

Child care advocates confront minister in Barrhaven park ^[1]

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Source: Your Ottawa Region

Format: Article

Publication Date: 10 Aug 2011

EXCERPTS

South Nepean Park became the backdrop for a political rumble on Aug. 10, with the federal minister of Human Resources and Skills Development taken to task by supporters of a national child care program.

Minister Diane Finley arrived at the park to mark the fifth anniversary of the federal government's universal child care benefit, which currently delivers \$100 per month to about 1.5 million families for each child under age six.

Child care advocates have called for a federal program to provide government-funded care for children across the country. They criticize the current system, saying the money is of little use to parents who can't find a daycare space for their children.

Finley spent time defending the government's decision to hand out monthly cheques instead of creating a federally-run system. She insisted the issue is choice for parents, and that national daycare would remove that choice. Finley did not address the issue of the cost of a federal program when answering a question about ways to finance a national system.

Carleton-Mississippi Mills MP Gordon O'Connor, who was on hand to introduce Finley, provided a frank response to a question after the press conference. He said cost is a critical factor in the government's decision.

"I hope I'm not contradicting what Minister Finley said, but we've calculated the cost of a national program to be \$16 billion a year," he said. "That's \$16 billion every year.

"We can't afford that. Governments can't meet every need, everywhere. It's parents that decide to have children, not the government."

In addition to the mixed message about why the Harper government has declined to create a federal child care program, Finley also had to deal with some vocal critics.

As Finley began to speak inside a small tent set up for the occasion, at least five people arrived wearing T-shirts bearing the website name *ivotechildcare.ca* - a grassroots movement to maintain child care spaces for children under the age of five.

Decked out in one of the brilliant yellow shirts, Diane O'Neill - who says she has worked for more than 30 years in child care - managed to speak to Finley before she left the tent.

"I'm really surprised that you would come here to Barrhaven," O'Neill said, adding that many Barrhaven parents can't find daycare space for their children. "There are more and more people waiting for child care in this community."

O'Neill added that "the only daycare spaces being created are for-profit," which she said affects the quality of care, and asked why the federal government won't create a national system.

In response to O'Neill's question, Finley said the federal government knows there is a shortage of child care space.

"That's why we have given an additional \$250 million to the provinces; because we're trying to help," the minister said.

Asked why the federal government doesn't combine the money transferred to the provinces with tax credits provided to businesses and use the funds to create a national child care program, Finley said a government program wouldn't work for all families. She said rural families may have no local child care options, and that parents who work nights or weekends may have no centre available to care for their children while they are on the job.

The event wrapped up with Finley cutting a cake, with pieces distributed to a crowd of children gathered in the tent for her speech. Some of the people wearing *ivotechildcare.ca* T-shirts attempted to stand behind Finley to ensure their message was picked up by news cameras, while members of Finley's staff took up positions next to the minister in an effort to block the cameras' view.

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