

Opinion: Why the rhetoric of federal budget fails the reality of Canadian women ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

It would be neither wrong nor novel to point out that the federal Liberals' third budget released on Tuesday could be aptly titled the "Women's Budget." It's rife with pretty promises of parental leave, expanded child benefits, funding for right-sounding programs.

It even assures future budgets will be subject to "gender-based analysis."

Bless my pretty head.

I have no idea what that means exactly, but I maintain some skepticism that anything in here is going to do this country's women much good.

As per usual with this government, what we get is a lot of showy prayer, but no piety. It all sounds lovely, and focus grouped to appeal to the targeted voting demographic.

But if anyone suffered the illusion that the Liberals were here to provide some kind of transformative government — one that will substantially improve the lives of women between the ages of 18-45 who are voting decision-makers in key suburban ridings — well, at least this budget will make us feel better, right?

First, the stuff I like.

Fixing the stigma

Among the top-line promises in the Liberals' budget (or rather, pre-election campaign pamphlet) is an extended parental leave provision for non-birthing partners. Fathers and spouses will now have a use-it-or-lose-it option to take five or eight weeks of paid leave.

In truth, I rather like this idea.

Women disproportionately suffer a long-term pay penalty for taking time off to recover from childbirth and care for their kids.

As a new mother in her thirties, I am under no illusions about how many potential employers look at me as nothing more than another maternity leave waiting to happen. I'm bossy and aggressive, too.

One way to address the former stigma, at least, is to distribute that penalty a little more evenly, by encouraging men to take time off from their careers as well.

Also welcome are changes to the maternity leave that would allow mothers to work a little while collecting the benefit.

As it previously stood, any income I earned on maternity leave was simply clawed back from the benefit, which created a disincentive to do the kind of occasional freelance or "outside" work that many of us now rely upon in the new gig economy. If we're aiming to reduce the penalty on new mothers who take leave, this is an obvious fix.

Now, if you'll forgive me, it's time to stop being so agreeable.

Virtue signaling

The federal Liberals are developing a reputation for sprinkling sums of cash on programs and ideas that signal their virtuosity, but offer little more beyond a headline. The sums are never enough to truly address problems in any kind of systematic or transformative way. It's all very proper, but it lacks priority, vision and ambition.

The budget is rife with this kind of spending — \$100 million for women's groups; \$187 million to address #MeToo-worthy goals over five years; \$1.8 million to create a strategy to do something to make men and boys engage the topic of gender equality. Or something.

If this government is serious — and serious about gender equity — I wish, for a moment, they'd spare us these pretty half measures. Please explain to me why a progressive government set on running large deficits can't come up with a credible, universal and properly costed child-care strategy?

When it was elected, team Trudeau promised "to create a new national early learning and child-care framework, to ensure that affordable, high-quality, fully inclusive child care is available to all families who need it."

In the last budget, the Liberals promised \$7 billion to the provinces over the next decade, which sounds like a lot, but in fact amounts to a piecemeal approach that hopes to create 40,000 child-care spaces by 2020 — maybe/probably/depending — on how already cash-strapped provinces choose to allocate federal spending.

This budget does little to bolster even those modest ambitions.

There are a lot of reasons for the pay gap between men and women, and for discrepancies in the workforce participation rate of women in this country. And it would be naive of us not to acknowledge that it's a complicated issue.

One explained by some combination of systemic discrimination, but also personal choice informed by both cultural expectations and innate biological differences.

But a huge part of that gap is directly connected to the fact that most women are still having children, and child-care disproportionately falls to us.

This government is two years into its mandate and already stepping up the goody spending and rhetoric to prepare for the next election. Further, it's already abandoned any pretence of balancing the budget, and has few legislative victories to show for its few years in office aside from an eventual plan to legalize pot sometime soon.

If there were a time to announce the kind of transformative social spending it promised, surely it would have been now.

A grim joke

Daycare costs in this country are exorbitant, a fact that disincentivizes many women from returning to work full time, or removes us from the workforce altogether. For some women, staying at home with the kids is a choice, freely made — and all blessings and good wishes to those who choose it.

But for other women, there are no good choices: work for just enough money to pay for the child care we need to work in the first place, or don't work at all.

The previous Conservative government tried to gloss over this fact with a Universal Child Care Benefit, which amounted to \$160 per month per child under the age of six.

The Liberals overhauled that program. The benefit is now means tested.

But the fact that this change was lauded as one of "the most ambitious social policies to be implemented in Canada in decades" when it was announced in 2016 must be one of the grimmest jokes ever played on working parents of this generation.

The new program does pay more than the Conservative one, but it maxes out at \$6,400 for a family earning \$30,000 per year. That equates to \$533 a month. Meanwhile, according to a 2017 report by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, the median fee for infant child care in Calgary is \$1,250 per month, while in Toronto is \$1,758 per month.

Meanwhile, most child-care centres in major cities in this country report long wait lists.

That means even after directing the whole of that benefit to daycare, a household making \$30,000 per year could still be spending between half and two-thirds of its net income on child-care costs, absent access to heavily subsidized care.

And, of course, if a woman works more, the family income tends to increase, thus reducing the size of the benefit even as she in greater need of the child care that benefit might subsidize. We women are very good at this kind of math, and it adds up to a lot of us staying home until our children are in school.

Everybody loves to get a cheque in the mail, especially the people who are inclined to vote. But if this government wants more women in the workforce — as it said it did when it unveiled this budget — it doesn't make sense to simply fork over unfettered cash, at an estimated annual cost of \$22.4 billion.

The federal government would probably spend less money to set up a universal child-care program or direct child-care subsidy, which would do more to get keep women in the workforce than every other budget item combined.

For me, that sweet child benefit cheque (thanks, Trudeau!) covers about 1/10 of the cost of my part-time daycare. For one child. I'm luckier than most.

God bless this nation's single mothers. I don't know how they are covering rent.

A profound reorganization

Women who make less money have fewer options — greater dependence on friends and family, and on unregulated or substandard child care.

Our society has undergone a profound reorganization over the past two generations. One that has dissolved traditional gender roles and upended the extended community support networks that once helped us to raise our children.

Daycare is what fills the gap. We don't need to dig too deeply into ideology here; if you value equality of opportunity, ensuring all women have the ability to access the labour market on an equal footing with their male peers should be a priority for everyone.

It's also a matter of economics. This country needs women to fill the void left by a rapidly aging population.

The market has failed to provide enough affordable and high quality child-care spaces in this country. As long as that remains so, women will not be able to work to their full potential or capacity.

Feel free to title your budget with words like "equity." Paint it purple and put a bird on it for all the good it will do, for all the good it will do. Women love that.

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