

# A moving target: federal parties aim for the family <sup>[1]</sup>

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**Source:** Vancouver Sun

**Format:** Article

**Publication Date:** 13 Apr 2011

## EXCERPTS.

It's a prime target in the federal election campaign, with each party offering its own parcel of tax cuts, credits and juicy cash payouts aimed at attracting the "family" vote.

But the battle isn't just for millions of ballots. The very definition of family appears to be up for grabs, with competing visions of the ideal Canadian household in play ahead of the May 2 showdown at polling stations.

Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff is peddling the "Family Pack." Stephen Harper's Conservatives have offered a number of tax breaks, making the "Family Tax Cut" a campaign centrepiece. The NDP's Jack Layton is "Putting Families First."

The Conservatives have announced plans to expand tax breaks for families' athletic and artistic activities. But the showpiece of the party's pitch to families is an income-splitting tax reform that would let many Canadian parents - once the federal budget is balanced - keep much more of their shared income.

At the centre of the Liberals' family strategy are measures totalling up to \$2 billion annually in new childcare funding and post-secondary education grants.

And the NDP is highlighting its plans to help families dig themselves out of debt and cope better with the "sandwich generation" challenge of caring for children and elderly grandparents at the same time.

In their respective campaign pitches, the Conservatives and Liberals offer rhetorical affirmation for all manner of Canadian family configurations. But in their proposed tax policies and benefit packages, the country's two main parties appear to be pushing families - specifically mothers - in two different directions.

While the Liberal plan is viewed as offering incentives for women to work outside the home by subsidizing childcare options, the Conservatives' key tax proposal is seen as a particular boon for families with a stay-at-home parent - typically the mother.

Critics of the Liberal approach say that plan takes choices away from parents, especially those who normally would opt out of the workplace to raise children.

"The tax reductions the Conservatives are offering help parents choose what they want, versus the Liberals' daycare system that promotes the use of licensed government-run daycares," argues Niels Veldhuis, a senior economist with the Fraser Institute.

Citing polls that suggest parents would prefer to be their child's primary caregiver, Veldhuis said the Liberals are moving directly opposite to that preference and creating a major new public expenditure that all taxpayers will have to shoulder.

But critics of the Conservative plan say the party's planned tax reform is little more than a cash transfer to wealthy households with one stay-at-home parent.

And in some scenarios, that measure will encourage women to drop out of the workforce, said Kathleen Lahey, a law professor at Queen's University in Kingston, Ont., who focuses on tax policy.

In a household with one \$60,000 salary and one \$20,000 salary, for example, the benefit derived from the lower-earning partner quitting their job and the couple splitting the remainder of the salary, is just enough to encourage that person to stop working.

"To a great extent, it's inducing a very selectively defined area of workers to move from paid work to unpaid work," says Lahey, predicting a jump in the number of stay-at-home moms under the plan.

"Women are less attached to paid work," she adds. "So by providing bigger benefits at higher income levels, statistically we know it's going to remove some women from paid work."

In 2006, the Conservatives introduced a childcare tax benefit that saw \$100 a month go to families for each child under the age of six.

In its recently unveiled platform, the Liberals said they would maintain the \$100 monthly credit but also create a \$500-million fund - to reach \$1 billion in four years - for provinces to create new childcare spaces.

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Gwendolyn Landolt, REAL Women's national vice-president, told Postmedia News that the choices presented to families by the Liberals

and Conservatives in this election couldn't be clearer.

The Liberals, she said, see Canadian households "as a two-parent-working family with no choices for the family to decide otherwise. The Conservatives are saying: whatever works for you, whether both parents work or not."

Landolt, whose organization claims a cross-Canada membership of 50,000, supports the Conservatives' proposed income-splitting option as a way of easing the tax burden on household partners with different levels of income - including families with one stay-at-home parent.

The Conservatives "aren't dictating any kind of family formation or how the parents will behave," she says. "They're just saying, here, you pick and choose. It's your decision, not the state's."

But the idealized family all parties imagine they're wooing with their various promises - mom, pop, the kids and their dog - doesn't exist in the huge numbers they seem to think it does, says Susan McDaniel, research chair in global population at the University of Lethbridge in Alberta.

In today's Canada, according to McDaniel, there's a growing proportion of divorced and separated families, leading to more people living alone, more re-partnering, a greater number of lone-parent families and more families spread over two or more households.

And those families stand to gain less, or nothing, from the Conservatives' proposed tax breaks.

"There are serious problems facing families," says McDaniel. She notes, for example, that many recent immigrant parents have trouble entering the workforce, and that many families are concerned about the cost and quality of childcare.

"Policy has to target families as they are, not as we might wish they would be."

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In their respective campaign pitches, the Conservatives and Liberals offer rhetorical affirmation for all manner of Canadian family configurations. But in their proposed tax policies and family-support packages, the country's two main parties appear to be nudging the Claire Dunphys of the world - women torn between home and office - in separate directions.

#### FACT BOX:

Here are few promises for families from the major parties:

Conservative Party of Canada.

- Income splitting up to \$50,000 for families with children under 18. Will cost \$2.5 billion a year but will only begin once federal books are balanced, currently scheduled for 2015-16. Savings of \$1,300 per family per year.

Liberal Party of Canada

- \$500 million a year to the provinces to create more childcare spaces. Would increase to \$1 billion a year in four years.
- \$1 billion in family care employment insurance benefit.

New Democratic Party

- Wants inter-generational Home Retrofit program to help renovate homes when caring for aged relatives.
- Would expand Compassionate Care benefits.
- Would extend Employment Insurance eligibility to parents just finished maternity or parental leave.

Bloc Quebecois

- Wants to improve measures for caregivers.

- reprinted from The Vancouver Sun

**Region:** Canada <sup>[2]</sup>

**Tags:** election <sup>[3]</sup>

public opinion <sup>[4]</sup>

funding <sup>[5]</sup>

spaces <sup>[6]</sup>

outcomes <sup>[7]</sup>

family resource programs <sup>[8]</sup>

federal programs <sup>[9]</sup>

mother's labour force participation <sup>[10]</sup>

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[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/11/05/moving-target-federal-parties-aim-family> [2]

<https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7864> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/election> [4]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/public-opinion> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/funding> [6]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/spaces> [7] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/outcomes> [8]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/family-resource-programs> [9] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/federal-programs> [10]

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