

NATIONAL POST

National daycare redux

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When the federal Liberals lost the January, 2006, election there was no policy plank so emotional, and so close to becoming reality, as the Liberal's national daycare plan. So close and yet so far: The Conservative policy to counter the Liberals was money given directly to parents, which proved to be popular and tolled the death knell for the nationalized system.

Except that the system did not die: Bill C-303, "An Act to establish criteria and conditions in respect of funding for early learning and child care programs" resurrected the old Liberal plan, this time as an NDP private member's bill. It awaits third reading in the House of Commons, where it looks ready to pass with NDP, Liberal and Bloc Quebecois support. In an odd turn of events, the Conservatives are helping them out. Opposed are parents-rights groups and many provincial governments.

By sending as much money to the provinces for child care, rather than giving it directly to parents, the Conservatives are giving Bill C-303 tacit support. Back in 2004, the Liberal promise was \$5-billion dollars over five years for the creation of 250,000 spaces. Today, the Conservatives are promising \$850-million annually, which does not include \$250-million for new spaces. Moreover, that \$850-million will grow to \$1.1-billion by 2008-2009 and to \$1.3-billion annually by 2013-14 according to the finance department.

National daycare activists can accurately claim the money is ready and available, it just needs the "criteria and conditions" of a national daycare plan.

That's precisely where the provinces balk. Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, Saskatchewan, and the Northwest Territories have spoken out against Bill C-303. And a spokesperson for the Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services says that province is not in favour of standardized, inflexible mandates from Ottawa either.

Bill C-303 is inflexible on any number of points: for one, it funds not-for-profit, centre-based child care preferentially, so many existing private daycares and home-based daycares are out. In some jurisdictions, usually more rural, private child care and care that is not centre-based makes up the sector. Jeanette Mac-Aulay, deputy minister for the Department of Social Services in P.E.I. told the Human Resources Standing Committee that 74% of her province's daycares are private and that the conditions of Bill C-303 are "onerous" and "inflexible."

Saskatchewan's Deb Higgins, Minister of Learning, told her provincial legislature on May 7 she is concerned because "Saskatchewan is very different from Ontario or British Columbia, and northern and rural areas need to have a different fix than a child care centre."

And Quebec supports the bill only because they can opt out, a clause the Northwest Territories is also eager to explore. The Northwest Territories complained about the "lack of consultation with the governments who have the legislative authority for program delivery," calling it "unacceptable." In the Northwest Territories, 40% of child care is provided by family home operators. Bill C-303 would limit that -- family child care is not, after all, centre-based.

When asked if Ontario was planning to create a province-wide, standardized daycare system, a spokesperson for the Ministry of Children and Youth Services said this: "[t]he thing is that in everything we do, we work with our municipalities who have child care plans where it doesn't matter if it is a not-for-profit or for-profit child care facility ... The idea is that those plans address local needs and are flexible to meet local needs. And that has been our biggest concern with anything the federal government does, that it would allow for child care to be provided in a way that is consistent with local priorities."

The attempt to revive the Liberals' national daycare plan using Bill C-303 is moving forward despite the fact that it is the least popular with parents and that many of the country's provinces want nothing to do with it. The question that remains, however, is this: Why is the Conservative government stoking demands for a national daycare system by sending childcare money to provinces when it won the last election promising to put more money in the hands of parents for the care of their children?

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