

Mulcair says NDP government would keep Tory child care benefits ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

NDP Leader Tom Mulcair made a multi-billion-dollar pledge Thursday, saying that if his party wins the next election, it will honour the expanded universal child care benefit the Conservatives unveiled late last year.

That increase in the child care benefit has eaten into the projected surplus for the coming fiscal year and will cost federal coffers just over \$4.9 billion in fiscal year 2015-16, rising to \$5 billion two years later.

Mulcair's pledge to keep the benefit is on top of the party's promise to create a national child care program. That proposed program would subsidize one million existing or new spaces across the country, and cost \$5 billion annually once spending is fully ramped up.

"Let there be no doubt, we'll keep the recent additions to the child care benefit," Mulcair told MPs and staffers gathered for a two-day strategy session.

"Young families have told us that what's needed most is affordable child care spaces, and despite years of broken promises by both the Conservatives and the Liberals before them, we'll get the job done."

Last year, the Conservatives expanded the monthly child care benefit. Currently, \$100 payments go to families for each child under age six. Under the Tory plan, that payment will rise to \$180 per child, per month. As well, families with children between ages six and 18 will also start receiving monthly payments of \$60 per child. The planned payments, if approved by Parliament, are expected to roll out in July.

The Tories used the tax announcement to separate themselves politically from the NDP and Liberals, saying they were the only party that wanted to give money directly to parents. Now the NDP is planning to do the same, but spend even more.

Economists suggested that there was space in the federal fiscal outlook to handle the NDP's \$5-billion child-care plan before the Conservatives unveiled a bundle of tax goodies at the end of October. Increasing the monthly child-care benefit and allowing income splitting for eligible couples - a 2011 Conservative campaign promise - shaved the projected surplus in 2015-16 to \$1.9 billion from \$6.4 billion, according to projections from the Department of Finance.

Since then, however, the price of oil has plunged. This week, TD Economics projected the federal budget would be in a deficit for the next two fiscal years. The government has maintained it will balance the budget as promised.

In his speech, Mulcair didn't say how the party would fund both promises. In the past, the NDP has suggested it would raise corporate taxes to cover its child-care pledge.

The speech touched on many of the points Mulcair has made in the past, reviewing the party's campaign promises and taking aim at his two rivals. Mulcair targeted Prime Minister Stephen Harper, saying his "stubborn approach" has caused the economy to falter. Mulcair also continued to paint Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau as lacking the experience needed to be prime minister.

"Increasingly, many Canadians appear to be telling Mr. Trudeau that if he doesn't have the experience for the job, then at least he should have a plan. So far, he appears to be satisfied with neither," Mulcair said.

"In the absence of experience, and without a concrete plan, if we refuse to state where the solutions lie, it means we're just not ready for the job. But Trudeau still believes that he can just inherit power without proposing a thing," Mulcair added in French.

Mulcair also announced a shuffle in the ranks of the NDP's political staffers. Brad Lavigne, who was instrumental in the 2011 campaign that gave the party its best finish ever, will be a senior campaign adviser. Michael Balagus, who oversaw the Manitoba NDP's recent electoral victories, is heading up the party's efforts in Ontario and will also be in charge of the party's election war room.

Mulcair said MPs will review the party's election preparations "to run the most ambitious, well-resourced and successful NDP election campaign ever."

Child care spending by the numbers

\$15: Cost, per day, for child care under the proposed NDP program

1 million: Spaces the NDP program would subsidize

\$5 billion: Annual cost to the federal government under the NDP plan

\$180: Amount per child under six, per month, that families could receive starting in July under the expanded universal child care benefit

\$4.9 billion: Cost for the expanded child care benefit for fiscal year 2015-16

\$6.4 billion: Originally projected budget surplus next year

\$1.9 billion: Updated projection with new tax measures and benefits

\$2.3 billion: Deficit for next year projected by TD Economics

Region: Ontario ^[3]

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