

Childcare advocates to cabinet ministers: Tips on families, finances and federalism ^[1]

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Text of the press release:

A group of parents and early childhood educators are challenging several of the Conservative cabinet ministers' statements marking the fifth anniversary of the Universal Child Care Benefit.

Yesterday Conservative cabinet ministers Diane Finley and Gordon O'Connor held a photo-op to showcase the fifth birthday of the Harper government's Universal Child Care Benefit (UCCB). Today a group of parents and early childhood educators (ECEs) who attended the public event in an Ottawa park are challenging several of the ministers' statements.

"Minister Finley said that a childcare system would "remove parents' choices", said Ottawa ECE Shellie Bird. "I beg to differ. A childcare system could offer a choice of full-day learning programs, part-day nursery school, family childcare (in a caregiver's home) or parenting resources But - like health care or public education - quality childcare isn't something parents can develop themselves."

In response to Ms. Finley's assertion that "A government program wouldn't work for all families", singling out rural families and parents working extended hours as examples, Sue Delaney, Coordinator of the Childcare Advocacy Association of Canada said: "What doesn't work for most families is the status quo. No system could meet all needs but a well-designed childcare system could go a long way to help families including those in rural communities or working extended hours."

The Harper Government's UCCB replaced the previous Liberal government's national childcare program with a \$100 once-a-month cheque for every child under age six. The UCCB cheques, to be spent any way the family chooses, cost Canadians a reported \$2.5 billion.

Minister O'Connor proclaimed that the government "can't afford it - can't meet every need". Long-time centre director Diane O'Neill, retorted that "12.5 billion (\$2.5 b/yr. for five years) could have bought many desperate parents much-needed childcare". She added: "More than 70% of mothers of young children are in the labour force. This isn't a small group asking for help with a fringe need - quality childcare is a mainstream need right across Canada!"

Mr. O'Connor continued: "It's parents that decide to have children, not the government", a remark the childcare advocates said indicated not only "disdain" and low regard for families but limited comprehension about current and future needs in Canada's labour market.

The advocates observed that Minister Finley's admonition to "direct their concerns to provincial governments" is smoke and mirrors. "We do understand how Canadian federalism works", said Ms. Bird. "The federal government has a role (with the provinces) in early learning and childcare, just as it does in health care, also under provincial jurisdiction. Childcare is for all families across Canada's regions, no matter where they live or what they're doing."

Finally, Ms. Finley's statement that "we've given an additional \$250 million to the provinces" was challenged. "The \$250 million/yr represents a significant cut from the previous government's \$1.2 billion/yr in 2005. It's also a fraction of the UCCB expenditure -and there's no information at all about how the UCCB is spent, whether it's well spent, whether it meets families needs. It certainly doesn't provide the "choice in childcare" they talk about, yet costs billions of dollars." explained Shellie Bird.

Childcare advocates will be seeking a meeting with Minister Finley in the fall when Parliament reconvenes to seek solutions to Canada's childcare crisis.

Region: Canada ^[3]

Tags: advocacy ^[4]

funding ^[5]

federalism ^[6]

federal programs ^[7]

families

Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/research-policy-practice/11/08/childcare-advocates-cabinet-ministers-tips-families> [2]

<http://buildchildcare.ca/2011/08/10/childcare-advocates-to-cabinet-ministers-tips-on-families-finances-and-federalism/> [3]

<https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7864> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/advocacy> [5]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/funding> [6] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/federalism> [7]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/federal-programs>