

The budget's unchained malady [CA-ON] ^[1]

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See text below.

EXCERPTS

The provinces are bleating because the federal government wants to put strings on how federal budget dollars are spent. It's perversely amusing that one of the lead complainers is the province of Ontario.

Ontario has attached chains rather than strings to its own child-care transfers, in the form of a 700-page list of very specific instructions with which local governments must comply to get provincial dollars for regulated child care. These are not eloquent expressions of principle. We are required, for example, to let the province know each time there is a renovation at a child-care centre, or do criminal reference checks at drop-in centres.

Such precision isn't unique to child care. It can be found in the 50-page mandatory public-health guidelines on what it takes to get provincial health money into city health programs. (A city must reduce the incidence rate of gonorrhea to 120 cases and slow the number of 20- to 64-year-olds fattening up beyond a body mass index of 20 to 27; we must organize one campaign of individual counselling, presentations and written materials to convince folks to get a flu shot.)

Sadly, provincial governments like Ontario's have shown they deserve at least as much supervision from the federal government as they impose on cities. The feds previously made a \$144-million annual commitment to children's services in Ontario. Almost nothing has gone to quality, licensed, regulated child care; the money has been mainly used to slap the provincial Trillium logo on pre-existing social service agencies across the province.

The Ontario government's visceral hostility to regulated child care was vented by former premier Mike Harris in 1996: "If you go back 30 or 40 years ago, where it seemed to be that mom was in the kitchen with a hot breakfast cooking as everybody woke up in the morning, that's not the normal situation today." Shortly after his nostalgic outburst, Mr. Harris commissioned a report on early childhood development from Fraser Mustard and Margaret McCain. They lamented that Ontario ignored their recommendations and "repeated feedback from communities across the province about the importance of quality non-parental care."

The Ontario government's view of child care is "cheapest is best" but it lacks the courage to say that about health and education. If dumping three-year-olds at neighbours' homes helps avoid the cost of child-care centres, why not send granny there as well? Long-term care centres cost money, too.

In the city of Ottawa, this neglect of licensed quality child care means the 6,300 subsidized spaces we have in 2003 are the same number we had in 1993. This, during a decade when our total population grew by 100,000. In that decade, the city has unilaterally raised wages, built new centres and expanded programs without provincial or federal help. But when the government with the fewest resources is the one with the greatest motivation, the results are slow and small.

The new federal budget's commitment to licensed quality child care is heartening; the funds in the budget a first baby step in the right direction. Finance Minister John Manley is promising to make sure the money goes to licensed care, but the agonizing process of federal-provincial negotiations has often turned strings into elastics. If the Liberals need advice on how to attach conditions to ensure their cash is spent as advertised, just drop me a line. I have some ideas.

- reprinted from The Globe and Mail

Ottawa councillor Alex Munter is head of that city's health, recreation and social services committee.

Region: Ontario ^[2]

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demand ^[4]

availability ^[5]

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/03/04/budgets-unchained-malady-ca> [2] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7856> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/budget> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/demand> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/availability>