

THE CHILD CARE POLICY THAT WASN'T

by

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Introduction

Canada does not have a national child-care system; the licensed child-care that does exist is provincially regulated and under-funded. In fact, there have never been enough licensed child care spaces to meet the needs of Canadian families, and the challenge is even greater today with the changes in family structure and paid work, as a majority of women are now in the labour market. A decade ago, Friendly argued that “the gap between regulated child-care spaces and the number of children with mothers in the labour force has widened considerably (and), as a result, the supply of regulated child care is even more inadequate than it was twenty years ago.”¹ Little has improved over the last ten years.² Moreover, the predominant view of child care in Canada, unlike Europe, is still one of child care as a custodial babysitting service, rather than as an important component of early child development programming.

Currently, much paid work is being casualized, with increases in part-time, contract and shift work, and fewer and fewer employees working the so-called standard hours of 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.³ The majority of the licensed care that does exist offers care from 7:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. on weekdays. So, along with the general lack of child care, there is a growing number of parents who work outside of standard daytime hours and cannot usually find licensed care for their children. They must rely on the unlicensed or informal sector to meet their child care needs.⁴ Given these changes, one could argue that the already inadequate child care situation in Canada has deteriorated for many families. With real incomes falling since the 1970s and insufficient funding for child-care programming, fewer families can afford to put their children in licensed care.

In the Spring 2001 issue of the *Canadian Review of Social Policy*, a number of authors discuss the child care dilemma and the possibilities for expanding child care services under the Social Union Framework Agreement (SUFA), the National Children’s Agenda (NCA) and the Early Childhood Development Services Agreement (ECDS). Rothman says that the promised “full review of SUFA ... ensures ‘significant opportunities for input and feedback from Canadians’,” and adds: “This aspect of the agreement provides a rare chance for broad collaboration on social policy.” However, she concludes: “On balance, the ECDS Agreement lacks the teeth needed to deliver on the critical SUFA goal of ensuring access to essential social programs and services.”⁵

Friendly says, “it would be hard to argue that the limited civic engagement that has occurred constitutes SUFA’s promised ‘effective mechanisms for Canadians to participate in developing social priorities and reviewing outcomes.’” She wonders whether the lack of action on child care is the result of “the redesigned federalism of the 1990s or an absence of political will.”⁶ But perhaps we should ask whether these recent government policy-making initiatives are flawed because they are top-down exercises in social control rather than bottom-up efforts at citizen-induced social policy.

We would argue that the inadequate state of child care in Canada results from the fact that Canada does not have formal social policy on child care. This situation stems from the fact that Canada, with the exception of Quebec,⁷ does not have formal family policy, unlike many European countries where citizen action enforced the “political will” to respond to social needs.⁸ Part of the problem results from a confusion over what social policy entails. Let us explain.

After reviewing various authors’ definitions of “social policy,” Gil provides the following composite definition:

Social policies are guiding principles for ways of life, motivated by basic and perceived human needs. They were derived by people from the structures, dynamics, and values of their ways of life, and they serve to maintain and change these ways. Social policies tend to, but need not, be codified in formal legal instruments.⁹

Much social welfare literature, including that on child care, tends not to give precise definitions of social policy, sometimes equating it with “public policy” and sometimes with “government policy” or legislation.

The benefit of a broader definition like Gil’s is that it emphasizes how there is more to social policy than what governments do. Social policy comes from social activism – from organizing, advocating, lobbying, et cetera. We did not acquire, for example, public education and public health care simply because some politician or bureaucrat bequeathed them upon us. Rather, over time, matters of concern to citizens grow as social issues and, with sufficient action, emerge as social policy issues. As such, there is a groundswell of opinion that these issues are important enough to society that they should be acted on. But only once there is consensus on the part of a sufficient number of the members of various sectors of society do we reach the next step, where the

state, as the only social institution with the authority and command over resources to do so, undertakes to address the issue through legislation and programming (see Chart 1). We then get what is usually called public policy. In the case of public education, this happened when citizen pressure combined with business need for more-educated workers and government interest in creating “good citizens.”¹⁰

Chart 1

THE SOCIAL POLICY PROCESS – A SKETCH

▶ **Rise of a social issue:**

▶ **Pushed by social movement(s):**

▶ **Becomes a social policy issue:**

▶ **Societal consensus leads to:**

▶ **Demand for state/government action:**

▶ **Government develops:**

- public policy
- legislation
- regulations
- programs *
- services*

▶ **to address/remedy social issue/problem**

▶ **Success determined by extent to which**

basic and perceived needs are met

***Sometimes delivered jointly with NGOs and the private sector**

Following Gil’s definition, we would argue that, despite strong advocacy and lobbying since the 1960s, Canada does not have a formal *child care policy*. Canada does

have informal social policy on the *care of children*, which assumes that child rearing and nurturing is the responsibility of the individual family, mainly women. Cleveland and Krashinsky note that, "Society provided care for its young children by making half the population – women – responsible for child care, and placing considerable obstacles in the path of those women who became, over time, less than thrilled with this role."¹¹ In fact, there was a now-discredited psychoanalytic treatise on material deprivation that purported to offer scientific evidence on the detrimental effects of public child care.¹²

Governments have used the argument that families should be responsible for child care to avoid funding universal child care. Successive provincial governments in Saskatchewan, for example, have argued against funding child care, saying it is a family responsibility. Two decades ago, the advocacy organization Action Child Care stated: "The NDP provincial government's assumption, prior to their defeat in 1982, that the provision of day care is the individual family's private responsibility (unless they are designated as needy) has been adopted by the new P.C. government."¹³ This assumption is still held by NDP governments after the party's return to office in Saskatchewan in 1991. This belief is reflected in the fact that mothers still have the majority of responsibility for child care, whether they are providing this care themselves or arranging alternate care. In fact, in the post-1980 neo-conservative policy climate, with political parties varying more in style than substance,¹⁴ this belief has been reinforced and reaffirmed by governments across Canada. As long as this view is held to be part of our value system, Canada will continue to have no formal social policy on child care and the role of the family in society, and will continue with a patchwork of child care that relies on bake sales for centres and the informal economy of family and women at home with their own children who take in the children of others to make a few dollars.

In what follows, we will further address the need for and benefits of child care, in terms of child development and the needs of employed mothers. We will then discuss the conditions that impede the development of formal child care policy, including the shift from a Keynesian to a neo-conservative policy climate since 1980.

The Need for Child Care – Balancing Paid Work and Family

The debate on child care in Canada began 150 years ago, at about the same time that the first child care centres in Canada were established. These centres began in the 1850s in industrial areas of Ontario and Quebec and provided charitable, custodial care for the children of working parents.¹⁵ Nothing changed much in child care until the Second World War when women were needed to work in war industries. To facilitate women working outside the home alternate child care was needed, so it was deemed to be of national importance. At that time the federal government found the money to cost share with the provinces the expenditures to care for children of mothers working in war industries. However, only Quebec and Ontario had war industries employing women, so the federal government would only share the cost of care for women working in war industries in those provinces. Following the war, both provinces planned to close their child care facilities. Quebec did so, but Ontario was forced to keep many facilities running, as women demanded care for their children so that they could continue to be employed.

The lack of affordable, quality child care continues to be identified by women working both full and part time as one of the greatest impediments to their labour market participation and advancement.¹⁶ Since the turn of the century, women have made steady gains in the workforce. In 1901, only 13 percent of Canadian women were in the formal labour force. By 1941, 21 percent of women participated in the labour market, constituting 19 percent of those in formal employ. Women's labour market participation increased steadily throughout the post-World War II decades and, by 2001, 60 percent of Canadian women were in the labour market, constituting 46 percent of labour market participants.¹⁷

The most notable increase has been in the participation rate for married women with young children. Between 1976 and 1999 the employment rate of women with children under 16 years of age rose from 39 percent to 69 percent. By 1999, the percentage of women in the labour force with children under three years of age rose to 61 percent, more than double the figure in 1976. The employment rate of women whose youngest child was aged three to five increased from 37 percent in 1976 to 66 percent in 1999.¹⁸

Various studies on child care have reported that existing child care does not meet the needs of these Canadian families. The members of the Special Committee on Child Care reported, in *Sharing the Responsibility*, that "the evidence before the committee leads us to conclude that there are currently problems in matching the supply of various types of child care to the demand".¹⁹ The report *The Status of Day Care in Canada in 1995 and 1996* showed that less than 50 percent of children whose parents were employed or studying 20 hours or more per week, had access to licensed child care spaces.²⁰ According to more recent studies, summarized by Prentice;

In Canada today, there are over five million children aged twelve and under.... More than 3,323,000 Canadian children have mothers in the paid labour force. For the country's children, there are 516,734 licensed child care spaces (in group centres and licensed homes). Quality, accessibility and affordability vary wildly within and between provinces and territories. The cost of child care and the scarcity of public fee subsidies put the service out of reach for nearly every low-income and most middle-income families.²¹

Through the 1980s and 1990s, both government and non-government reports on employment equity discussed the problems women confront due to the lack of adequate child care. In 1994, the Human Resources Development Canada publication *Improving Social Security in Canada: A Discussion Paper* stated: "In many cases, the lack of affordable, high quality child care is an insurmountable barrier to a job."²² A recent study shows that lack of affordable quality child care places a significant barrier between lone-parent mothers and participation in the labour market.²³

Compounding the gendered character of family responsibilities and the labour market, current studies of employment highlight the impact of economic globalization on work. Most apparent is increased unemployment and underemployment, with a decline in full-time "standard" employment and the increase in various types of non-standard or flexible employment patterns.²⁴ Many jobs for women are casual and flexible, many being part-time jobs. In 2001, 17 percent of employed workers in Canada were working part time. Women constituted 69 percent of these part-timers, with 27 percent of formally employed women working part time, compared to only 10 percent of men working part time.²⁵

Statistics Canada reports that “a substantial number of women work part time because they cannot find full-time employment. In 1999, 25 percent of all female part-time employees indicated that they wanted full-time employment, but could only find part-time work.”²⁶ Women in the prime child bearing and rearing ages of 25-44 make up 41 percent of female part-timers, and 33 percent of them say that they choose to work part time because they are caring for children. Another eight percent cite other personal and family responsibilities, 20 percent cite personal preference and 29 percent give what Statistics Canada lists as “other” reasons for working part time. But we know from studies based on interview and other qualitative sources of data that many women’s “personal preferences” and “other” reasons for working part time are structured by family responsibilities.²⁷ In interviews conducted with part-time workers in Saskatchewan, lack of child care was repeatedly cited by respondents as a reason for working part-time and for turning down shifts.²⁸

Obviously, the problem of matching child care need with supply affects many families, even those needing care between the standard hours of 7:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m., the hours that most licensed child care centres are opened. However, for families needing care during other hours, licensed services offer “little flexibility for seasonal demands, shift schedules and part-time evening care.”²⁹ The *Report of the Task Force on Child Care*, chaired by Katie Cooke, concluded that “parents whose schedules vary or who work non-standard hours clearly have a need for flexible arrangements, to which the present system fails to respond.”³⁰ The need for child care during non-standard hours is growing with the increase in the number of non-standard workers (though perhaps we need to question why we are all being expected to be available for employers 24 hours a day, seven days a week).

The Benefits of Quality Child Care

There has been a great deal of research done on the benefits that quality child care provides to children, families and society. High quality child care has been defined by both the United States National Association for the Education of Young Children and the Canadian Child Day Care Federation as child care which (a) supports and assists the

child's physical, emotional, social and intellectual well-being and development, and (b) supports the family in its child rearing role.³¹

Society benefits from high quality child care, both financially and developmentally, in a number of ways. It is generally agreed that the community should have a stake in the well-being of its children. The future of any society depends on the healthy physical, mental, and emotional development of its children.³² Also, pre-school programs that can facilitate long-term improvements in children's lives are often viewed as investments.³³

The benefits to society of quality child care programs has also been well documented in Canada. In 1970, the *Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women* made recommendations to all levels of government for expanding child care services.³⁴ In 1980, a report commemorating the International Year of the Child discussed the problems of lack of child care.³⁵ In 1986, the Canadian Day Care Advocacy Association published a cost-benefit analysis of a national child care system.³⁶ The same year the Task Force on Child Care recommended funding of universal public child care,³⁷ and the following year the Special Parliamentary Committee on Child Care made a number of recommendations,³⁸ but was split between Liberal and NDP members who recommended public funding of child care, and Conservative members who recommended tax credits to parents.

Providing high quality child care is expensive, but it has been demonstrated that the money spent on this early education is more than saved later through lower costs in special education, juvenile delinquency and prisons. Cleveland and Krashinsky argue that

investment in children's early years is required to meet a set of interconnected social and economic goals. These goals include healthy childhood development and readiness to learn; economic productivity and labour force attachment; women's equality; positive population health outcomes; reduced levels of family and child poverty; and cohesive safe communities.³⁹

It is clear that the current patchwork approach to child care in Canada will not achieve these goals. Friendly has recommended blending child care and early childhood education programming.⁴⁰ Investment in a number of areas is needed to provide an early childhood education program that encourages optimal development. It is important to

have staff trained in early childhood development; high staff-child ratios; low staff turnover; small group size; non-profit sponsorship; good salaries and working conditions; and high standards or regulations.⁴¹

High quality child care is labour intensive, with the biggest single expense being staff salaries and benefits.⁴² For child care programs to hire and retain trained early childhood educators and maintain high staff-child ratios, programs must have the resources to provide decent salaries and benefits. With the present state of insecure and inadequate funding, staff turnover is often high, which "is bad for young children, who need the stability that a regular day-care teacher can provide."⁴³ Lack of recognition and poor remuneration also impedes professional growth and development of child care workers, who find it hard to take pride in their job when they are paid less than parking attendants and zookeepers.⁴⁴ If it is to advance, child care as an occupation must be valued more highly by society.

The Need for Social Policy

As noted above, there has been a great deal of activism in Canada in favour of expanding the availability of affordable, quality child care. Since the 1960s, feminists, trade unions, child care educators, parent groups and others have set up child care centres and advocated and lobbied for more funding and recognition.⁴⁵ Federal and provincial governments were being pushed to provide more resources for child care programming and, in 1988, the federal government of Brian Mulroney introduced Bill C-144, the child care bill, which died in Senate following an election call. But most child care activists opposed the bill because it would have imposed a ceiling on cost-sharing with the provinces; it promoted expansion of commercial centres; it would impose no national standards; and it included the option of using tax benefits for parents rather than committing funding to child care programming. The bill would have formalized a residual rather than an institutional approach to child care programming.

Since the 1980s, while child care has surfaced as an election issue and in the federal Liberal's so-called Red Book during the 1993 election, commitment to child care has generally declined. The Liberal government made a half-hearted attempt at promoting child care in the mid-1990s, but with insufficient funding to interest the

provincial governments.⁴⁶ A cynic might accuse the politicians of setting their child care initiatives up for failure. But this need not be the case, if we could establish a social policy consensus.

Formal social policy on child care has been a feature of other countries for many years as part of broader family policy.⁴⁷ The 1986 *Report of the Task Force on Child Care* noted:

Unlike the approach taken in many European countries, Canadian family policy has never acknowledged the need to accommodate the family responsibilities of working parents, and unlike health care or education, childcare has not been recognized in Canada as a public service.⁴⁸

But still, there is no public provision of the services. In a background paper to the Task Force on Child Care, the authors state that "daycare in Canada has been a concern for over a century, yet, social policy in this area is still elementary/rudimentary."⁴⁹

To understand why Canada does not have social policy on child care, let us compare the history of the struggle for public education and public health care to the struggle for child care, examining the political context at the time in which major changes have taken place. The Cooke Task Force Report pointed out: "Changes in social forces, in public attitudes, values and needs had a dramatic impact on policy development. Shifting economic conditions were also instrumental forces precipitating change."⁵⁰ These social forces, economic conditions and public attitudes have influenced the fact that we have a public education system, a national health care system, but no national child care system.

Health care and public education were not won in a short period of time. "A lengthy campaign to raise public awareness and generate public support was carried out for both education and health care before major legislation was presented."⁵¹ It could be argued that there has also been a long public awareness campaign to generate support from the public for child care. But before there was public provision of health care and education services there was acceptance that these services are community and social responsibilities.

There has, in fact, been change over time in public opinion regarding child care responsibility. It appears that the national child care movement formed in the 1960s and

1970s affected a positive shift towards more public responsibility for child care. Friendly argues that this movement, made up of child care advocates, the women's movement and trade unionists, "has been pivotal in shaping the content and process of what became a national debate about child care policy."⁵² According to public opinion surveys, support for government sharing more of the responsibility for the care of young children has almost doubled since 1975. A 1975 Gallup Poll found that 44 percent of Canadians thought government should share in child care responsibility. A study by the Canadian Policy Research Network found that 85 percent of Canadians support public provision of the care for young children.⁵³

Public Health Care, Public Education, Private Child Care

In 1986, the Cooke Task Force on Child Care pointed out that the state of child care today looks much like health care and education did in their infancy. Education was provided only to those who could afford to pay for it and health care was provided as a charitable service to needy families and individuals. Child care in Canada today follows both of these models. It is provided on a fee for service basis for those who can afford to pay and as a welfare service for those whose incomes are low enough that they qualify for a child care subsidy.

The debate around the provision of child care includes many of the same arguments that were raised in the debate around universal public education. The arguments in favour of government-funded child care include: high quality child care is beneficial to children and society; high quality child care saves money in the long-run by combating juvenile delinquency; for parents to be productive members of society they must have child care; and for women to become equal members of society economically they must have provision of child care. The arguments against child care provision include the beliefs that: children should be cared for by their mothers; putting children in child care centres is institutionalizing them; parents should be teaching their own children at such a young age; the family will be undermined and will lose its freedom of choice. These beliefs are clearly ideological, embodying socially conservative guiding principles for ways of life.

The assertion of the ideology variously called neo-conservatism or neo-liberalism, and its hegemony in official politics after 1980, has served to put a brake on the drive for expanding public child care. So, despite all the reports and studies identifying the need for child care, we still do not have a national child care system. In fact, in recent years, while the struggle for a national child care system has been nationwide, federal governments have not only reneged on their promises of increased public funding for child care, but cut funding by approximately one third.⁵⁴

Let us return to the Cooke Task Force's observation that changes in social forces, public attitudes, values and needs had a dramatic impact on policy development, and that shifting economic conditions were also instrumental forces precipitating change. The stronger push for universal child care began when the population became more urbanized and there was a dramatic increase in the number of women employed in the formal labour market. The reports and commissions listed above are dated from the 1970s and 1980s. But by the 1980s social forces and public attitudes were different than they were in the 1867, when education first became compulsory, and different than they were following the 1930s Great Depression when citizens were fighting for social security; back then there was great demand for expansion of social welfare services.

Following the Depression, Canadians organized to demand social security measures that would ensure that people did not suffer again the way they had in the Depression.⁵⁵ It was at this time that the welfare state was born. Many of the measures provided by the state were proposed in 1936 by John Maynard Keynes in *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*.⁵⁶ Keynes argued that substantial government action was needed to remedy the defects of the market system.

There were, of course, those who opposed the social security measures of the welfare state. Since 1980, those most opposed to government intervention in the free market, known as the "New Right," have been successful at getting neo-conservative governments elected in Western countries and shifting the policy climate to the Right. The New Right has gained ascendancy because Keynesian economic policies failed to prevent the post-1970 current economic crisis, and because capitalist enterprises have made a concerted effort to change the political climate and advance government policies favourable to short-term business interests.

The New Right follows an ideology that has two components: a neo-laissez-faire economic doctrine; and the value of social traditionalism.⁵⁷ In practice these two components result in support for the traditional family, with the father as the breadwinner and the mother as the at-home caregiver; and an economic doctrine promising that if our well-being is left to a totally free market our needs will be met. These beliefs are not conducive to expanding public child care programming.

Conclusions

So, while over the last 20 years governments have made a number of promises for increases in public child care provision, we would argue that these promises are unfulfilled because the New Right, which is opposed to government social programs and the public provision of child care, was gaining sufficient credibility and power to set the agenda and define the debates. Fifteen years ago Gonick noted: "In ten short years we have seen a remarkable counter-revolution of ideas and policy. The New Right has seized the ideological terrain, defining the issues, setting the agenda for change."⁵⁸

Many of the same arguments were made for and against a system of public education as are being made for and against public funding for child care. While it is now being eroded, we did achieve public education. But because we lack the same constellation of social forces, we have not achieved public child care. The same sort of arguments that resulted in public education are not resulting in public child care today because the predominant social forces are different today – the forces advocating for less government and opposed to the public provision of social services are currently more powerful.

According to Bach and Phillips:

Child care has been the first fatality of the construction by the federal and provincial governments of a New Social Union, which has shifted the balance from primarily public to greater private provision of social services, from direct state funding of services to reliance upon the tax base for redistributing income to individuals and families, and from a moderate degree of federal involvement in social services and welfare to emphasis upon the primacy of the provinces.⁵⁹

Until we achieve an ideological shift and develop a social policy consensus on the needs and benefits of public child care for society, families and individuals, governments will continue to renege on their promises for child care programming. The ones to benefit will be employers who can cut costs by relying on the casual, informal and unpaid work of women as child care providers. And many of these same women will continue to be restricted to part-time and other casual employment because of their family responsibilities.

Let us add that people should have options for balancing their paid work and family responsibilities. But this should not mean flexible employment and flexible child care defined solely to suit the needs of employers. This is a social policy issue. Development of a social policy consensus in support of public child care as a social right, codified in formal law like education and health care, would go a long way in giving families, and women in particular, options for participating more fully in society. Perhaps this could be advanced through the Social Union Framework Agreement, the National Children's Agenda and the Early Childhood Development Services Agreement, thereby helping to fulfill the promise of those public policy tools.

Child care activists in Canada need to recognize that their struggle is an ideological one, and that they must take to the ideological plane and push for a formalized progressive family policy which would include a formalized child care policy. The apparent socio-economic hardships imposed by recent neo-conservative policy initiatives should, in fact, leave the general public open to alternative values and guiding principles for ways of life.⁶⁰ The choices being presented to child care advocates are that of articulating and promoting these alternatives, or forgetting our ideals and adopting the pragmatic politics of taking what we can get, on the assumption that half a loaf is better than none.⁶¹ The problem with the latter approach, however, is that agreeing to half a loaf can leave one crawling for crumbs, and child care centres will still have to resort to bake sales to raise funds. Canada's children deserve more than crumbs.

Endnotes

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