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PRIME MINISTER HARPER'S SPEECH AND AVAILABILITY

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STEPHEN HARPER (Prime Minister of Canada): Thank you, everyone. Merci beaucoup. Just before I begin, I'd like to draw attention to some of my colleagues who were able to attend today.

There's no way we're going to step them from yelling. If they want to, they could yell.

James Moore, member of Parliament for Port Moody-Westwood-Port Coquitlam, the parliamentary secretary for Public Works, for the Whistler Olympics and for the Pacific Gateway, where is James?

There he is! Give him a big hand!

(applause)

Ed Fast, member of Parliament for Abbotsford, nice to see you here, Ed.

(applause)

Mark Warawa, member of Parliament for Langley.

(applause)

Randy Kamp, member of Parliament for Pit Meadows-Maple Ridge Mission.

(applause)

And the Honourable Gary Lunn, Minister of Natural Resources, who should never be at the back.

(applause)

And Chuck Strahl had to leave, but I appreciated Chuck and Deb being here today as well.

It's always a great pleasure to be back in British Columbia. Before I get into my remarks in detail, I'd like to thank the

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Willingdon family drop-in here, at the Willingdon Community Centre, for being kind enough to allow us to use their facility this morning.

Through providing a venue for local parents and their children, to meet and socialize with other families, Willingdon is helping not only to build stronger families, but also to build a stronger community here, in Burnaby.

(applause)

Go ahead.

I'd also like to acknowledge the presence of Helen Ward, President of the Kids First Parent Association. Where is Helen?

(applause)

There she is.

Kids First is a truly laudable organization and organization whose foremost focus is what is best for our children. Kids First recognizes that parents need the flexibility to choose the type of care that best suits their circumstances and needs. Through their volunteer efforts, that's exactly what Helen and Kids First do: help parents find the type of childcare that best serves their children's needs.

Whether it be care through a relative, a neighbour, a parent, or a full-time home, a parent full time at home or a daycare facility, Kids First sees the value in all childcare choices.

So thank you again, Helen, for your work with kids and for helping us arrange the roundtable this morning.

Believe me, that is only half as noisy as the Press Gallery in Ottawa, so don't worry about it.

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Chers amis, le 23 janvier, les Canadiennes et les Canadiens ont voté pour le vrai changement. Nous avons un plan et nous avons pris des engagements. Et dans notre premier discours du trône, nous avons identifié cinq priorités immédiates sur lesquelles nous allons agir dès ce printemps.

Aujourd'hui, j'aimerais vous parler de notre programme universel en matière de garde d'enfants, un engagement que nous allons respecter.

Now, friends, on January 23rd, Canadians voted for change and they asked our party to lead that change. We have responded by presenting Canadians with an agenda for change, an agenda built upon core principles. Principles such as accountable government, reward for effort, support for families, and a strong and united Canada that works for all of us.

Our principles are represented in our priorities. Priorities outlined in the speech from the throne. We know what we want to do and we have a plan to do it. It starts with the federal Accountability Act, a plan to clean up government and make politicians accountable for your money. We'll move forward to cut taxes for all Canadians, starting with a cut of the GST from seven to six per cent and eventually to five per cent.

(applause)

We will crack down on crime, in particular the gun gang and drug crime that especially affects cities like Vancouver.

(applause)

We'll work... Go ahead.

(applause)

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We'll work with the provinces to establish a patient wait times guarantee, giving Canadians the healthcare they need when they need it.

Now, as I told Helen and the other parents this morning, we will deliver universal choice in childcare to Canadian families. As a father and a husband with young children, although maybe not so young as the ones we have today, I am particularly aware of the challenges that young families face. People are working harder, commute times are becoming longer and families today are increasingly struggling to balance their books, their chequebooks.

Nowhere is the challenge of balancing time and money more apparent than with childcare. The previous government spent a lot of time talking about childcare. And since the election, they've been beating their chests on the issue. But for all of their talk, they have precious little to show for it. Their national childcare program never materialized. Parents certainly didn't get any financial support. And after 13 years of rhetoric, no one can find those universally free, readily accessible, federally created daycare spaces.

So where did all the money go? Well, for starters, politicians got their childcare money. So did armies of academics, researchers, and special interest groups. But what about parents? No direct financial support, no new spaces.

My friends, the old approach was a failure. That's not good enough for the parents who have been waiting and waiting for childcare. As one mother said to me during the campaign, the Liberals promised childcare when my daughter was four and in pre-school. Now, she's 17 and waiting for them to break their post-secondary education promises.

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(laughter)

It's time for a new approach, an approach that cuts out the bureaucratic middleman, an approach that directly supports parents. An approach that actually creates spaces.

Pendant les 13 dernières années, on a entendu que de belles paroles en matière de garde d'enfants, mais la réalité est qu'aucune famille canadienne n'a reçu un appui financier direct sous les Libéraux, aucune place de garderie n'a été créée au courant de cette année.

Pendant que nous complétons les paiements existants aux provinces, nous avons le temps nécessaire afin de mettre en place un nouveau programme qui va créer des vraies places de garderie. Mais pour tout de suite, dès ce printemps, nous allons inclure dans notre premier budget une allocation familiale en matière de garde d'enfants de 1 200 dollars par an, par enfant d'âge préscolaire.

La question pour l'opposition est simple: Est-ce qu'ils appuient le 1 200 dollars pour les enfants ou est-ce qu'ils appuient le statu quo du grand zéro?

The new approach to childcare starts now. As part of our upcoming budget, we will ask Parliament to approve a universal choice and childcare allowance, an allowance that will deliver a direct payment of 1,200 dollars per year per child under six to parents.

(applause)

The math, my friends, is pretty simple. One kid, 1,200 dollars per year; two kids, 2,400 dollars per year; three kids, 3,600 dollars per year. This requires no federal-provincial negotiations, no funding for academics, researchers or special interest groups. It cuts out the

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political and bureaucratic middleman. It provides real support, it provides direct payment and it will be ready to go as soon as Parliament approves it.

Our new approach enhances parental choice. It acknowledges and supports the two-thirds of parents who do not use nine to five institutional daycare. And it will be bolstered by a plan to create spaces.

In Parliament over the next year, we will seek input on how to best create those spaces. Just as we will seek ways to better integrate our universal choice and childcare allowance with other existing family support programs.

Well, let me be clear. We are only interested in a space creation program that actually works. Just as we want to ensure direct financial support for every Canadian family. No more phantom spaces, no more dollars eaten away entirely by bureaucrats and advocates. We want real childcare for all Canadians.

Given our commitments...

(applause)

Given our commitments to the provinces for the coming year, we have some time to develop the new space creation plan, one that works. So the question for this spring is clear. Our upcoming budget will provide Canadian parents with a universal choice childcare allowance of 1,200 dollars per pre-school child. Does the opposition support giving parents 1,200 dollars per child per year? Or do they prefer the status quo, which is zero?

The question is clear: And Canadian parents are waiting for the opposition to answer. Parents know where Canada's new national government stands. We ran on a clear commitment. We were elected to keep

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our promises and Canadians, especially those with pre-school children, want and expect us to keep our commitments.

And make no mistake about it. We will take that commitment back to Canadians if we have to. The choice is up to the opposition.

Mes amis, au courant de l'année prochaine, nous allons chercher des façons à mieux intégrer notre nouvelle allocation familiale universelle en matière de garde d'enfants avec les bénéfices familiaux existants. Mais soyons clairs. Notre nouveau gouvernement national va respecter son engagement envers les familles canadiennes, car ces familles veulent et s'attendent à recevoir 1 200 dollars par an par enfant.

Et nous allons amener cet engagement au Parlement et s'il le faut, on leur ramènera aux Canadiens.

My friends, parents have told us they are fed up with empty promises. They're fed up with one-size-fits-all solutions and they're fed up with everyone but them getting childcare money.

Ordinary parents, people who work hard, pay their taxes and play by the rules do not have a taxpayer funded lobby group, they don't have the time to hold demonstrations and they certainly don't make regular trips to Ottawa for news conferences.

But we do know ordinary parents support our plan. And let me say to them today, if you want less talk and more action on childcare, if you want 1,200 dollars per child per year, if you want Parliament to keep delivering real results for ordinary working families, call your local MP. Tell them you support choice, tell them you support the 1,200-dollar per child, per year allowance, and tell them to get with the program.

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Together, we can make choice and childcare a reality.
Let's make it happen.

(applause)

Thank you. Merci beaucoup.

MODERATOR: Terry Milewski, CBC.

QUESTION: Prime Minister, you just said that Canadians voted for change. One of the changes that you spoke about most eloquently while in opposition was the important principle, as you saw it, that committee chairs on the Hill should be selected by the committee members, not by the Prime Minister. Now, you seem to have flip flopped. You're naming committee chairs. Obviously, no government member is going to stand against your nominee.

Why did you flip flop?

STEPHEN HARPER: This is actually the practice that's developed under the new elected system. There's still going to be an election, but we think we can create a consensus.

As you know, the chairs and vice-chairs are allocated by party. So you know, we obviously want to get some consensus rather than having our members fight among themselves.

MODERATOR: Ian Bailey, Vancouver Province.

QUESTION: Prime Minister, your International Trade Minister continues to be dogged by protests. There were protests out here as you came in today. Do you consider this an acceptable price for welcoming Mr. Emerson into the Conservative Party?

STEPHEN HARPER: Absolutely, the same ten people every time. You know, it's kind of getting old, isn't it?

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(applause)

MODERATOR: Rob Brown, CTV.

QUESTION: Prime Minister, will you consider allowing Canadians access to an online sex offender registry as is done in the States? And if not, why not?

STEPHEN HARPER: That's not a proposal that we've made. We obviously want to have an effective registry that the police will be able to enforce and protect society with, but we haven't made... we certainly haven't suggested the public itself would use the registry, although the police should have the power to inform the public when they need that information.

QUESTION: (Inaudible).

STEPHEN HARPER: Well, I think it's up to the police to protect us from offenders. I'm not sure that that's a function we want to have just dealt with on the street.

MODERATOR: Terry Theodore, Canadian Press.

QUESTION: Prime Minister, if I understand you right, are you going to make this a vote of confidence, the childcare issue?

STEPHEN HARPER: The childcare allowance will be part of our budget, the budget will be a matter of confidence.

QUESTION: And may I ask you one more question? Twelve hundred dollars, a lot of these parents that I've talked to today, they say that's great for the first two months, but what do they do for the next ten months?

STEPHEN HARPER: Yes. No, look, we're not... we're not pretending for a second that 1,200 dollars is going to deal with all

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childcare expenses. I made no such claim. What I will say is that 1,200 dollars is a lot better than nothing, which is what parents have been getting.

And frankly, at 1,200 dollars, we're already spending double the amount of money the Liberals were prepared to spend on childcare in this country.

(applause)

ANIMATEUR: Pierre Martineau, Radio-Canada.

QUESTION: Monsieur le Premier ministre, il y a encore une manifestation contre le... à propos de l'affaire, ce qu'on appelle l'Affaire Emerson. Est-ce que vous allez donner aux gens de Vancouver-Kingsway ce qu'ils demandent, une élection partielle pour choisir un député?

STEPHEN HARPER: J'ai vu les dix mêmes personnes chaque fois. À mon avis, c'est une vieille nouvelle maintenant. M. Emerson fait un bon travail pour le gouvernement et pour ses commettants.

(applaudissements)

MODERATOR: Samantha Folk, Global Television.

QUESTION: Right here. U.S. President George Bush...
Sorry, over here sir.

STEPHEN HARPER: Oh, here you are.

QUESTION: U.S. President George Bush has not ruled out military action in Iran. Canada did not support action in Iraq. What would your position be on Iran?

STEPHEN HARPER: We'll be working closely with our international allies on this. I spoke to President Bush on this subject when I was in Cancun. I know that Mr. MacKay has spoken to U.S. Secretary of State on the same matter. Right now, the Americans are consulting with their allies

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and other permanent members on the Security Council on finding a peaceful solution and I think that's what we'd all prefer to see.

MODERATOR: Gloria Galloway, Globe and Mail.

QUESTION: Yes, you must have done some projections on what it's going to cost you to set up the administration and distribution of this childcare benefit. Can you tell us how much it's going to cost to do that?

STEPHEN HARPER: Yes, offhand, I can't. I can't...

QUESTION: (Inaudible).

STEPHEN HARPER: Gloria, no, I can't. We could... I could check that for you and get back to you, but I mean, it's a tiny amount of the...

QUESTION: In the millions or billions?

STEPHEN HARPER: No, no.

QUESTION: And also, you're here. The way you're talking, it sounds like you're clearly worried that you're not going to get support in the House for this childcare program. Is that why you're here? Are you concerned that the other parties are actually going to vote against the budget on this issue?

STEPHEN HARPER: Well, there's been a lot of beating of chests, particularly by the Liberal Party. What I have noticed is that, you know, there's two distinct schools of thought emerging, or at least, schools of criticism. The NDP and the Bloc are saying the program doesn't go far enough or doesn't pay enough and they're suggesting some ways to make sure the families get the benefit they should, and we're interested in looking at those changes. But the Liberal Party's opposing the idea of paying parents at all.

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So you've got people who may oppose it for different reasons. I know, you know, my purpose here today, Gloria, is to deliver a clear message. We were elected on this. We ran on this. We know this is popular. It's particularly popular with parents who have pre-school children and we are going to proceed with it.

And so it'll be in the budget, so I hope the opposition considers the alternatives very carefully.

MODERATOR: Tonda McCharles, Toronto Star.

QUESTION: Sir, you're clearly saying though that the second part of your program is not going to be part of this year's budget. So I'm curious, we've heard from some of the parents here that they would like to see the whole package, the whole 10 point whatever billion put into allowances to go directly to parents to allow them a greater choice vis-à-vis the 1,200.

Is that an option for you?

STEPHEN HARPER: Well, the truth is that right now, under our plans, roughly 80 per cent of our dollars is directly to parents. Only about 20 per cent, when we fully implement our program, is targeted to the space creation program.

The reason we're not proceeding with that this year, Tonda, is we, as you know, we have extended the existing federal-provincial agreements by one year to give the provinces time to adjust to the new reality. So that's why it's going to take us a year to put the space creation program in place.

But you know, as I say, we're willing to consult with parents and others on the best way to proceed over this year.

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QUESTION: I have a follow up to that.

STEPHEN HARPER: Yes.

QUESTION: Is it an option for you that if you find it's impossible to create the kinds of spaces you want vis-à-vis a tax credit, is it possible to direct that money directly into the hands of parents through a refundable tax credit or some other mechanism?

STEPHEN HARPER: Well, we're certainly... first of all, we're certainly open to methods other than a tax credit to delivering the space creation program.

As I said during the campaign, this would not just go to profit corporations. It would also go potentially to non-profit employers. So, you know, we're flexible on making this program work. We would like to have a program that creates spaces. In terms of how much, whether additional money could go to parents, and say we made a commitment to create a space, to establish a space creation program, we will do that. Whether there's additional money to go to parents is a decision we'll have to make next year.

ANIMATEUR: Julie Landry, Radio Canada.

QUESTION: (Inaudible).

STEPHEN HARPER: Oui.

QUESTION: Il y a certaines garderies qui sont en mauvais état, qui sont en train de tomber, notamment au Yukon, en Colombie-Britannique aussi. Les présidents de comité d'administration de ces garderies veulent non seulement de l'argent pour les parents mais aussi de l'argent que pour tenir les garderies dans l'état actuel.

Votre programme va-t-il inclure de l'aide pour tenir les garderies dans l'état telle qu'elles sont à l'heure actuelle?

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STEPHEN HARPER: Ce n'est pas... ça ne fait pas partie de nos propositions. Nos propositions pour les garderies est une proposition pour créer, pour donner des fonds pour des dépenses capitales. Le règlement et les règles pour des garderies actuelles est la fonction des garderies actuelles sont clairement la compétence des provinces et ce n'est pas une compétence du fédéral.

MODERATOR: Frank Chief (ph), HL TV.

QUESTION: Prime Minister, at first, your government, there was some voices to revisit Taiwan affairs, acted then, bringing refugee from Thailand and last Friday, Peter MacKay made some allegations about Chinese bias(?). Does this mean that your government has a totally different attitude toward China and will this mean that your policy towards China will change?

STEPHEN HARPER: Well, our position to China I think will be the following: I think it's been the position of Canadian governments for some time, but our position will be clear. We want to engage China in trade and economic relations and we certainly want to add our voice to political reform in China and a respect for human rights. These are universal values that we strongly support.

In terms of the issue that Mr. MacKay raised on the weekend, there are some well-documented problems with the Chinese government's operations in this country and our officials certainly intend to raise those with Chinese officials at the appropriate time.

MODERATOR: Allan Dowd, Reuters.

QUESTION: Following up on your Iran comments, OPEC issued a statement today saying that the tough talk on this is one of the

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things that's driving up oil prices and that they would probably come down, they would come down if people sort of backed off a little bit.

Are you at all worried about the economic problems that are potentially being caused by this nuclear sabre rattling as it were?

STEPHEN HARPER: I think it's speculation. I think it's frankly a little bit hard to believe that tough talk is responsible for Iran's nuclear program.

QUESTION: Oil prices.

STEPHEN HARPER: In terms of oil prices. You know, I think oil prices are driven largely by supply and demand and we know, as we see gas prices rising, we know the reality is that worldwide, demand is gradually outstripping supply and there's long-term upward pressure on prices.

So I have my doubts that prices can be attributed to that. What I will say is this: I think that our allies have a very serious concern. When you see a regime like Iraq, or excuse me, a regime like Iran with the kind of values it stands for, the kind of human rights abuses we've seen there, including to a Canadian journalist who was murdered in that country, and many of the other problems in that regime, the Holocaust denial and some of the bellicose language, I think our allies are completely... have a completely legitimate case in being concerned about a regime like that, gaining access to nuclear weapons.

And so Canada certainly will work with our allies to try and bring about a peaceful solution that does not leave the government of Iran in possession of nuclear armaments.

MODERATOR: Glenn Bonn, Vancouver Sun.

(applause)

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QUESTION: Sir, have the public servants who are putting together your childcare program recommend any ways to ensure that the money you are promising for parents in fact goes to childcare?

STEPHEN HARPER: Well, you know, I really don't consider that a serious challenge. Anybody who is raising kids of pre-school age has significant financial pressures that are caused by children. Obviously, that's obvious for the very poor but even for those who are much better off. There are significant choices that have to be made, there are impacts that this has, not just on your expenses but on your working life and your ability to earn income, and our program works on the assumption – and I think it's a sound assumption – that the vast, vast majority of parents care about their children and will put funds towards their children.

You know, we'll let the Liberals speculate that it's for beer and popcorn and other sorts of things. I think Canadian parents told them what they thought of that in the election campaign.

(applause)

MODERATOR: Mike Clark, CBC Radio.

QUESTION: I'm wondering what your thoughts are on the leadership of Vancouver's Organizing Committee, the Olympic Organizing Committee, the fact that there's significant cost over-runs already. Do you have confidence in the leadership of VANOC?

STEPHEN HARPER: As you know, this is not primarily a federal responsibility. I can say the federal government has committed 500 million dollars, I believe, to the holding of these games. It's a lot of money. I gather there are cost overruns. We're going to get a report on that and evaluate obviously our financial commitments in light of those things.

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You know, I think it's fair to say the Committee's argument to this point is the overruns are due primarily to the inflation of real estate prices and construction in the Greater Vancouver Area and without knowing all the details, that would seem to me a reasonable possibility.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) members to the VANOC board? Any thoughts of doing that?

STEPHEN HARPER: I think we did change one appointment. We're going to evaluate, for the most part evaluate appointments as they come due and at the moment, I'm just not sure what the timeframe is on those particular appointments.

MODERATOR: Victoria Chang, Ming Pao(ph).

QUESTION: Hi, Prime Minister. Minister Oda did meet with Chinese community leaders and she indicated that a formal apology to (inaudible) Chinese head tax will be delivered before July the 1st. And are you also considering to financially redress those victims of Chinese head tax?

STEPHEN HARPER: All I can say right now is that Minister Oda is crossing the country, holding consultations on the best way to proceed. The government will put out an apology and it's planned in the near future and we would hope to do that by July the 1st. But I can't share any detail with you at the moment. We're still consulting.

MODERATOR: May Han, Sing Tao(ph).

QUESTION: I just want to follow up that question. There is a rumour about the government (inaudible) regarding the compensation for the head tax payers and it was decided the government would like to compensate those head tax payers and their spouse, but not their descendants. What's your comment regarding that?

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STEPHEN HARPER: Well, I would say this: These are all rumours at the moment. We haven't in fact finished our consultation, nor put out a position. I will say this, though: I think in principle, the idea of compensating descendants is fraught with enormous legal and financial risk to the government and to taxpayers.

MODERATOR: Missy MacIntosh, Media Q. Okay, Sherrie Dong, Epoch Times.

QUESTION: Prime Minister, we just noticed a group of Falun Gong practitioners are holding banners out of the building. My question is have you heard of their... heard of their... Sorry, have you heard of the news report about the organ harvesting of their Falun Gong practitioners in the labour camp in China? And are you concerned such crime, which is below the moral standard of human beings? Thank you.

STEPHEN HARPER: Yes, I have heard these allegations. I don't feel I'm in a position to comment on the truth of them, but obviously, as I said to an earlier question, the new government of Canada is concerned about human rights abuses around the world, including in China, and we will raise those with Chinese officials at every opportunity.

MODERATOR: And the last question, Doug Charmin, City-TV.

QUESTION: Over here. Prime Minister, you appear dismissive of the protesters outside, and yet you speak of accountability. They have, a group of constituents has regularly tried to meet with Minister Emerson and he has not met with them. Does accountability to constituents matter?

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STEPHEN HARPER: Of course, it matters. But members of Parliament have to make their own decisions and live with those decisions. Minister Emerson is making a tremendous contribution to our government. I think that contribution is getting more and more appreciated in the Greater Vancouver Area, and not just by the business community, but by others.

And I don't think a handful of people can say that they represent the entire population.

MODERATOR: Thank you very much.

QUESTION: How do you prove...

(applause)

* * * *