

The spectator's view: At last, child care on the election agenda ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Surprise. Child care is going to be an issue in the fast-approaching federal election campaign. And we have Thomas Mulcair's NDP to thank.

Last year Mulcair announced an NDP government would partner with provinces to create a million daycare spaces across the country and would cap the cost at \$15 daily. It's an audacious plan, anathema to conservatives big C and small. But it's resonating with Canadian families facing patchwork availability and costs typically above \$1,000 per month per child.

The NDP's big play caused both the Conservatives and the Liberals to increase their focus on parents and children, and now all three parties have so called plans. Which is best?

The Conservatives recently announced Universal Child Care Benefit, which will see parents get either \$60 or \$160 per child monthly, depending on age. This is simply a modern version of the family allowance program. The UCCB is not progressive. It goes to all parents. If you're a store clerk you get it. If you're CEO of a hospital, you get it. How much will it help? As details emerge, it looks like not much. The UCCB is taxable, so an Ontario parent receiving an additional \$720 in monthly income will pay about \$225 back in taxes. Now consider that the Conservatives eliminated the existing child tax credit of \$2,255 when they introduced the UCCB. Check with your tax person for your specifics. But many experts say the UCCB will result in only about \$160 in new income over a year — a whopping \$13.18 a month.

The chief benefit of the NDP plan is that it actually is a strategy. In Quebec, a similar effort allowed 70,000 women to work who couldn't afford to previously. That's why, Mulcair argues, this is an economic plan as well as a child care plan. More affordable care, more parents working, more income and spending, more taxes to the treasury. The biggest hole in the NDP plan? Cost. Quebec is struggling with its system and may have to index the cost based household income. Mulcair says the federal plan would start out costing about \$290 million but that would escalate to \$5 billion eight years in. Can Ottawa really afford it?

The Liberal plan would cost an incremental \$2 billion. The Canada Child Benefit would not be taxable but it would be scaled so wealthy families would receive less while low income parents would receive more. That makes this plan the most progressive. Affluent Canadian families can afford child care. Governments should be helping families who struggle.

The NDP plan is the most intriguing. It's new social policy, like medicare was in its day. The Liberal proposal is most progressive as it helps those who need it most, but neither it or the Conservative family allowance program address the lack of quality affordable care. That gives the NDP the edge on this file, overall.

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