

GETTING CHILDREN OUT OF THE HOUSE

REMOVING THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT FROM THE BUSINESS OF CHILD CARE IS TRICKY – BUT IT CAN AND SHOULD BE DONE

by *Andrea Mrozek*

Child care: The perfect policy storm

Child care is the perfect policy storm. It involves economic factors and social policy. Above all, it involves a parent's most intimate concern: His or her own children. Good governance on this issue should work to maximize familial stability, cooperation between family members, and decrease dependence on government. All parents – including working parents and single parents – should be free to make decisions with the best interests of their children in mind.

Since the October 5, 2004, speech from the Throne, when then-Governor General Adrienne Clarkson announced a national system of early learning and child care, the child care debate has rotated around a national universal child care plan, as if such a centralized system were the sun and families the planets. In this position piece we turn that vision on its head: Parents are the sun, and the planets represent different child care choices.

SUMMARY POSITION

This paper asks – and answers – one question: What is appropriate federal child care policy? Ours is one possible solution among many, with one caveat: We maintain that a national universal system would bring more problems than solutions for Canadian families. It is unrealistic to expect the federal government to be a universal, high-quality daycare provider, a “creator of spaces;” an educator to infants and toddlers. Parents’ concerns are real; they demand a real, workable solution.

We suggest:

All current federal child care monies should bypass the provinces and go directly to parents, which would increase the universal child care benefit (UCCB).

In addition to this, taxes should be substantially lowered for families with children so that their own money would not leave their hands in the first place.

The Institute of Marriage and Family Canada bases its position on four criteria:

- Parental desires
- Social science research
- Federal government jurisdiction
- Sound economic principles

Child care means the care of a child, and research shows there are a number of different ways to care for children well. Ultimately, this can – and should – be done without the direct involvement of the federal government in the child's life.

It's time we got children out of the House.

Canadian federal child care:
Where we are today

Prior to the 2004 Throne Speech, no federal government, whether Liberal or Conservative, seriously entertained the prospect of a national, universal system.¹ The same might be said today, yet due to a minority government, Bill C-303 ("Early Learning and Child Care Act")² teeters on the brink of passing, awaiting a final reading before the House of Commons. (The Act's preamble states: "Whereas the primary objective of Canadian child care policy is to promote early childhood development and well-being and support the participation of parents in employment or training and community life by providing accessible, universal and high-quality early learning and child care programs and services...")

An Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) report published in 2006 ranked Canada last of 14 nations for child care funding at 0.2 per cent of GDP.³ The OECD figures, however, calculated expenditures only on junior and senior kindergarten, thereby underestimating Canadian federal involvement in child care.⁴

Federal child care funding levels by 2007-2008 reached \$2.2 billion through various agreements.⁵ The Conservative govern-

ment also announced the Universal Child Care Plan in the 2006 federal budget, which amounts to an additional \$2.4 billion annually.⁶

Federal funds are transferred to the provinces through the Canada Social Transfer. Each province spends the money

as it chooses. The reporting mechanism for how those funds are spent is weak, because the federal government relies on provincial accountability to their own populations, not to the federal government.⁷

Canada's federal child care policy also includes tax-based incentives and there are

THE SEVEN Ps OF DIMINISHING FEDERAL INVOLVEMENT IN CHILD CARE

By Andrea Mrozek

POLITICIZED RESEARCH – AVOID IT

Voices in favour of a national daycare system highlight research showing either better outcomes for children in care, or neutral outcomes as the result of institutional care. Research exists showing negative outcomes for children in centre-based care.¹² All research must be considered.¹³

PARENTAL PREFERENCE – RESPECT IT

There is sufficient evidence to suggest few parents desire a national daycare plan.¹⁴

PROHIBITIVE COSTS – DON'T IGNORE THEM

Advocates for a national daycare system cry out for "free" daycare, alternatively they say the high costs to governments now are actually savings down the road for society at large. Cost estimates for such a national system have varied from \$11 billion to \$18.5 billion annually.¹⁵ The Quebec example shows that costs have a tendency to skyrocket beyond initial estimates. That province began in 1997 with a \$250-million budget, but now spends \$5 billion annually on family-oriented policy.¹⁶

PROVINCIAL JURISDICTION – FEDERAL VERSUS PROVINCIAL

Federal involvement in child care means an immediate incursion into provincial jurisdiction. This accounts for the provincial backlash against Bill C-303, which had stringent rules attached to how money must be spent by the provinces.¹⁷

PUBLIC INSTITUTION-BUILDING ERA OVER?

The author of *Standardized Childhood*, sociologist Bruce Fuller, worries that the push to institutionalize early learning will affect families. "I do worry that the push to universalize and standardize preschooling in America will disempower parents from the most essential human task of all: raising young children."¹⁸ Canada has not discussed this angle.

"POLYMORPHOUS" CANADA

Canada faces unique policy conditions because of the size and diversity – urban, rural, aboriginal, immigrant – of the country. Imitating Europe, as universal daycare advocates sometimes desire, will not always be feasible; France would fit with room to spare in Ontario alone.

PUNITIVE AND COUNTER-PRODUCTIVE PROVINCIAL REGULATIONS

Some provinces enact worrisome (and changing) child care regulations and increased federal transfers in effect reward bad behaviour. Says Kathy Graham, an independent child care consultant in Ontario: "The problem is there are 47 different regions and 47 different ways of doing business... There are 47 child care managers that are responsible for the delivery of the fee assistance of parents and to determine what that system looks like in their region. ... The federal money would be helpful if the provinces would be willing to pull off a few band-aids and take a few steps back and start to look at how we can make this better instead of just piling more money into a bad system."¹⁹

TROUBLESHOOTING CRITICISMS

IF YOU ARE AGAINST A NATIONAL DAYCARE PLAN, YOU HAVE TO BE PREPARED TO COMBAT CERTAIN ASSERTIONS—BELOW ARE SOME OF THE MOST COMMON ONES

By Andrea Mrozek

BUT EARLY CHILD DEVELOPMENT SETS CHILDREN ON A PATH OF LIFELONG LEARNING. IT SHOULD THEREFORE HAVE PRIORITY IN FEDERAL FINANCES

“Early child development” is a new catchphrase which professionalizes parenthood. Parents are the true experts on their own children, and were long before such expressions were invented.

BUT CHILD CARE IS EDUCATION AND SHOULD BE PART OF OUR PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM

Ontario is moving toward this model.²¹ For an in-depth discussion of how and why this might not work universally for our infants and toddlers, see *Standardized Childhood*.²² In Canada, however, education is an area of provincial jurisdiction. So even if child care were attached to the public school system, this would be an argument against federal involvement.

BUT UNIVERSAL CHILD CARE SYSTEMS WORK WELL IN EUROPE

Universal systems do not work well in Europe. A recent report from Sweden mentions extremely high class sizes. “In the current evaluation, the municipal questionnaire shows that the average group size for younger children (1-3 years old) is 14.6, for groups with older children (3-5 years old) 19.7 and for mixed age groups 18.4.”²³ Other problems include a lack of choice for parents, the inability of women to achieve high-ranking positions in the workplace and a high tax burden to pay for the universal system.

BUT PARENTS WANT FEDERALLY FUNDED DAYCARE INSTITUTIONS

No. Parents may feel strain and want help, but there is no evidence they desire a federally-funded, universal system.²⁴

BUT IT'S WORKING IN QUEBEC

Quebec is experiencing waiting lists, lawsuits, high and rising costs and a mediocre quality of care.²⁵ It's not the success story advocates would lead us to believe.

BUT PARENTS MUST WORK, THEREFORE THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT SHOULD PROVIDE CARE

Many parents must work, this is true. Canada may have created a context in which it is difficult and expensive for one parent to stay home through poor public policy and high tax rates (see for instance the discussion, on page 15 of this magazine, of the ways Canada's tax system is unfair to single-earner families). The admirable course is to reverse this trend before we reach the point where only the very highest income earners can afford to raise their own children as they desire.

BUT WHAT ABOUT SINGLE MOTHERS?

In this case, we ought to discuss policy that would uniquely help those single parents. The idea behind universal “early child development” is that the plans not target any needy group, but rather be available to everyone. There is some evidence from Quebec that low income earners are not accessing the universal system at the same rate as high income earners.²⁶ This might mean that lower income single moms are in as difficult a position with a “universal” system as they are now.

BUT UNIVERSAL CHILD CARE INCREASES A COUNTRY'S BIRTH RATE

The assertion that child care increases a country's birth rate is as difficult to prove as it is to disprove. Quebec has a universal provincial daycare system and the province had a baby “boomlet.” But so did Alberta, without a universal child care system.²⁷

Denmark and Sweden are ranked well by the OECD for child care, and their fertility rates are 1.74 and 1.66 respectively. Italy, which has limited child care programs, has a fertility rate of 1.29; lower to be sure, but none of these countries achieve replacement fertility. Gains in this regard are infinitesimally small when compared with the amount of money spent.

BUT GOOD QUALITY CHILD CARE IS ALWAYS BENEFICIAL

This claim, cited by those in favour of a universal system, is true.²⁸ But the definition of child care includes parents and family members, too, and is not limited to professional staff in day-care centres.

ARE YOU SAYING PUTTING A CHILD IN A CENTRE IS WRONG?

No. However, when the government puts its resources toward a particular program, it sends the message not that this is a choice among many, but that this is the preferred course of action. And since our tax dollars pay for those new programs, not participating means parents who sacrifice to stay home are paying to care for their own kids – and everyone else's.

BUT TAX CUTS AND MONEY FOR PARENTS DOES NOTHING TO CREATE SPACES

Some communities have a surplus of child care spaces, and others have waiting lists.²⁹ A child care plan at the federal level cannot reasonably account for these differences. If the government enters the market as a child care provider, the possibility of other choices will be removed because a government monopoly will dominate the market.

BUT IF THERE IS NO FEDERAL SYSTEM PRIVATE ENTERPRISE – “BIG BOX” CARE – WILL ENTER CANADA

There is always the risk that poor-quality care will be offered, whether by government or private entrepreneurs. This is precisely why parents must be afforded choices and the responsibility of discerning what is best for their child at every turn.

federal government programs that assist families with children. There's the Canada Child Tax Benefit and a supplemental benefit for low-income families.⁸

Together, these items make up Canada's federal child care policy.

If federal funds given to the provinces were given directly to parents with the UCCB, it would increase the amount of that subsidy, and send the important signal that parents are the arbiters of their child's care and education.

The critics: Is federal funding too high or too low?

The pro-national daycare lobby cites the aforementioned lack of funding accountability as a call to strengthen the regulations at the federal level.⁹ Those advocating for increased government involvement in child care also say money alone does not a child care policy make.

Other critics are disgruntled with what they see as high funding levels of which they never see a penny. They are personally funding care for their own children and others through their taxes.¹⁰

That child care activists – those in favour of a national daycare system and those against – are unhappy with the current situation may be the only area of consensus on child care provisions in Canada. That's not likely to change: The creation of a national system will not result in a sudden, magical disappearance of problems, as the provincial example of Quebec clearly demonstrates.¹¹

Ultimately, good governance on child care means elevating parents to a position of power and autonomy in choosing how to care for their kids.

EARLY CHILD DEVELOPMENT IS A NEW CATCHPHRASE WHICH PROFESSIONALIZES PARENTHOOD. PARENTS ARE THE TRUE EXPERTS ON THEIR OWN CHILDREN, AND WERE LONG BEFORE SUCH EXPRESSIONS WERE INVENTED

How to get there

Child care policy in Canada is a combination of tax credits, tax incentives and government funding for provincial child care plans. Substantial tax relief, either through income splitting or a flat tax,²⁰ is

necessary to encourage parental choices, whether those are to stay home or work, part or full-time.

Enhanced parental leave is another area of consideration. However, enhanced government parental leave does not always benefit those who are self-employed and may prove to be a difficult burden for small businesses to bear. However, the implicit assumption behind such policy – that parents are good people to raise their own kids – is better than the government message sent by building child care institutions.

Communicating the ideas

Communicating tax reductions and money in parents' pockets should be easy – and in

our high tax environment, very welcome. It's communicating this as the right child care policy that is more difficult. Those looking for a European-style system will never be convinced that parental empowerment constitutes child care.

Into a vacuum, bad policy will grow. So communications are therefore critical to ensure Canadians understand what and why the federal government is pursuing – no matter the course of action.

Parental empowerment is the idea behind our kind of plan. Parents, not child care stakeholders (the bureaucracy, activist lobby groups, educators or unions) are the target audience.

The end is nigh

Those in favour of a national daycare plan tend to see "one system" as a fix-all – the lack thereof is viewed as a sign of the coming apocalypse. To be fair, those on the parents' rights side of the debate tend to view the presence of a universal system as a sign of end times, too. There are any number of solutions between a universal system and the total non-involvement of the federal government. Ours is one reasonable proposition among many.

The emphasis of those advocating for universal systems tends to be on encouraging parental employment and on improved cognitive outcomes for kids. But social/

WHEN THE GOVERNMENT PUTS ITS RESOURCES TOWARD A PARTICULAR PROGRAM, IT SENDS THE MESSAGE NOT THAT THIS IS A CHOICE AMONG MANY, BUT THAT THIS IS THE PREFERRED COURSE OF ACTION

behavioural outcomes are just as important for Canada's future as are improved vocabularies, and poor behavioural outcomes may be the result of too much time in non-parental care.³⁰

In a paper unrelated to child care, The Vanier Institute of the Family speaks of a need to "strengthen parental moral authority."³¹ It is this strengthening of parental moral authority that the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada aims to promote. This idea is an essential but neglected component of the child care debate.

The empowerment of parents to love and care for their children should be the goal of a responsible, fair-minded government. Good governance for Canadian families today means prioritizing parental choice and freedom in child care, in word and deed.

endnotes

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