

National daycare plan being hammered out [CA]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Jean Chrétien's legacy may include a national child-care program at long last.

It was promised in the first Red Book, the script for the Liberal campaign that swept Mr. Chrétien into power almost a decade ago. After years as an abandoned election pledge, the prospect of a federal role in child-care was resurrected a few months ago in the Throne Speech, which promised "to increase access to early learning opportunities and to quality child-care."

A few weeks ago, federal and provincial social-services ministers sat around a table at Moncton with child-care on the agenda. Today, their bureaucrats gather again to hammer out what a national child-care plan might look like.

"They're working towards a budget deadline," said John Godfrey, chairman of the social-policy committee of the Liberal caucus.

"What is putting the urgency here is we need to have something defensible and coherent that we can put into the budget, and not a lot of time to do it."

The big question left to be answered at budget time in February is how much money Ottawa will set aside for child-care and what strings will be attached to the funding, especially with pressure from the Romanow report to plunge billions more into health care.

"Whether this will be the year that cracks the national child-care nut, I guess we'll have to wait and see the federal budget," said Tim Sale, Manitoba's minister responsible for child-care.

While the federal government brokered a deal with the provinces two years ago to pour \$2.2-billion over five years into early childhood development programs such as child-care, the criteria for spending the money were so open-ended that some provinces invested in services only remotely linked to the type originally intended to be covered.

Some provinces, Ontario among them, poured none of their federal money into child-care even though that is the social program that reaches the most young children and research has shown it furthers emotional, social, and intellectual development.

Indeed, if there is an opponent of a national child-care program, it is Ontario.

"I don't think all the provinces are there, but the majority of them are," Mr. Sale said.

"There still is some ideological bias, but I don't think it's nearly as entrenched as it was. I would say all of the Maritimes, Quebec, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and B.C. would all embrace a federal offer of unilateral dollars for child-care." I

n a decade when research on the lifelong dividends of nourishing children's brains in the first few years of life has proliferated, new statistics from the University of Toronto's Childcare Resource and Research Unit show that Canada's child-care system outside of Quebec looks only modestly different than a decade ago.

In Quebec, a massive subsidy created child-care at a cost of \$5 a day for parents and quadrupled the number of regulated daycare spaces from a decade ago. There are 234,905 children in licenced child-care in the province. Of the \$1.89-billion invested in regulated child-care across Canada last year, Quebec spent 57 per cent.

Outside Quebec, the number of regulated child-care spaces across Canada increased by 65,000 over the decade, to 358,525.

While 4.89 million children under 13 live in Canada and 68 per cent of their mothers work outside the home, there are licenced child-care and nursery schools to accommodate only 12 per cent of those.

Percentage of children aged 0-12 years for whom space in regulated child-care (including nursery school) is available (2001):

British Columbia 12.1%

Alberta 9.1

Saskatchewan 4.2

Manitoba 12.4

Ontario 8.9

Quebec 21.1
New Brunswick 9.9
Nova Scotia 8.1
PEI 14.0
Newfoundland 5.5
Canada 12.1

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