

National child care — the promise that's never kept^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Child care is back on the federal political agenda. It is the promise that never goes away.

It is also the promise that is never kept.

This time, the New Democrats are making the pledge. Party leader Tom Mulcair announced this week that his party will create a national child care program if it forms government after next year's federal election.

He said it will be based on the Quebec system, which offers space (when available) in subsidized, regulated daycare centres at a per-child cost of \$7 a day.

There is a certain irony to this.

In 2005, it was then NDP leader Jack Layton's decision to pull the plug on Paul Martin's minority Liberal government that helped kill the closest thing Canada has ever had to a national child care system.

Martin too promised a cross-country program based on the Quebec model. During the final months of his struggling government, he even managed to get all 10 provinces onside with his \$5 billion, five-year plan.

But then the NDP, Conservatives and Bloc Québécois joined forces to defeat the Liberals.

Harper won the subsequent election and immediately cancelled Martin's scheme, putting in its place a cheaper, per-child subsidy for parents

Some child care advocates never forgave the NDP for its role in this.

In fact, the death of the Martin daycare plan was typical.

Federal politicians of all stripes are keen to promise affordable child care. None wants to be seen as an enemy of small children.

But in the end, they never deliver. There is always another priority deemed more important.

The need for affordable child care has been on the national agenda since women began to flood into the paid workforce.

A national child care program was recommended by the 1970 Royal Commission on the Status of Women, again in 1980 by the Canadian Commission for the International Year of the Child and yet again by a federal task force that reported in 1986.

Brian Mulroney's Conservatives won power in 1984 in part on their promise to introduce a national child care program.

In 1987, Mulroney's government came up with a \$5.4 billion plan to create 200,000 new child-care spaces across Canada and deliver tax breaks to parents.

By this time, there was an ideological divide over child care. On the one hand were those who said government should give money to parents and let them spend it on whatever caregivers they chose - including babysitters

On the other were those who argued that government should focus on funding regulated daycare centres, where children would receive better care.

The Mulroney plan straddled both camps and pleased neither. Yet only the tax breaks made it into law.

The more expensive element - creating daycare centres - was a casualty of political warfare between the Conservative-dominated Commons and the Liberal-dominated Senate.

When Mulroney called an election in the fall of 1988, his child care scheme died on the order paper, never to be resurrected.

By the time the Liberals returned to power in 1993, child care was no longer top of mind. The federal deficit dominated political discussion.

Liberal prime minister Jean Chrétien said child care would have to wait until the economy improved. His finance minister, Paul Martin, spent his time gutting social programs, including those used to fund daycare.

But after succeeding Chrétien, Martin decided to introduce his own ambitious child care scheme.

Former hockey star Ken Dryden, Martin's social development minister, spent a year and a half criss-crossing the country to get provincial agreement.

By this time, however, the Liberal government was on the ropes - a casualty of political scandals in Quebec that most Canadians would now be hard-pressed to remember.

For both the NDP and the Conservatives, the defeat of Martin's Liberals in 2006 was a boon.

Harper's Conservatives won power. The NDP won more seats.

The nascent national child care program, however, died. It was, as always, collateral damage.

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