

Will Trudeau roll out national child care?^[1]

Author: Rabson, Mia

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EXCERPTS

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is not a subscriber to the business mantra to underpromise and overdeliver.

As the days creep closer to his first federal budget as prime minister, his "sunny ways" campaign, which promised the sky to so many, is running up against the cold, hard reality of a crappy economy. Everyone he made a promise to is lining up for their share.

The latest are child-care advocates, who are asking Trudeau to live up to his promise to create a national framework for child care, and invest in it using some of the \$20 billion pledged for social infrastructure.

This week in Edmonton, Social Development Minister Jean-Yves Duclos meets with his provincial counterparts, and child care is one item on the agenda. But Duclos will make no actual commitments, especially when it comes to dollars on the table. He will say, "Wait for the budget." It's what every minister tells anyone asking about money these days.

History has not been kind to federal child-care promises when there is a budget crunch.

The fact it's being talked about at all is enough to have advocates such as Don Giesbrecht, chief executive officer of the Canadian Child Care Federation, clapping his hands.

Giesbrecht said he had a meeting with Duclos and his parliamentary secretary, Manitoba MP Terry Duguid, in January. In 10 years, Giesbrecht said, he never once got a meeting with the previous Conservative government.

"Small victories," he said.

But there was no specific commitment. Giesbrecht said given the government already plans to run a deficit, and included child care as eligible for the social infrastructure stimulus funding, he'd like to see something in the budget that shows more than just the right words.

"The economy is really in a difficult place, but at the same time, it doesn't stop the need for quality affordable child care," Giesbrecht said.

Research has shown investing in child care is one of the biggest returns on investment government can receive, as it helps drive up employment, generating more tax dollars. University of Quebec at Montreal economist Pierre Fortin's research showed for every \$1 invested into it, Quebec's \$7-a-day child-care program returned \$1.05 to the Quebec government and 44 cents to Ottawa, more than paying for the programs.

But time and again Canada has promised child care and not delivered.

Starting with the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in 1970, dozens of reports, reviews, panels and audits have recommended a national child-care strategy that improves both the quality and accessibility of child care for parents. Then-prime minister Brian Mulroney almost did something about it in 1988, with legislation offering funding for new spaces and tax breaks for parents. It was shelved after the 1988 election because the government said it was too expensive.

In 1993, prime minister Jean Chrétien's Liberal Red Book promised national child care, but when the government turned its sights on slaying the deficit, child care was one of many things that got the boot.

In 2005, prime minister Paul Martin introduced a \$5-billion, five-year, child-care plan and actually managed to sign agreements with each province to roll out programs specific to each province's needs and desires. It was shelved in 2006, as one of the Harper government's first actions. The universal child-care benefit, a \$2.6-billion program to send money directly to parents, was introduced instead, along with a tax credit to encourage businesses to open daycares. The UCCB didn't do anything to encourage quality or affordability in child care, and the tax credit was so unpopular, almost no businesses took advantage of it.

So now we have Justin Trudeau, who will roll out a \$22-billion Canada child benefit, which will blend several different family benefit payments (including the UCCB) into a single, income-tested program that could pay out as much as \$6,400 a year for a child. The government needs to find \$2 billion in new money in the budget to pay just for that.

When you add up the faltering economy and its impact on government revenues, and all the other promises Trudeau has to live up to, don't be surprised come budget day if a national child-care framework once more is sent to the back of the line.

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