

Quebec, Ottawa reach deal on parental leave program, Canadian Press learns [CA-QC] ^[1]

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Source: The Canadian Press

Format: Article

Publication Date: 18 May 2004

AVAILABILITY

See text below.

EXCERPTS

The federal and Quebec governments have reached an agreement in principle on the contentious parental leave program that has had both sides in court, The Canadian Press has learned.

The deal was reached at the end of last week after several months of negotiations and could be announced within days if Quebec agrees, sources said.

"The negotiators for the two parties have reached an agreement in principle which is currently being studied," said a government source close to the issue. "The deal is based on the goals of the program, its financing and the schedule of payments."

Claude Bechard, Quebec's minister of employment and social solidarity, is to present the deal to the provincial cabinet which will decide if it satisfies Quebec's demands, the source said.

But federal government officials are apparently confident this will not be a serious hurdle, saying Quebec's demands were respected.

News of the deal was greeted with surprise in Quebec, where only the hope that a deal will be reached soon was expressed.

Officials in Quebec said the government is in no hurry to negotiate a quick deal to accommodate the federal government and one cabinet minister suggested the news was a "trial balloon" being floated in the context of an election call.

Federal Human Resources Minister Joe Volpe has already received federal cabinet support for the accord, sources in Ottawa said.

The parental leave program has been a source of friction between the two governments.

In February, Ottawa asked the Supreme Court to overturn a Quebec Court of Appeal ruling that found its parental-leave program to be unconstitutional.

The Supreme Court was to consider whether the program, which is paid for by Employment-Insurance funds, encroaches on provincial jurisdiction as defined by the Constitution.

The case began when the former Parti Quebecois government filed a suit in March 2002 after Ottawa implemented the program.

The Quebec Court of Appeal ruled employment insurance covers the loss of a job and was not created with parental leave coverage in mind.

Quebec claimed Ottawa owed it \$630 million for its parental leave program, which it did not implement because the federal government had already started its own.

Quebec was prepared to contribute \$222 million to its own program in addition to the funds sought from Ottawa.

The impending federal election, which is expected to be called Sunday by Prime Minister Paul Martin for June 28, may have tipped the balance. Martin said recently he hoped to have some news to report on the issue soon. The deal could serve as an example of federal-provincial co-operation that could be touted during the election campaign.

The Liberals had identified the parental leave and employment insurance changes to benefit seasonal workers as issues they wanted settled at the start of the campaign.

- reprinted from the Canadian Press

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