

Promises, promises – A history of federal childcare proposals ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Feminists have been fighting for 50 years for the creation of a national universal child care program. Some version of a national program has been proposed by different federal governments over the years, but these proposals have never been realized. Below is a countdown of the times that the federal government has considered “the child care debate” and what the results were.

5... In 1970 a national child care system was recommended by the Royal Commission on the Status of Women. The Canadian Council on Social Development held a conference in 1971, bringing together 350 delegates to discuss a framework for such a system. There was significant divergence about what a system should look like, with the newly emerging feminist movement pushing against existing notions of childcare and arguing for childcare as a matter of gender equality. In the end, the conference did agree that “governments needed to do more to ensure that a wide range of day care services were available around the country.”

4... Nonetheless, it was well over a decade before the federal government seriously took up the issue of a national childcare program again. Just before the 1984 election the (then-Liberal) federal government created a child care task force headed by Katie Cooke. Even though the Liberals lost the election, the task force continued its work and in 1986 it recommended a federal-provincial cost sharing arrangement for a public system similar to education or health care. In its report the Task Force made the importance of a national child care system clear, stating “We have become convinced that sound child care and parental leave programs can no longer be considered a frill but are, rather, fundamental support services needed by all families in Canada today.”

In 1987, following the publication of the Cooke report, the (then-Conservative) government established a Special Parliamentary Committee on Child Care. The submission by the Canadian Day Care Advocacy Association CDCAA to the Committee argued against deregulating the system and offered recommendations for future child care policy. Other briefs included one from the Ontario Federation of Labour. The all-party committee couldn’t agree how to proceed and each party released their own report. The Conservative majority suggested tax breaks, incentives for businesses to create child care spaces in workplaces, and money handed out to for-profit centres. This approach was criticized by a range of organizations and the proposed legislation died on the order paper when the 1988 election was called.

3... The 1993 Liberal platform “Red Book” promised a shared-cost national program. The proposal was to split payment between the federal government (40%), and the provinces (20%), with parents paying the remaining 20% (on a sliding scale). The platform promised 150,000 “new, quality” child care spaces and incentives to businesses for workplace child care. Yet, although the Liberals were elected, their child care promise was ignored and a national program was never implemented despite the Liberals holding power until the early 2000s.

2... In 2004, the (still-Liberal) federal government headed by Paul Martin promised to spend \$5 billion on a child care program that would be developed with the provinces. After failing to negotiate a multilateral agreement, separate bilateral agreements were reached. However, a non-confidence motion toppled the minority government the following year before the programs could be implemented. The government changed from Liberal to Conservative and the incoming government acted on their campaign promise and cancelled both the agreements and federal funding.

1... In 2015, the Liberals pledged to create a “national framework” that would make sure “affordable, high-quality, fully inclusive child care” is available to everyone who needs it. Once elected, however, the multilateral deal on childcare that they signed with all provinces and territories (except Quebec) stopped far short of setting out a national framework, instead leaving provinces and territories largely in control of how to spend the \$7.5 billion over 11 years that was committed to child care in the 2017 federal budget.

Canadian families have been waiting a long time for the federal government to develop a high-quality, affordable and universal national child care program since it was first recommended by the Royal Commissions fifty years ago. Promises, promises ... but so far, a “failure to launch”.

What’s next? During last fall’s election campaign the Liberal party promised funding support to increase access to child care for school-age children, as well as increases to the Canada Child Benefit, paid family leave, and parental leave for adoptive families. Yet mentions of

childcare in the Liberal minority government's Speech from the Throne last December were nowhere to be found, despite ongoing and substantive support for a national childcare system. Just recently, however, Canada's Minister in charge of federal efforts to expand childcare announced that the upcoming federal budget will outline how funding to create 250,000 before- and after-care spaces will be rolled out, although the new money will not flow to provinces until renewed funding agreements are signed with Ottawa.

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