

# Child care crawling back into campaign [CA] <sup>[1]</sup>

Reality Check

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## EXCERPTS

It's been 20 years since federal leaders discussed child care during a televised election debate.

So when the leaders were asked last week if they would spend federal money in areas of provincial jurisdiction to address such problems as "the crying need" for a national child-care program, working parents and day-care advocates cheered.

They just hope the leaders' answers &mdash; which showed only the Conservatives to be reluctant to spend money in this area &mdash; will translate into votes for parties with strong child-care platforms.

Not since 1984, when the now-defunct National Action Committee on the Status of Women staged an election debate on women's issues, have federal party leaders even discussed child care.

"We were really surprised and excited to see it come up," said Kira Heineck, of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care.

Even the nature of the question posed by CTV reporter Craig Oliver in Tuesday's English-language debate was a breakthrough, Heineck said.

"To have the national media identifying this as a pressing issue shows that people are talking about child care and that it's important to voters," she said.

Liberal Leader Paul Martin and the NDP's Jack Layton said Ottawa must use its spending power to help the provinces build a national system of early learning and care for the country's children. Both praised Quebec's system of \$7-a-day child care that is widely available to families in that province.

But Conservative Leader Stephen Harper said he favours "much more direct help for families" in the form of a \$2,000-per-child tax deduction for all families to use however they want.

"This would be the kind of approach &mdash; a low-tax rather than high-spending approach &mdash; and I think it's one that respects the fact that provinces have different approaches to day care in their jurisdictions," he said during the debate.

Ken Battle, head of the Caledon Institute of Social Policy, calls Harper's tax deduction proposal "a retrograde and regressive idea."

It mirrors a tax exemption for families first introduced during World War I, he said. And it would divert scarce public money to wealthy families while leaving the poorest families &mdash; who don't earn enough to pay taxes &mdash; with nothing.

In another wrinkle, the proposal, which would cost Ottawa about \$3.5 billion annually, would also cost the provinces some \$1.7 billion because the federal tax deduction would also reduce the amount of provincial taxes families would pay.

"Is this a sensible way to run a child-benefit system in an era of high child poverty, gaping income inequality and concerns about the sustainability and effectiveness of government spending?" he asked.

The Canada Child Tax Benefit, which Battle helped Ottawa design in the early 1990s, is a much more progressive way for the federal government to give money to families, he said. About 80 per cent of families with young children receive income-based benefits under the program, with poorer families getting the most help. Harper should be building on that program, rather than resurrecting tax measures from the "graveyard of Canadian public policy," he added.

Kerry McCuaig, co-ordinator of the Better Child Care Education Foundation, said a federal role in child care is long overdue.

The European Union last year made a commitment to provide early learning and care for all children aged 3 and older. Even the United States &mdash; where most states provide full-day junior and senior kindergarten programs &mdash; provides more universal services for young children than Canada, McCuaig said. Only Ontario offers junior kindergarten as a universal program.

"It shows how far Canada has fallen behind and why child care has made it back onto the Liberal agenda," McCuaig said.

For Graham Mitchell and his wife Deanna Yerichuk, the scarcity of day care and the staggering cost are not only a political concern. It's a personal problem now that they are expecting their first child in January.

The Toronto couple have already put their names on three or four waiting lists for child care and are facing monthly fees of between \$1,100 and \$1,300.

"That's more than my mortgage," said Mitchell. "I don't know how parents with two kids do it."

Mitchell said he's thrilled the issue was even raised in the debate. It was clear to him Harper doesn't really have a child-care policy. But he was impressed with Layton and Martin.

"I think the debate helped to advance the issue."

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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