

# Child care must take back seat to health, Dryden. But social development minister insists national program won't be far behind [CA] <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

Ken Dryden, the new social development minister, said he expects to make tangible progress on a national child care program before the next election. 'We are at a point where child care is becoming a national expectation,' he said. The Martin government wants to jumpstart its minority mandate with a federal-provincial deal on health-care reform, but Ken Dryden, the new social development minister, insists progress on a national child care program won't be far behind.

The former hockey star and longtime children's advocate admits the Liberals' child care promise ranks behind health care on the government's list of priorities.

He insists, however, that neither health-care reform nor minority government will impede efforts to build a universal child care program.

"We're a government," he said during an interview in his spacious new 20th-floor office near Parliament Hill. "The people of Canada expect us to govern, and govern according to the priorities we set out and the promises we made (in the election). Whether we are a minority or an overwhelming majority, the obligations and the expectations are the same."

Mr. Dryden says it's "very proper" health care is the government's main focus because Canadians made clear during the election campaign that fixing the system was the No. 1 issue.

Prime Minister Paul Martin meets provincial and territorial leader in Ottawa beginning Sept. 13 to hammer out a health-care deal, a negotiating session that will be carried live on television.

The issue of child care will be less visible and less prominent, but the pressure is still on to live up to the election promise to establish a national child care program, Mr. Dryden said.

"That was a very high priority during the campaign," he said. "The message that we delivered to the Canadian public and the message they delivered back to us is that this is what they expect of us."

Mr. Dryden says work is proceeding quietly behind the scenes as he prepares to open talks soon with his provincial counterparts on the federal government's offer to spend \$5 billion over the next five years to create 250,000 new child care spaces across the country.

The offer says federal funds will be provided to the provinces and territories on a per-capita basis on condition they put in place quality, affordable and universal child care programs that have an element of childhood development and learning as part of the care component.

Mr. Dryden said he expects to make tangible progress on a national child care program before the next election, regardless of how soon it happens, because the public demands action.

"We are pretty close to seeing the writing on the wall," he said.

He said he's counting on that public sentiment to push the provincial and territorial governments to play ball with the federal government. Quebec is the only province which has universal child care. It costs \$7 per child per day.

- reprinted from the Ottawa Citizen

**Tags:** quality <sup>[2]</sup>

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