

Quebec should get out of day care [CA-QC]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

In his inaugural address last week, Jean Charest sketched out a bold new vision.

Under a Liberal government, Quebec will rely far less on the state and far more on individual initiative.

For too long, Quebecers have been at the service of government rather than the other way round, he said.

The creaky old Quebec model, propped up by high taxes and strangled by regulations, no longer delivers the quality of service the public expects.

It was an almost revolutionary manifesto in a province where Big Government rules.

But the true measure of Charest's commitment will come, not in speeches, but in the details of government programs.

Let's start with day care. A lot of parents will be looking at Thursday's budget in Quebec City for clues to the future of \$5-a-day "universal" day care.

The \$5 fee covers only about 8 per cent of the cost, with the rest subsidized by taxpayers. And the program is nowhere close to universal: thousands of families are on waiting lists with a marginally better chance of getting a spot than winning the 6/49.

Then again, the day-care program was always more about marketing the PQ's image than about delivering equitable solutions to families.

To pay for it, the PQ had to reduce tax credits and eliminate family allowances for all parents with young children, even those who didn't use day-care services.

In this one-size-fits-all policy, both mother and father had to enter the work force if they were going to get financial help. If they wanted to leave the child with Grandma, or even work during hours when the public day cares weren't open, they were penalized.

Three years ago, the Institute for Research on Public Policy estimated that the PQ plan was harming more families than it helped: the cuts to tax credits and elimination of family allowances left 250,000 families without any assistance at all and another 180,000 with reductions.

The Parti Quebecois proceeded to make things worse by freezing private day-care construction, effectively declaring a public monopoly.

Meanwhile, waiting lists swelled to 60,000.

The Liberals have had the good sense to recognize that, in a market short of day-care spaces, the private sector can help. The Charest government has promised 3,000 new spaces in private centres by September.

The private sector can meet that demand faster and more efficiently, while the subsidies the government would pay to private operators would be about 15 to 20 per cent less than for public centres.

As for the \$5-a-day program itself, Charest has said he will maintain it, though high-income people may have to pay more.

But if he really does have a new vision of the government's role in Quebec society, Charest will go farther.

A policy that fairly serves all parents would see the government get out of the day-care business and restore the financial aid all families need to make their own child-care choices.

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