

Bracing for a step backwards [CA-QC]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

For six years, Quebec's \$5-a-day child care program has stood as a beacon for working mothers across the country.

It never shone as brightly as they would have liked. The demand for spaces always outstripped the supply and there was no flexibility for parents who worked later than 5 p.m.

But women took hope from the fact that one government in the land was committed to universal, affordable day care.

Now that hope is flickering. The province's new premier, Jean Charest, hasn't snuffed it out yet, but he has made it clear that he is no fan of the country's most progressive child care program.

During his election campaign, Charest suggested that a Liberal government would open Quebec's publicly-funded child care program to private, for-profit operators.

Shortly after taking power, he mused about raising day care fees for middle and upper income parents.

In his inaugural speech, Charest promised a massive restructuring of the Quebec government. It would be leaner, less costly and less interventionist, he pledged. "We can be inspired by the experiences of many other governments."

Last week, his finance minister, Yves Seguin, reinforced that message. "Rather than asking what the state can do for us, we should ask ourselves what we can do with it," he told Quebecers.

Child care advocates were relieved that Seguin did not scale back or privatize the popular program in his first budget. But they are bracing for bad news.

It does seem unavoidable. If Charest is to reduce provincial taxes by 27 per cent over the next five years, without affecting health care or education, he is going to have to put almost everything else- including the \$1.6 billion-a-year child care program- on the chopping block.

The premier is getting plenty of encouragement from mainstream economists. They contend that the groundbreaking child care program is expensive, inefficient and ill-conceived.

It leaves out children with non-working parents, they point out. It discriminates against families who choose to leave their child with a relative or friend. And it drains resources from other programs.

In a discussion paper released last week by the Institute for Research on Public Policy, Pierre Lefebvre and Philip Merrigan of the Universite du Quebec called it "an example of idiosyncratic action."

It is true that the \$5 daily fee covers only 12.5 per cent of the cost of running the program. It is also true it is not yet universal and will never be right for all parents.

But there are benefits that economists cannot measure:

In Quebec, subsidized day care is a right of citizenship, not a stigmatized form of welfare. Wealthy parents can't buy their way to the front of the line and poor parents don't have to go through humiliating means tests.

Since the Parti Quebecois introduced its program in 1997, the number of child care spaces in the province has jumped from 78,000 to 167,000- an increase of 114 per cent. That still falls short of the 200,000 spaces that day care operators say are needed. But it has allowed thousands of women to enter the workforce and become self-supporting citizens.

Affordable day care has become part of the glue that holds society together in Quebec. Parents from all walks of life drop off their children at the same publicly funded child-care centres. Youngsters learn, from the earliest age, to get along with kids from different backgrounds and economic circumstances. Just as Ontario's strong public school system was once a unifying force in communities across the province, Quebec's strong child care system has become a source of pride and social cohesion.

"There'll be a real backlash if Charest touches this program," said Kerry McCuaig, co-ordinator of the Better Child Care Education

Foundation.

It may have been the angry rumblings of middle-class parents that prevented the premier from acting this spring. But he will have to move soon in order to deliver his promised tax cuts.

The path of least resistance would be to keep charging \$5 a day, but treat daycare as a taxable benefit for middle- and upper-income families. But that would send their tax bills shooting up, neutralizing the cuts that Charest has promised.

An alternative would be to raise the cost of day care for families that can afford to pay more than \$5. But it would take a dramatic increase in fees to come anywhere close to covering the cost of the program. And most of the money would come out the pockets of middle-class taxpayers, whose support Charest needs.

A third possibility would be to seek bids from private operators to run the province's day-care centres, in the hope that they can do it more cheaply than the current non-profit providers. But there is a risk that they would cut corners or pull out if they couldn't make sufficient profits.

Charest will pay a political price, whichever option he chooses.

But it is women across Canada, who saw their lives and needs reflected in Quebec's family policy, who will pay the highest price.

-Reprinted from The Toronto Star.

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