

Canada Child Benefit is basic-income guarantee, says families minister Jean-Yves Duclos ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Jean-Yves Duclos, federal minister for families, children and social development, says the Liberal government remains open to the idea of a guaranteed minimum income but believes it has already brought one in for families with children.

The streamlined, income-based and tax-free Canada Child Benefit the Liberals unveiled in the March 22 federal budget can be considered a form of basic-income guarantee, Duclos told the Star in an interview Thursday, because of its simplicity and equitability.

“The fact that it is a single benefit, non-taxable, makes it simple for families to understand what they receive,” said Duclos, adding that it is also simple to administer and is distributed according to need.

A guaranteed minimum income, which would have governments ensure that every individual had enough money to meet their basis needs, was never mentioned in the Liberal platform.

But Duclos, who is responsible for developing the national poverty-reduction strategy and spent years studying the concept as an economist, has said he would be open to the idea.

The Ontario government is designing a pilot project to study the impact and effectiveness of a basic-income guarantee compared to traditional means of delivering social assistance.

Quebec is also studying the idea.

Duclos said he remains interested, but the provinces would have to take the lead.

“We are going to be listening and listening very attentively to the lessons found in those provinces interested in the issue and we are going to learn from the work that they will be doing,” he said.

Ian Culbert, executive director of the Canadian Public Health Association, which has been pushing for a basic-income guarantee, said he wants the government to look beyond families with children.

“We really want to see a fully fleshed-out basic-income guarantee, as opposed to this piecemeal approach to different populations in Canadian society,” he said.

David Macdonald, senior economist at the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, said the Canada Child Benefit does behave like a basic-income guarantee for a specific group, much like the Guaranteed Income Supplement and Old Age Security does for seniors.

Macdonald said he thinks it would be a better idea — and cost less both financially and politically — for the government to put resources into improving those programs than bringing in a guaranteed minimum income for all.

“Improving them would likely go much further towards reducing poverty than trying to implement a very high-level (guaranteed income) which would just cost astronomical amounts,” said Macdonald.

As for the rest of the national poverty-reduction strategy, which Duclos said is still in the pre-consultation phase, the federal government will look to existing poverty-reduction programs in provinces and municipalities nationwide.

“The poverty reduction strategy that we are going to build will not start from nowhere,” said Duclos, adding formal consultations will begin later this year.

The Liberals are also still in the early stages of creating the promised national framework on early learning and child care, for which they earmarked \$500 million — including \$100 million for child care on First Nations reserves — in fiscal 2017-18.

Duclos said the framework, being developed in consultation with provinces, territories and indigenous communities, will recognize that

much has changed since Paul Martin's Liberal government signed child-care agreements in 2005, which the Conservatives abandoned when they took power in 2006.

"The universal message was that the federal government has to be respectful of the diversity of circumstances and ambitions of provinces, so to want to impose a universal system across Canada would not be welcomed by provinces and territories," he said.

"That's why I want to collaborate, to be a companion, as opposed to being a dictator with them," said Duclos, who will be meeting with provincial and territorial social development ministers again in the fall.

While he said it is too early in the process to be certain, Duclos does anticipate it will result in signing individual and separate agreements with each province and territory, as the Martin government did.

"It is most likely the way in which the federal government will be able to assist most effectively will be to respect each individual province and territory's path ahead," Duclos said.

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