

Changing the status quo for child care: Easy as pie--1,2,3--A,B,C ^[1]

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In 2012, the National Film Board released *Status Quo*, Karen Cho's documentary ^[3] that aptly identified child care as one of three pieces of "the unfinished business of feminism in Canada". A national child care program, the film observed, was one of the few (if not the only) recommendation of the 1970 Royal Commission on the Status of Women that had not been addressed at all.

So on International Women's Day 2017--five years and a change of government since the film's debut--it is timely to take stock of the Canadian child care status quo once again.

For feminists, the dark decade between 2006 and 2015 was characterized by the erosion or end of many hard-fought advances. A key exemplar of the Harper governments' anti-woman roll-back was the cancellation of their predecessor's nascent national child care program and its signed federal/ provincial agreements. It was to have been based on an initial five year federal commitment of \$1 billion earmarked for child care. The decade also saw withdrawal of the federal government from any role in improving child care provision across the country (indeed, from cooperative federalism more broadly), leaving the intergovernmental apparatus unused and rusty.

Thus, while it's disturbing, it isn't surprising that in 2017--despite multiple provincial initiatives --high quality child care remains hard to get, hard to sustain and even harder for families to pay for across most of the country. The status quo has not changed noticeably from the assessment of it in UNICEF's 2008 report card on early childhood education and care in 25 wealthy nations. In this analysis, Canada only achieved one of 10 benchmarks assessing quality, access and financing, tying with Ireland for last place among peer nations.

Child care is still identified on many agendas as a major "to-do" for Canada. The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) -- reviewing whether countries are meeting their international commitments--recently found Canada care to be exceedingly deficient on child care. The Committee recommended that the Government of Canada "take action to make child care more affordable and accessible", calling for adoption of a "a rights-based national child care framework in order to provide sufficient and adequate child care facilities." The expert group further specified that the federal government should "use conditional and targeted federal funding in order to make sure that transfer payments to provinces and territories take into due account compliance with the provisions of the Convention". Closer to home, a feminist "score card" by Oxfam Canada marked IWD 2017 by calling for "sustaining and increasing federal funding so that quality child care is accessible to all by 2020", calling for \$600 million in 2017, \$1.6 billion in 2018, and \$2.6 billion in 2019, "complemented by initiatives to ensure living wages and pay equity for child care workers".

So with a status quo like this and in light of the Trudeau Liberals' election promise of "working with provinces, territories and Indigenous peoples to establish a National Framework on Early Learning and Child Care that meets...the needs of Canadian families wherever they live", it's no wonder that activists and parents alike are eager to move on. The Trudeau governments' promise has been taken as signaling a renewed federal commitment to working with provinces/territories and Indigenous communities to develop a system of child care that is available, affordable and of consistently high quality for all those who choose to use it.

As the Liberal government has also committed to a "research, evidence-based policy, and best practices in the delivery of early learning and child care," it has also been assumed that the National Framework will use the best available knowledge to develop affordable, inclusive and high quality services will grow to serve all children and families everywhere in Canada over time.

So far--although intergovernmental work has been under way and a set of principles (accessibility, affordability, quality and "flexibility") has been floated, there is no National Framework and no new money yet. However, the 2016 federal budget committed an initial \$500 million to begin in 2017 and there is an expectation that the set of common principles circulating in the community (or something like them) will soon be officially announced.

At the same time, for young women struggling to pay the rent and feed the kids, young "Squeeze Generation" families trying to get by or even trying to decide whether to have kids at all, early childhood educators earning a pittance for the important work they do and children in inconsistent, unreliable, poor quality or even risky child care--the status quo is still the status quo--quality child care is hard to get and hard to pay for.

So--what to do? How can Canada--this means all of us--federal government, provinces/ territories/Indigenous communities--begin to make a breakthrough that will make a meaningful difference to families on the ground? To adapt the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care's Carolyn Ferns' IWD Opinion piece ^[4] there are three transformative ideas about what's needed:

1. Affordable fees for parents. We should replace individual fee subsidies with a more modern approach. [Canada] should fund child care programs directly and set a sliding fee scale that makes child care affordable for every family;
2. Decent work for educators. To hire and keep the best staff we need [provinces/ territories] to make fair wages and good working conditions a priority. Funding programs based on fair wages for educators will help us build good, stable programs for our children;

3. Expansion in the public and non-profit sectors. We need every dollar of child care expansion going to our kids. There is simply no room for profit. [Canada] should ensure that none of the [expansion] should be in profit-making operations.

Taking these three practical ideas a step further and reflecting on the wealth of evidence, research, policy analysis and concrete experience that links them to public policy that is needed to implement all of them work brings us from 1, 2, 3 to A, B, C:

- A. Affordable child care that pays educators decent wages needs long-term sustained federal funding, ramping up over about a decade to (eventually) at least the 1% of GDP-- the minimum benchmark recommended by international analyses;
- B. To make sure that quality non-profit or public child care is available in all communities to fit families' not-one-size-fits-all life situations means moving from the current failed market to a system that incorporates planning at all levels, much better data and research, a better way of ensuring a pool of early childhood educators, more public management and more public funding;
- C. Expansion of quality child care needs a decently paid, well educated workforce. A national workforce strategy could concretely address and plan to deal with the multi-workforce issues that now act as a barrier to quality improvement and increased access across Canada and perpetuate the (almost) all female child care workforce as the poster child for the gender wage gap.

Thus, A,B, and C will allow 1, 2 and 3 to be put in place to allow the federal Liberals' commitments to be fulfilled. As the song goes-- "Easy as pie - 1, 2, 3 - A, B, C..." But even if it isn't as easy as pie, it's well worth doing for many reasons--among them to keep Canada's feminist promise.

And if other countries can do it --why not Canada?

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