

Political parties trying to entice voters with family-friendly platforms

Whoever wins the Oct. 21 federal election will be focused on families and helping them get ahead – or so it would seem with the early slate of promises pouring out from the platforms of the ruling Liberals, the Conservatives and the NDP.

Making life more affordable for families is a key plank in each platform and all parties are promising to put more money back into the pockets of everyday Canadians.

From the universal tax cuts offered by the Conservatives, to an enhanced Canada Child Benefit pledged by the Liberals, to quality, affordable child care from the NDP, families are shaping up to be the big winners in the aftermath of election day.

It's a good thing, in many ways, says Peter Jon Mitchell, the acting program director for Cardus Family, a think tank that examines the family and its impact on society.

"There has been a focus on families and what they need early on in the campaign," said Mitchell. "I think it's good that politicians are recognizing the importance that families play in Canada. ... Each of the campaigns has demonstrated that."

In the earliest days in the campaign, it seemed the Conservatives had offered the most to families and their pocketbooks. Their universal tax cut promises to "put more than \$850 back into the pockets of an average Canadian" with a reduction in the rate of the lowest-income tax bracket, while reimposing the Children's Fitness Tax Credit (allowing a \$1,000 per child credit related to fitness or sports activities) and the Children's Arts and Learning Tax Credit (\$500 credit for arts and educational activities).

These were in place under the last Conservative government and cancelled shortly after the Liberals took power in 2015. The Conservatives have also promised its Green Public Tax Credit – a redo of its Public Transit Tax Credit eliminated by the Liberals in 2017 – for those who rely on public transit. It could save a family of four in Toronto up to \$1,000.

But the Liberals have not been far behind in promises, vowing to improve the supports of the Canada Child Benefit, which provides \$6,400 per child under age six and \$5,400 per child from age six to 17, to eligible families. It's a popular program that many have credited with raising thousands above the

poverty line.

The Liberals have also promised tax-free maternity and parental benefits (similar to the Conservatives), a raise in the basic personal tax deduction to \$15,000 and more accessible child care.

The NDP has also pledged more affordable child care while offering every Canadian access to publicly-funded education, including post-secondary. They've also promised universal public health care for all Canadians, including prescription insurance coverage.



Michel MacDonald

Michel MacDonald, executive director of the Catholic Organization for Life and Family (COLF), which promotes Church teachings on family and its role in society, is happy that all parties are recognizing family interests, but warns that we are in the heat of an election campaign.

“Any help for families is something good,” said MacDonald. “But obviously when you’ve got an election coming around, everybody is promising you the moon. Things can look good on paper.”

Pledges to take care of the family are nothing new in Canada though. Mitchell notes there has been a multi-prong approach to supporting families dating back to the mid-20th century, with a “history of diverse levers governments have used” to support the family.

“Historically the government has recognized that supporting families is important because of the work that they do and the benefit of raising kids for the country,” he said.

And studies have shown many families are under pressure, particularly young families. It's led to a trend of couples having children at a later stage in life, said Mitchell.

"Certainly I think young families are sensing pressure, economic pressure, and that's a challenge for young families," he said. "We're seeing this campaign responding to that."

As for the platforms, Mitchell said he would leave it up to economists and political scientists to determine which party has the best platform.

MacDonald, for his part, sees the pluses in many of the promises, including the enhanced Child Tax Benefit and re-implementing the fitness and arts credits. However, he also warned that government needs to be careful such benefits don't discourage institutions that strengthen families. He said some of these benefits may actually be disincentives to a young couple getting married, as they "can act as a marriage penalty when they are geared-to-income" and reduce the benefit payout.

In an opinion piece written for Troy Media, Mitchell questioned the long-term sustainability of increased benefits, warning that they could be threatened should the government need to reign in its spending.

"If the program were ever scaled back, low-income families would feel it the most," Mitchell wrote.

Still, MacDonald can't help but seeing the family coming out ahead with such a focus.

"At least all parties are on board to help families. The issue of family is front and centre, and that's a good thing in the end for families," he said.