

Advocates pleased with child care plan despite past disappointments [CA] ^[1]

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Source: The Canadian Press

Format: Article

Publication Date: 3 Jun 2004

AVAILABILITY

See text below.

EXCERPTS

OTTAWA (CP) - Social activists swallowed the disappointment of the past decade and gave a nod of approval Thursday to a Liberal election promise of \$5 billion for a national child-care plan.

Calling quality child care and early learning "smart investments in our economy," Prime Minister Paul Martin pledged to set out a five-year national strategy, replacing the current patchwork of programs across the country.

Child-care advocates have heard it all before, dating back to a promised national strategy in the 1993 Liberal Red Book in a campaign that first elected Jean Chretien prime minister.

But this time, they say it just might work.

"(Among) myself and my colleagues in some of the social justice groups, people seem optimistic," said Martha Friendly of the University of Toronto's Childcare Resource and Research Centre.

"I think the time has come."

Public demand is steadily growing for good quality child care and early education as increasing numbers of mothers return to work outside the home.

Yet in 2001 there were only about 315,000 regulated child care spaces in Canada.

That was supposed to serve more than two million children under six in Canada including 1.3 million whose moms who work outside the home, according Liberal statistics.

"The need is huge," said Maryann Bird of the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada.

"There is a groundswell of public support now for this."

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

Some new analyses are even more bleak. They suggest the number of working moms is now likely more than 80 per cent, with only about one in 10 kids in quality child care, said Bird.

The cry from help from families has been heard by other political parties too.

The NDP has already pledged that if elected, it would bring in 200,000 affordable day-care spaces over four years.

Stephen Harper's Conservatives are taking a different tack, offering larger tax breaks for families rather than setting up new programs.

Thursday's announcement isn't really a new step, said Ken Battle of the Caledon Institute, a social research think-tank based in Ottawa.

The federal government has slowly been building towards this with previous, smaller spending arrangements with the provinces.

In early 2003, Ottawa and provinces hammered out a framework on child care and early learning to share \$935 million over five years but few federal strings were attached.

The 2004 federal budget last March added another \$75 million this year and next.

But Thursday's election pledge goes further by setting out strong principles the provinces will have to adopt if they want to share in the federal purse.

That could lead to tough negotiations, although the \$5-billion carrot may soften concerns about Ottawa treading in provincial territory.

The Liberal proposal is based on the hugely popular Quebec plan - by far the most advanced in Canada - which offers child-care spaces for just \$7 a day.

Because that's established, Quebec says it will use Ottawa's money for other social plans.

Activists like the fact the Liberal proposal sets out four principles for the provinces, beginning with the demand they offer good quality child care that's affordable to parents at all income levels.

They must also train qualified staff able to deliver quality programs focused on childhood development.

That's what will make it workable, said Friendly.

"I have a positive feeling about the fact that there are principles, a commitment to legislation, the money is quite respectable," she said.

"It's not saying (to the provinces) it's all up for grabs."

- reprinted from the Canadian Press

Region: Canada ^[2]

Tags: election ^[3]

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