

Plans to cut parental programs draw scorn in Quebec ^[1]

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Source: [Globe and Mail](#) ^[2]

Format: Article

Publication Date: 16 Sep 2014

EXCERPTS:

Trial balloons filled the skies over Quebec's National Assembly with the launch of the fall session and reports that Philippe Couillard's government is planning cuts to sacred provincial programs.

The province appears poised to end the province's \$7 daily fee for the public daycare system, drastically cut benefits in Quebec's parental leave program, and slash spending on education, including money for school boards, milk programs and books, according to recent reports from anonymous sources. Details remain scant on what the government actually wants to do and whether main purpose of the leaks is to reduce expectations.

Mr. Couillard and other government ministers refuse to confirm what is on the chopping block, but have warned nothing is off limits. The province must balance the books in the short term and address a structural deficit for the long term, Mr. Couillard said on Tuesday as he returned to the legislature.

"Our room to chose where to invest is very reduced, so small, in fact, it scarcely even exists any more in some areas," Mr. Couillard told reporters. "Redressing our financial balance is a path we must take. It won't be easy. All programs are subject to an examination."

Mr. Couillard returned to some numbers he has often repeated since he ran for election in the spring: Quebec represents 23 per cent of the Canadian population, generates 20 per cent of the country's wealth, but accounts for 27 per cent of the total of all provincial spending.

"We must rebalance that triangle, bring it closer to being demographically representative while keeping in mind Quebec's particular circumstances," Mr. Couillard said.

Cuts to parental leave and the introduction of income-contingent fees for daycare would be substantial political risks for the Liberals in a province that takes pride in child-friendly policies that are the envy of the rest of North America.

"I think people will rise up if they try to go down this road," said Françoise David, a member of the legislature who represents the left-wing Québec Solidaire. Parental leave and daycare are "the great innovations in Quebec. What's next? Are they going to cut the heat in the schools this winter?"

The Quebec programs were put in place to help boost the birth rate in the province, which has a shrinking work force, said Sylvie Lévesque, the head of a Quebec umbrella group for family organizations.

Quebec has had a minor baby boom since the daycare and parental leave systems ramped up. The birth rate has remained above the national average in the 2000s after declining for decades.

Ms. Lévesque said the programs have allowed single parents to return to work in droves and encouraged fathers, who get five weeks of leave in the Quebec system, to play a greater role in raising their children. Seventy-six per cent of fathers take leave in Quebec, compared with about 26 per cent in the rest of the country, according to Statistics Canada.

"We're very worried. This ... program has great benefits to our society, these are among the jewels of Quebec," Ms. Lévesque said. "They keep saying families are important. This is not the way to show it."

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