

Quebec parties make families a priority: Quality-of-life promises litter campaign trail -- Province already taking national lead on child care [CA-QC] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Nadine Giroux is already married, has been for almost two years, but the parties in the Quebec election campaign are still trying to court her.

"I'm not surprised," she says. "Families are very important. We are the ones who can make changes."

Perhaps because they know that will be true on Quebec's election day, April 14, the parties here have made young families — particularly those with working parents — their No.1 priority in this election.

Each party leader has made multiple promises aimed at making it more attractive to spend time with family and have babies.

"We have presented Quebecers a vision of Quebec where quality of life is the first priority. Quality of life of families. Equality of life of young couples," Finance Minister Pauline Marois underscored yesterday.

Photo-ops at daycare centres have become a near daily occurrence in the campaign. Quebec Premier Bernard Landry, 66, has been seen with his granddaughter, and Mario Dumont, 32, leader of the right-wing l'Action démocratique du Québec, has invited the media to photograph him taking his daughter to school.

The promises come from a province already taking the lead on child care and in seriously examining the effect of work on family life.

Quebec has long been the darling of child-care advocates around the country for what's seen as a progressive, government-subsidized provincial daycare program.

Parents pay only \$5 a day to place their children in publicly funded daycare centres.

That's the main reason why Quebec and Ontario "are moving in opposite directions," said University of Toronto child-care expert Martha Friendly.

Quebec, for instance, now provides licensed child-care spaces for 21 per cent of children up to the age of 12. In Ontario, it's just 8.9 per cent. Where Quebecers pay \$5 a day for child care, in Ontario it can be up to \$50. And in Quebec, unlike Ontario, 5-year-olds go to full-day kindergarten.

Ontario's provision for parental leave, like Quebec's, is in line with federal government goals, but Quebec wants to expand it.

There are many other promises for families in this campaign.

While the Ontario government approved a 60-hour work week in 2001, the Parti Québécois wants to offer a four-day work week for parents of children under 12. It's also offering interest-free home loans for young couples, three weeks paid vacation instead of two, and to refund half of new graduates' student loans if they have babies.

The ADQ wants to turn unpaid family-leave days for workers to paid days and to give parents vouchers instead of subsidizing daycare centres, so stay-at-home parents can benefit.

Liberal leader Jean Charest, 44, wants to expand the daycare program to privately-owned centres, and to offer homework help to students. The Liberals say their focus on injecting, over five years, \$7 billion into health care and on cutting income taxes will help families.

Quebecers pay among the highest tax rates in North America.

Friendly says the sustained focus on families in Quebec reflects the province's progressive politics.

"It's political will," she said. "Ontario could do it with political will."

Some experts in Quebec say there is also a real urgency to appeal to 25- to 40-year-olds because they tend to vote.

But the focus on families may better reflect the rapid changes happening in Quebec society.

The birthrate, 1.45 children per woman, is lower than elsewhere in the country, as are marriage rates. The divorce rate, however, is over 50 per cent higher than in the rest of Canada.

Many more babies — 58 per cent — are born out of wedlock in Quebec, compared to 33 per cent in Ontario.

And Quebec is second only to Japan in having the most rapidly aging population. The Quebec Institute of Statistics predicts that the workforce will shrink by nearly 300,000 between 2010 and 2020.

Just as in 1988, when the Liberal government of the late Robert Bourassa introduced its cash-for-babies scheme, the Quebec parties are trying to make it more attractive to have children.

In the past, debate swirled around the survival of the French population in Quebec.

Now, Lapierre-Adamcyk said, "the intention is not so clearly directly pro-natalist as it is a way to recognize that people who have children are doing something for society."

Landry gave another reason the other day: Getting older, he said, is "a beautiful personal adventure, but we'll age better if we have children to watch grow."

- reprinted from The Toronto Star

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