

OFFICIAL REPORT (HANSARD)

Thursday, October 25, 2007

Child Care and Early Learning

Ms. Ruby Dhalla:

The Prime Minister has spoken about his plans to legislate limits to the federal spending power, but all of us have to wonder about this continued hostility toward social programs, hostility that he championed when he was head of the National Citizens Coalition, a hostility that he demonstrated when he cancelled the child care and early learning agreements that had been negotiated with the provinces. These agreements would have provided children and families with an opportunity to invest in early learning.

This hostility and the federal spending power mechanism that he speaks about will jeopardize medicare. It will continue to jeopardize national programs, like child care, which are of prime importance to Canadian families.

Code Blue for Child Care, which has done a tremendous job advocating and speaking up on behalf of Canadian families and Canada's children, wrote a letter recently. It stated:

The Tories are misusing Quebecers' desire to control their own social institutions to cover their actions...[even though] Parliament has all the practical tools it requires to both protect and expand social programs while respecting Quebec's distinct status.

It goes on to talk about the fact that the government has also given out \$1,200 to Canadian families for child care. However, that \$1,200, broken down to \$100 a month, is taxable.

Therefore, parents have been left with almost \$60 a month. They have been left to fend for themselves. This is why the gap in our country continues to grow.

We talk about the fact that the government committed to producing child care spaces, 125,000 of them, but yet again it is another broken promise. When we look at this today, October 2007, not a single child care space has been produced.

Under the previous Liberal government, early learning and child care agreements were reached with all 10 provinces and would have ensured quality, universal, accessible and affordable child care for all Canadian families. Instead, parents and families are being left to fend for themselves. Mothers or fathers, who may want to participate in the workforce, have been denied that opportunity because they are unable to find access to a child care space.

I take a look at my own riding of Brampton—Springdale. I meet with constituents on a regular basis. They have been unable to find access to quality child care. Unfortunately, despite our many surpluses, we are failing to invest in children and in early learning and child care.

We have to ask ourselves this. If those agreements had not been cut by the government, every riding would have had access to over 266 additional early learning and child care spaces.

All of us have read the research. Study after study has concluded that a good start in life gives children a leg up, regardless of their family socio-economic status. Positive early experiences will help children build self-esteem, confidence, physical and emotional well-being and have the ability to cooperate and socialize.

Today in Toronto, in an era of surpluses, both at the provincial and the federal level, the city of Toronto is talking about cutting back or closing skating rink, swimming pools and community centres for children. Why is this happening in an era prosperity, growth, success and surplus at the federal level? All the money the government is trying to save right now is going to be spent on guns, gangs and violence. We need to invest in our children and we need to do it now. That is why the motion speaks to investing in education.

(1245)

We all realize that quality early learning and child care is an important part of every child and their upbringing. More than 73% of mothers with children under age six are in the workforce.

On behalf of so many Canadian families and children, I ask that we invest in them and that we do it today. We must not think about doing it tomorrow, or a month after, or a year after. Despite the fact that the government has inherited a surplus, it continues to cut back billions of dollars in programs and services that matter to Canadians, that matter to our children.

Mr. Dean Del Mastro (Peterborough, CPC):

Mr. Speaker, the member spoke quite a bit about child care, so I will point my question in that direction.

As she well knows, child care is a provincial jurisdiction. That is why in the last budget we provided her home province and my home province an additional \$90 million for child care, a significant increase for the provincial budget for child care. That is not all we have done. We have given every parent for children under age six the universal child care benefit of \$100 per month for each child. I have stacks of letters from parents in my riding who appreciate that.

However, that is not all we did either. We have also brought in a \$2,000 tax credit for every child under the age of 18. That is huge because for every parent, particularly for a single working mother with income under \$40,000, it will reduce taxes by 25%. That is huge.

We have supported families.

Unlike the member, my spouse is an early childhood educator. She works in day care. She can see the improvement. Yes, the program proposed by her government delivered some money to Peterborough, but it did not deliver any money to the adjacent riding of Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock. Then again, that riding was held by a Conservative. My riding used to be held by a Liberal. To me, that is a pretty discriminatory program. Our program discriminates against no one and provides support to all parents.

What does the member have to say about that?

Ms. Ruby Dhalla:

Mr. Speaker, I applaud my colleague for having a wife who is an educator for early childhood and learning. Those educators are providing a solid foundation for so many of our children.

The member talks about discrimination. Who is being discriminated against under the Conservative government at the moment? The children of Canada. They have been denied an opportunity because they do not have access to quality, universal, acceptable and affordable child care. Had the early learning agreements, as signed by the federal government and the provinces, not been cut up, every riding would have had almost 266 spaces.

The Conservatives talk about giving \$1,200 to parents. That \$1,200 is taxable. The \$100 per month is turned into almost \$60 a month. Where in Canada can we find child care for almost \$2 a day? That is a piecemeal approach. We need to have national leadership. We need to have vision on this issue so we have a national child care strategy in Canada.