

# Our kids, our future and two competing visions for voters: Tim Harper <sup>[1]</sup>

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### EXCERPTS:

For those who lament the lack of big ideas debated in the hyperpartisan federal hothouse, there is good news.

No issue can be considered larger than the well-being of our children and decisions we make now will help define future generations.

Now, parents, and all Canadians who have an obvious stake in our future, have a stark choice in front of them.

The Conservatives augmented universal child-care benefit versus the NDP's universal daycare plan will be a defining issue in the next federal election.

The government plan will be tangible in the form of pre-election cheques in your mailbox. The opposition's plan will have to be sold as a concept.

At the core is a societal view of the care of our children.

Stephen Harper maintains money to help families should go "to the real experts on child care. That's mom and dad."

Tom Mulcair argues an ambitious daycare program will pay for itself in tax revenue realized from greater participation in the labour force.

Which is more universal - a national daycare plan that will take years to cobble together, or a plan which provides monthly cheques to all with children under 18?

The unspoken Conservative implication is that a New Democrat government would outsource the care for our children to a huge bureaucracy. New Democrats would counter that an affordable daycare plan would allow more parents into the workforce, earning more money that can be spent on the well-being of their children.

Daycare in Canada today is scarce and expensive. It can cost parents up to \$1,000 monthly and unlicensed daycares have proliferated with sometimes tragic results.

In Ontario, there are 823,000 children in unlicensed day care and four of them died in 2013-14 from what provincial ombudsman Andre Marin called "systematic government ineptitude" in oversight.

The NDP plan would not kick in for four years, and then create only 370,000 spots. It is aspirational because it needs provincial buy-in, but the goal is one million daycare spots costing \$15 per day in eight years.

Those who argue this is not a universal program point to the probability that those at the head of the queue would be high-income earners, but Mulcair has not ruled out giving priority to low-income earners.

The Conservative plan is universal, even if it is modest. And the government has increased the child care expense deduction, to \$8,000 from \$7,000 for children under seven and to \$5,000 from \$4,000 for those ages seven to 16.

This comes down to whether we want to think big when it comes to working parents and the next generation or continue to crawl along at a pace that the Conservatives believe is a winner, a plan that provides an extra \$2 per day per child under the age of 18.

That increase is hardly a daycare plan. It will not buy a lunch.

But by earmarking \$27 billion over six years on these family-friendly targeted tax moves - almost half the projected surplus - the government has made Mulcair's \$5 billion per year daycare plan that much more difficult to attain.

The Harper government says its family package unveiled last week, including a scaled down but still controversial income splitting plan, will help parents pay for groceries, after school activities and saving for post-secondary education.

By capping the tax saving under the income-splitting to \$2,000 it is less vulnerable to the argument that its plan benefits only the wealthy.

Yes, it excludes single parents, couples without children, low income earners, families whose children have grown and many other constituencies, but the child-care benefits will put more change in the pockets of four million families.

We now have competing visions on our young and our elderly.

Mulcair will also roll back the Harper plan to move Old Age Security eligibility to age 67 by 2023 from the current 65.

Liberal leader Justin Trudeau late last month joined Mulcair in vowing to roll back the OAS eligibility, but on the question of daycare, child benefits or income-splitting, the Liberals are well behind.

He opposes income splitting, but has said only that the Liberals will "put forward positive solutions" to grow the economy.

The government and the opposition are crafting policy on some fundamental choices in this country and offering voters a choice. The danger for Trudeau is that it becomes more difficult to thread the needle between competing visions as we approach a vote. The policy trains have left the station and the Liberal leader is stuck on the platform.

**Region:** Canada [3]

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