

Catherine Holt: Universal truth about universal child care ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

B.C. Green Party Leader Andrew Weaver has been exerting his influence in several ways on the government's agenda, and that includes objecting to its promise of universal \$10-a-day child care. The universal part means that anyone who needs the program can use it, regardless of income.

Weaver was quoted in this paper as saying: "I've made the case many times before — somebody who's earning \$2 million a year clearly doesn't need to pay \$10 for child care. Why would we support a program that would diffuse the limited resources we have to provide a one-size-fits-all [approach]?"

There are a couple of universal truths about universal, one-size-fits-all programs.

The first is that they endure. That's because people support what they see as a benefit for themselves. It doesn't matter if they are using that program right now. What matters is that they've paid their taxes and, in return, as a citizen, they can use the program when and if they and their family members need it.

Here are a few examples of universal programs that have built this province and country:

University and college tuition for Canadians is subsidized by government and is not income-tested. We don't pay more if our family has a higher income. This has led to a highly educated workforce that benefits employers as well as individuals.

We have free, universal, public education from kindergarten to Grade 12 because we want to ensure all our kids have the basic education required to function in society and have opportunities for future success.

We have a universal Canada Pension Plan. We pay into it from our earnings and we get a pension at the end of our working lives. We aren't cut off once we reach a certain income level.

Even roads and transit are universal programs. The government has removed tolls on bridges in the Lower Mainland, saying people shouldn't have to pay more based on where they live. And we don't say you can't ride the bus because you're too rich.

And, of course, the grand-daddy of all universal programs is health care. There is one payer — the government — for one system with access based on need. You don't get better health care in this country because you earn more — or less. And we all benefit from not having to pick between health care and financial ruin.

(As an aside, generating the revenue for that universal access is another issue and one that has become controversial as a result of the government's new health tax on payrolls — but that's another column.)

The second universal truth about universal programs is that, counter-intuitively, the only way to make sure there is enough funding to sustain them is to provide them to everyone. The reality is the opposite of what Weaver is suggesting. As government funding gets tight, we don't cut programs that benefit everyone — we cut programs for the poor. Think health care compared to income assistance.

Or more to the point, we've had a low-income child-care subsidy program in this province for decades. It has been squeezed and shaved to the point that you basically have to have almost no income to qualify. And that's what the government is trying to fix with a universal program.

Yes, we need child care to support single mothers on income assistance. But, equally important, we need child care to support two-income working families who are stretched to the limit by housing and transportation and child-care costs. Employers need all of those parents' skills and expertise in our full-employment economy. And all children need high-quality child care to get a good start in life before they can go on to get their public school education and post-secondary training and join the workforce.

So to answer Weaver's question: "Why would we support a program that would diffuse the limited resources we have to provide a one-size-fits-all [approach]?"

We support a one-size-fits-all approach because it is the tried-and-true Canadian way to have a rising tide that lifts all boats.

Catherine Holt is the CEO of the Greater Victoria Chamber of Commerce.

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