

Tories roll out taxpayer-funded payola: Goar ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

On Monday, approximately four million Canadian families received a substantial bank deposit from Ottawa. The size of the windfall depended on the number and ages of children in a family. A couple with two preschoolers and a five-year-old, for example, got \$1,560. A single mother with a 10-year-old got \$360.

Heralding the child care payment as “Christmas in July,” Social Development Minister Pierre Poilievre trotted off to a series of news conferences sporting a T-shirt emblazoned with a Conservative Party logo.

The money was not a surprise. Last October, Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced an increase in Ottawa’s Universal Child Care Benefit. But the Conservatives held the cash back until this month, creating a hefty retroactive payment.

The timing, obviously, is no coincidence. Like every prime minister since Confederation, Harper is rolling out the goodies in the run-up to October’s election.

In the past 10 past days, he has enlarged Rouge National Urban Park, which borders on or includes a dozen ridings; announced a free trade deal with Ukraine that will bolster Tory prospects in seven key constituencies; and unveiled an expanded free trade agreement with Israel, which will strengthen his party among Jewish voters. This week’s \$3-billion child-care expenditure capped the bonanza.

Harper’s rivals can’t compete with this onslaught of federal largesse. They have no access to public revenues.

But payola doesn’t win elections. If it did, no incumbent would ever lose. (Thirteen of Canada’s 22 prime ministers have gone down to defeat).

There are at least three ways the New Democrats and Liberals can undercut — or at least discredit — the Tory strategy.

They can ridicule the government’s “generosity” as flagrant election bribery. It would take ingenuity to sway patronage-inured voters, but with Tory profligacy extending from prime-time TV ads to Senate spending, Harper is vulnerable.

They can neutralize the government’s advantage by matching its benefit. That is safe and easy.

Or they can offer something better. That is creative but risky.

On Harper’s cash-for-kids program, Thomas Mulcair and Justin Trudeau have gone in opposite directions.

The NDP leader would simply deliver Harper’s enriched benefit, while giving parents a chance to get in on the ground floor of his eight-year plan to develop a \$15-a-day national child care system.

The Liberal leader would scrap Harper’s assortment of payments and tax breaks (the Universal Child Care Benefit, the Canada Child Tax Benefit, the National Child Benefit Supplement and a parental income-splitting scheme) and introduce a single, tax-free Canada Child Benefit targeted at middle-and lower-income families. He would also launch a yet-to-be-unveiled national child-care strategy.

Both proposals trump Harper’s election goody. But they send different messages. Mulcair is offering low-risk, incremental change. Trudeau is offering a fairer, more coherent approach.

Some parents will no doubt prefer the straight cash the Tories are giving out. It is tangible. It is already locked into the 2015-2016 budget. It comes with no strings attached.

Some couples will be indifferent. They can afford nannies, rely on grandparents, or send their children to Montessori schools.

By election day, child care — which affects less than a third of voters — is unlikely to be top of mind. Canadians are worried about the stalled economy, their jobs, their debts, their kids’ prospects, the health-care system and the direction of the country.

But the issue does provide a clear glimpse through the pre-election smog. The New Democrats don’t want to ruffle feathers or raise fears.

Their objective is to be seen as a government-in-waiting. The Liberals have no qualms about dismantling Harper's policies. They are gambling that Canadians want a fresh start.

That dichotomy will set the tenor of the campaign. Until the writ is officially dropped, expect a spate of infrastructure announcements, trade deals and job-creating procurements. Parks will be improved, arenas expanded and water treatment facilities upgraded. Airports and harbours will be modernized. There will be ribbon-cuttings galore. Ridings the Tories hope to gain or need to hold will be particularly favoured.

Voters who wish to express their gratitude for these pre-election goodies need only thank fellow taxpayers. They are involuntarily financing this multi-billion-dollar spending spree.

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