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FEDERAL POLITICS

Conservatives and Quebec cool to Liberals' ambitious child-care plan

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Tue., April 20, 2021 | 3 min. read

OTTAWA—The Liberal government's signature budget ambition of building a \$10-a-day Canada-wide daycare system depends on reaching separate deals with each province, and for future government leaders to respect them.

Already there are signs that's not a given.

Conservative Leader Erin O'Toole said his party wants a plan that gives "choice" and flexibility to parents who want friends or relatives to take care of their children. The Conservatives under Stephen Harper ended the Liberals' last \$5 billion attempt to create a national early learning and child care system, and sent \$100 child-care cheques directly to families instead.

O'Toole said the Liberal party has promised a national daycare plan "nine times. Even cats only have nine lives." He said Conservatives will propose a plan for Canadian families "in the future."

And Quebec Premier François Legault said he will take Quebec's share of the national program "for daycare services that we already have in Quebec" and put the money toward health care after the Liberal budget rebuffed the premiers' unanimous call for a massive increase to the federal health transfer.

Legault acknowledged that the Quebec daycare network still "must be completed" but he estimated Quebec's share of the \$30-billion federal child-care proposal — at \$680 million in the first year, rising to \$1.8 billion in 2025-26 — would help Quebec solve "a small part of our funding problem" in health.

Earlier Tuesday, Prime Minister Trudeau said Quebec, like all provinces, would get its "fair share" of the money once an agreement was reached, but that just as under a previous funding arrangement, "it has to be invested in families and children."

Bloc Québécois leader Yves-François Blanchet told the Commons that Ottawa cannot dictate conditions on child care to Quebec.

"What we want is a no-strings-attached transfer," he said. "Quebec should do what it wants with its own money."

During the budget debate Tuesday, NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh made clear he doesn't believe the Liberals will follow through on the child care plan, saying the Liberals promised it simply to get elected. Still, the NDP took credit for pushing the government to pledge it.

Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland insisted that after years of unrealized promises, Canadians are ready "to get it done" and that as a working mother, she is committed to creating a Canada-wide early learning and child-care system.

But her budget avoided any talk of "national standards" in child care, or even referring to a "national" child care system.

Instead, the budget promised to spend up to \$30 billion over five years to create a "pan-Canadian" system. Freeland said Tuesday that separate deals would be struck with willing provinces and territories that "share our ambitions in this sector" and talks have already begun.

The budget specifically calls for a 50 per cent reduction in average fees for regulated early learning and child care in all provinces outside of Quebec to be delivered before or by the end of 2022.

“Our goal is that within five years, families everywhere in Canada should have access to high quality daycare for an average of \$10 a day,” Freeland said after tabling the budget.

But child-care advocates were left in the dark about what sharing the cost would look like: whether provinces would have to increase their current spending on services to match the federal contribution, whether the money would subsidize for-profit child care providers, or be limited to the non-profit child-care sector.

Freeland told CBC Radio the federal Liberals have a “strong bias” towards supporting the non-profit sector in both child care and long-term care.

Martha Friendly, head of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit at the University of Toronto, said that outside of Quebec, child-care spaces are primarily funded by parental fees which dried up over the course of the pandemic.

She said the pandemic showed that any government plan must “fund the services” not merely provide direct payments to parents because the previous Conservative government’s plan clearly did not work.

The Canadian Union of Public Employees says the pandemic has led to the permanent closure of approximately 58 child-care centres. “Enrolment has dropped and the workforce is exhausted, stressed and still not prioritized for vaccines amidst increased outbreaks,” the union said in a statement that welcomed the Freeland budget proposal.



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