



**B.C. NDP bent on liberating Canadian women with universal child care program**

*Amy Carmichael*

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VANCOUVER (CP) - Carole James says she'll face everything from deaththreats to snide comments about her refusal to don high-heeled shoes to become premier and liberate women with a universal child-care program.

The B.C. NDP leader doesn't yet have many specifics to offer on the policy front, but can promise that a government-funded day-care system will be at the heart of her leadership campaign. "Universal child care is certainly a top priority for me. It's good economics to be able to support people to get back to work and to be productive taxpayers," she told The Canadian Press.

With some provinces having all but abandoned pledges of universal daycare, it's risky plan for a party struggling to convince voters it can be fiscally responsible.

James says the money is there, it's just a matter of setting priorities.

And so far, hers seem to be women and families.

Funding for women's centres, eliminated last week by the Gordon Campbell Liberals, would be reinstated under a James government.

B.C.'s previous NDP government was one year into such a scheme when it was defeated by the Liberals and the program scrapped. Budget plans were unable to explain how the province was going to pay for its share. James hasn't either. Not yet. She said more details will come out closer to the winter.

And money for child care is already coming in from the federal government, with the intention that it be matched by the provinces.

Ottawa ramped up its contribution this year but B.C. and other provinces have been funelling it into other things, says the Canadian Child Care Advocacy Association.

In Quebec, however, Jean Charest's Liberal government wants the right to opt out of federal daycare funding initiatives, arguing it's a provincial jurisdiction.

And Quebec daycare is far from free. A part of the province's social policy cornerstone, it nonetheless features a \$5 per day fee. And, there has been talk of hiking that charge.

The idea of universal child care was recommended in the 70s in a Royal Commission on the Status of Women.

The calls have been ignored for decades, but association analyst Barbara Cameron said such a program is driving a resurgence of the women's movement in Canada. It's something James might ignite as her popularity skyrockets in the polls.

"I think it's probably the most important reform for women, having a system of accessible, affordable child care. We won't have equal work for women and economic autonomy without services in place to support it," said Cameron, who is grading the child care funding agreement between the feds and the provinces.

Manitoba is starting to realize the need, she said, and is in the early stages of doing something about it.

James could glom onto that momentum, join the massive outcry in Quebec over the Charest government's threats to the heavily-subsidized child care program, and run with it right across the country, said University of British Columbia political scientist Alan Tupper.

"It could be a good thing for her," he said.

But there's no question she's picked an issue that promises to be explosively controversial.

It's estimated a national day care program would cost \$10 billion over 15 years. That's one per cent of the GDP, the same spent on such programs in Western Europe.

James said she's prepared to stand tough on divisive expenditures.

"You can't anticipate all the balls that are going to be thrown at you. I've had death threats. I've had people outside our house and we had to bring in the police."

That was when James was chair of the Victoria school board and looking at school closures.

"I took a payout to take this position. You certainly don't do it for money. If you can make a difference at this kind of level, you can have huge impact on people's lives and that's what drives you." A motherly consensus builder when compared to the more attack-dog style of former NDP leader Joy MacPhail, James says she's winning people over by listening and offering them an opportunity to draft solutions in their communities.

"What you see the Liberal government doing right now is forcing the medicine down you rather than sitting down and talking with you to see, is this the right medicine to give you, is this the right solution for your community.

"Cuts may be on the table but then let's come up with ideas to meet the needs. People know their communities best."

Giving people attention, while it's a nice touch, is not going to be enough to solve problems, said Tupper.

"Consultation can sometimes increase controversy because it focuses in on the trade-offs of different policy options. In no way is extensive public consultation a panacea. It will not remove ideological conflicts. It will not remove the question of who pays and who benefits."