

Child care's time may have come [CA]^[1]

Author: Goar, Carol

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EXCERPTS

A happy confluence of events has pushed a national child care program back within reach.

It has been a decade since Prime Minister Jean Chrétien promised working parents access to high-quality, affordable child care, no matter where they lived. But with each successive budget, the goal slid further down his government's priority list.

Finance Minister John Manley is expected to reverse that trend tomorrow. His budget will contain the two cornerstones of a country-wide child care system. The first is multi-year funding. The second is a requirement that the provinces actually spend this money on child care.

Ottawa has put cash into early childhood development before. What it has never done is insist that the provinces use it to provide regulated child care. That has allowed Ontario to fritter away its portion (\$267 million) without creating a single new child care space.

This time, Chrétien is prepared to put his foot down: Any province that doesn't agree to invest in affordable child care, doesn't get federal dollars.

This new tough-mindedness flows from four factors:

The first is the Prime Minister's impending retirement. This is his last chance to turn a decade of half measures into a coherent social policy initiative.

The second is Chrétien's state of mind. His showdown with the premiers over health-care funding two weeks ago convinced him that ultimatums work. The premiers and territorial leaders came to the table vowing not to let Ottawa dictate how they spent their federal health-care transfers. They left (unhappily) agreeing to invest most of the money they'd secured on a package of specific reforms. "I suspect the same logic and spirit will be applied here," said Toronto Liberal MP John Godfrey.

The third is Ontario's recalcitrance. For two years, Human Resources Minister Jane Stewart has struggled to plug the holes in the nation's patchwork of child care arrangements. Not only has the Ontario government refused to spend any of Ottawa's money on child care, it has left \$113 of its early childhood development allocation unspent. Such obduracy irritates the Prime Minister.

Finally, there is the rivalry between Chrétien and Paul Martin. During Martin's term as finance minister, he freed the provinces to spend their federal transfer payments any way they liked. That left Ottawa with no mechanism to channel money into child care. Chrétien would like to publicly undo this unfortunate bit of handiwork. So would Manley, who is looking for ways to portray himself as a socially progressive Liberal leadership candidate.

On child care, like health care, there are cleavages among the provinces. Manitoba, Quebec and Newfoundland are eager to invest in child care. Ontario is firmly opposed to accepting federal money with strings attached.

Children's advocates hope that Manley will put enough money on the table, tomorrow, that Ontario will have little choice but to play by Ottawa's rules.

They have set their sights on an initial instalment of \$200 million, rising to \$400 million in the second year and \$600 million in the third year.

To put those numbers in perspective, the 1993 Liberal Red Book, which spelled out Chrétien's original child care commitment, called for a first-year investment of \$120 million, rising to \$240 million in the second year and \$360 million in the third year. (Adjusted into current dollars, these amounts work out to \$135 million, \$265 million and \$394 million.)

Liberal MPs, especially those from Ontario, are also pressing for more accountability. They believe the provinces should be required to show that they are creating more child care spaces with the money they receive from Ottawa. If health-care reforms can be tracked, they contend, so can improvements in child care.

Nowhere would the benefits of an effective national child care program be felt more than in Toronto.

There are 15,000 children on the waiting list for subsidized child care, yet the number of spaces is shrinking. Last year, Toronto lost 1,616 subsidized spaces because of provincial cutbacks and lack of access to federal money. This year, another 700 will have to be cut, unless the city gets financial help.

"Toronto's child care system is experiencing severe financial stress and is in the midst of rapid service decline," said a report released by the city last month.

Laurel Rothman, national co-ordinator of Campaign 2000, a coalition of 85 organizations dedicated to reducing child poverty, met Manley last month. She found him open to the idea of a three-year funding commitment for child care and willing to set conditions. "He sees it as a skills and learning issue," she said.

Godfrey, who has been fighting for a national child care plan for seven years, is unusually optimistic as budget day approaches. "I'm feeling chipper."

Nothing is ever easy in the field of federal-provincial relations. Ontario could balk. Ottawa could get mired in tortuous negotiations.

But on the eve of budget day, the signals are good. Manley has the money to act on child care. And Chrétien has the will.

-Reprinted from the Toronto Star.

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