

Push childcare as part of 'public good' in coming election, educators told ^[1]

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Source: Ottawa Citizen

Format: Article

Publication Date: 13 Nov 2014

AVAILABILITY

Read online ^[2]

EXCERPTS:

One of the NDP's elder statesmen says the debate about a national childcare program needs to be reframed if backers want to have any success in the next federal election.

Stephen Lewis told a national gathering of some 500 childcare educators and activists that childcare should be framed as a "public good" as Canadians debate the issue going into the next federal election.

"I would argue that early childhood education and care is a public good," said Lewis, a former Canadian ambassador to the UN. "A public good like healthcare."

The federal Conservatives, Lewis said, have turned the debate into one about "tax policy and benefits."

"It has absolutely nothing to do with childcare," Lewis said. "Why would anyone allow them to sell that?"

Lewis, a former Ontario NDP leader, addressed a packed hotel ballroom on the first night of this three-day conference where educators and activists are trying to set a political roadmap to push federal leaders towards a national childcare program.

"Everything you're doing here at this conference is a matter of politics," he said. "This speaks to the fabric of the nation. You're engaged in nation-building and that is an ideological phenomenon."

Many here feel the issue has largely fallen off the federal radar.

That changed when the NDP proposed a national childcare program modeled on the Quebec program where parents pay \$7 a day for a subsidized space. The NDP want to subsidize one million spaces at a cost of \$5 billion so parents would pay \$15 a day.

Lewis argued that a nationally-funded program should only be non-profit. NDP Leader Tom Mulcair, who addresses the conference Friday, has said the party would work with non- and for-profit daycares under the NDP plan.

The provinces would have to put in billions more as part of the NDP plan.

Manitoba Premier Greg Selinger told the gathering his provincial NDP party wanted to have a program similar to Quebec.

"It is part of that long-term vision for the province," he said.

The federal Conservatives argue that giving money directly to parents through the universal childcare benefit to the tune of \$160 per month - a benefit that is taxable - and raising tax deductions for childcare spending is a more effective way of paying for daycare.

The federal Liberals, who were on the verge of a national childcare plan in the waning days of the Paul Martin government, have yet to stake a position in the debate.

Region: Canada ^[3]

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