

New Canada Child Benefit rolls out with a more subtle pitch^[1]

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EXCERPTS

If it's July, it must be time to talk about the politics of child benefit cheques.

With the new Canada Child Benefit (CCB) rolling out this month, some Canadian families may also be thinking back to the mini-windfalls they received to boost their summer of 2015.

In a move criticized as crass pre-electioneering, Stephen Harper's former Conservative government had timed the delivery of retroactive, lump sum benefit cheques for its newly enhanced Universal Child Care Benefit (UCCB) for the month before the federal election call.

Then, former Conservative cabinet minister Pierre Poilievre (and other ministers, too) set out on a national search for "missing" families who hadn't signed up for the UCCB.

At the time, about 3.8 million households were signed up in the CRA's database. The previous Conservative government concluded that another 200,000 were "missing," for reasons partly redacted in documents CBC News obtained under Access to Information.

Poilievre's officials broke down where they thought the missing households were across Canada, based in part on Statistics Canada data.

A communications push was launched to promote awareness of the lump sum payments in targeted communities and among targeted populations.

Opposition critics pointed out many of the stops on the ministerial tour corresponded with ridings the Conservatives wanted to shore up or target in the election.

The Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) tells CBC News that it received 18,248 applications from new families between March 2015 and April 2016.

That timeframe includes the months in the spring and summer of 2015 when Poilievre's campaign was underway, but also months after the Liberal government was elected on a pledge to improve the child benefit so 90 per cent of Canadian families would be better off.

It's impossible to know how many of those new sign-ups are attributable to Poilievre's campaign.

A family who had just moved to Canada, for example, would need to apply. So would parents of a newly adopted or newborn child, if they wanted to start receiving their benefits.

But the CRA's database is still showing roughly the same number of average monthly recipients as last year - 3.8 million.

That number shifts around with not only new registrations, but also deletions, as other families see their children become adults or move outside of Canada.

Everyone who received the UCCB or the Canada Child Tax Benefit (CCTB), another program discontinued once the new Canada Child Benefit begins, is automatically signed up to receive the CCB.

Some 3.9 million households received letters from the CRA last month, explaining the change. The tax agency explains that number is higher than the 3.8 million average monthly recipients, because changes in marital status or custody, new births and children reaching their 18th birthdays constantly shift who gets what over the course of a year.

Last year, before the 2015 budget had even passed, CRA sent 570,000 letters to parents asking them to confirm their children's information before July's big boost.

The letters targeted "dormant" cases where payments ceased because children had grown too old for the existing UCCB (which previously ended at a child's sixth birthday) or family incomes were too high for the CCTB.

One Edmonton mom found her letter, confirming information CRA already had, "a little rich," and told CBC News it read like a Conservative

ad at taxpayers' expense.

But CRA said at the time it needed updates to make sure payments didn't go astray after custody changed, people moved or someone died.

This year's letter doesn't ask for updates or target "missing" families. It just explains how the benefits program has changed.

In a departure from the previous government's communications strategy, the letter does not mention the current Liberal minister's name.

There was also a lack of anything resembling Liberal Party branding - in fact, the headline font and banner with the CRA logo and government of Canada wordmark at the bottom was... blue.

However, the social media feeds of Liberal MPs and ministers have been full of plugs for the new benefit in the weeks leading up to July 20.

Changing the CCB was a central plank in now Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's pitch to middle-class families. That political pitch hasn't ended.

-reprinted from CBC News

Region: Canada ^[3]

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