

Child care tops agenda, Dryden says [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Ken Dryden insists that the Liberal promise of a \$5-billion national child care program isn't just another election nose-stretcher.

The new social development minister says relief is on the way for stressed-out parents who've heard it all before.

Affordable child care for all Canadians tops his agenda, Dryden said in an interview at his new office overlooking east Ottawa.

"In terms of the promise that has been made and our first priority to act on, that's it," Dryden said just six days into his dream cabinet job.

The Liberals won a minority government June 28 on a big-spending platform geared to soften Prime Minister Paul Martin's image as a tight-fisted former finance minister. It included \$5 billion to create 250,000 new child care spaces by 2009.

Quebec's \$7-a-day child care model is considered a leading example on which to base a countrywide service.

The Liberals first tantalized voters with the notion of national daycare back in 1993.

Dryden says much has changed since then.

This time, cash-strapped provinces won't be forced to match funds to get their share of federal money, he said.

"So it's much more deliverable out of our hands than would have been the case before."

That said, it will be a delicate dance to ensure federal quality and affordability standards are met without stepping on jurisdictional toes. Such social programs are provincial turf.

Still, the man renowned for his thoughtful, measured approach seems quietly assured.

"I think what all of us have going for us is that child care has evolved into something that is . . . a national expectation," Dryden said.

Studies increasingly show that kids from infancy to school age need care that includes early education, he added.

Dryden says he'll steer around any roadblocks.

"You try to work things out," he said of potential wrangling with the provinces over how to launch a truly national program.

Ottawa can't do it alone, he stressed.

"Nobody can do it by themselves. We all need each other in it, and we need to work with each other."

Canada's largely informal child care system falls far behind what's offered in several European and other countries, say child advocates.

Almost 70 per cent of Canadian women with children under 12 work, but there are licensed spaces for just 12 per cent of kids in that age group.

Child care proponents are watching for real change with tempered hope.

"We always have to be very cautious because we've heard so much of this before," said Pedro Barata of the Family Service Association of Toronto and spokesman for the anti-poverty group Campaign 2000.

"But at the same time, we're ready to go if governments are serious. The level of frustration of parents is just enormous."

"You can't work, you can't get training, you can't move off social assistance unless you have access to quality child care."

- reprinted from the Canadian Press

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