

Minister aims to deliver on child care [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

What's he up to now?" the waitress asks after Ken Dryden - the great former goaltender and now Canada's minister of social development finishes breakfast and walks out of an Ottawa diner. "Did he have to get a new job because of the hockey strike?"

Not exactly.

But in many ways, Dryden is now a federal politician because of a goal in last year's Stanley Cup playoffs. Scored against the Toronto Maple Leafs seven minutes and 39 seconds into an overtime game, it ended the Leafs' season.

But it opened the door for Dryden - then vice-chairman of company that owns the Leafs - to enter federal politics.

Nearly a year later - with a high-profile, high-pressure cabinet portfolio and the massive task of a national child care program ahead of him - the former goalie is fitting into Ottawa despite being the ultimate Ottawa outsider.

He rarely launches a partisan attack, shunning heckling and name-calling during Question Period. The hockey idol didn't even join his Liberal colleagues last week in a hockey game against the Conservatives. (The Liberals lost 5-2.)

And it's his image as the Ottawa outsider - untainted by Liberal misdeeds of the past with star status to boot - that has got some putting Dryden, 57, on their short list of Liberals who might one day be prime minister.

But suggest that to Dryden and he puts on the brakes, saying he's still got a lot to learn about politics.

"You just keep doing, and I figure if you do the thing that you're doing well, you'll get a chance at the next thing," he says. "If you don't do it well, you don't deserve a chance at the next thing, whatever the next thing is."

And doing well right now means that Dryden's got to deliver the high-quality and affordable national child care system the Liberals promised in the last election. Martin has entrusted Dryden - a rookie MP (York Centre) - with this core responsibility. Delivering it is Dryden's big political break and the stakes are high.

Ottawa has earmarked \$5 billion over the next five years to kick-start a national system. Under the scheme, each province would use Ottawa's money to design and run its own programs based on the so-called QUAD principles quality, universality, accessibility and developmental enrichment.

But Ottawa and the provinces have yet to sign a formal agreement spelling out exactly what those QUAD principles really mean. And they haven't agreed on a common set of data each province would collect to let Ottawa and the general public judge how well the principles are being met.

In February, Dryden met with his provincial counterparts to ink a deal. But the Vancouver meeting ended with nothing but a pledge to meet again following the Feb. 23 federal budget.

That meeting hasn't happened yet and child care advocates are growing antsy.

"I'm actually kind of worried that it hasn't moved forward already," says Martha Friendly of the University of Toronto's Childcare Resource and Research Unit. "It seemed that very quickly thereafter there would be another meeting and an agreement. And that hasn't happened yet and we're into April."

Since then, Dryden says he's been meeting one-on-one with his provincial and territorial counterparts, laying the groundwork for a deal.

"The conversations are 'So far as where you're concerned, how close to a deal are we?'" Dryden explains. "With a significant number of provinces ... we're there."

What's also frustrating to many is that Dryden hasn't articulated the specifics about how this system would roll out. It's not yet clear how a federal system would ensure that hundreds of thousands of Canadian children are prepared to go to school.

"Think of yourself as the 2-year-old or the 3-year-old or the 4-year-old. What is it that engages you? What excites you?" Dryden says. "That

has everything to do with watching a kid and putting in place those things that bring out the curiosity, sense of adventure, the sense of excitement, the pleasure in a kid."

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