

Justin Trudeau's government says it champions women. Proroguing Parliament suggests otherwise ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

When Prime Minister Justin Trudeau prorogued Parliament, he didn't just shut down politically sensitive hearings into the WE Charity contract and Canada-China relations.

Side-swiped in that political play was also a House of Commons committee looking into the fate of women in the pandemic — hearings examining domestic abuse, employment and the very urgent problem of safe and accessible child care.

Two cabinet ministers, a range of experts and many parliamentarians were part of the way through hashing out a plan to better support women dealing with the brutal fallout of isolation and working from home — a spike in violence and a disturbing drop in women's participation in the workplace.

It's easy to see the cynicism that may have led the federal decision-makers to shut down the WE Charity inquiries, since they were seriously damaging the Liberals. And the Conservatives were the instigators of the Canada-China committee, which the Liberals only agreed to reluctantly.

But motherhood and women in the workplace? It's right on brand, not to mention crucial for the business community, a prerequisite for a smooth and sustained economic recovery and essential for the healthy development of children.

There's a crying need for government action at all levels, and the time for that action is right now — as the recovery begins to take hold and as taking care of children is in a huge upheaval, with uncertain and ever-changing back-to-school conditions.

Just a few months ago, an amazing thing happened. As a country, we set aside political differences and agreed at a moment's notice that we would do "whatever it takes" to get through the pandemic. At that time, "whatever it takes" meant shutting down the economy, pulling health-care workers out of retirement and providing them equipment and resources, making allowances for foreign workers to quickly move into our health-care system, and spending all the money needed to make sure the health-care system was not overwhelmed.

It wasn't perfect, but it mainly worked.

Now, "whatever it takes" is different. By necessity, we are learning to live and work alongside COVID-19, and that requires a different type of government support.

Imagine if we collectively decided to treat child care the same way we treated health care last spring. "Whatever it takes" would be putting billions of dollars into keeping child-care spaces open, giving schools and daycare operators all the space and teachers and extra resources they need to keep kids safe and educated, and even pulling in people from retirement to make it happen.

It would be done in the name of easing children back to school and daycare safely, expanding before- and after-school care, allowing parents to fully return to work with confidence — even as we are still dealing with the pandemic.

In the midst of the parliamentary hearings in July, it looked like we were heading in that direction.

"We also know that the child-care system in Canada is not yet fully a system," said Maryam Monsef, the minister for women and gender equality. "We can't get back to a strong economy if we don't address the labour force attachments that women need. There is a link between gender-based violence, economic security, child care and pay equity. These things are all related."

Monsef told the committee that her government was committed to that work.

In the House of Commons this month, the NDP won unanimous consent for a motion committing Ottawa to send \$2 billion to the provinces for affordable daycare, and funding for a safe return to school.

The federal government proceeded to negotiate a \$19-billion "safe restart" agreement with the provinces, which included \$625 million for child care support.

But that money has yet to be spent.

Justin Trudeau told the premiers on Tuesday that Ottawa would transfer another \$2 billion for the safe reopening of schools, but it's not yet clear how much if any of that will be used for child care support.

And now, hope for a holistic all-party plan has been lost to prorogation.

"Money without a plan is just money. It's not helping anything right now," says independent economist Armine Yalnizyan, who has become a go-to resource for the federal government as it attempts to deal with the effects of the pandemic recession on women.

"There is no plan."

The committee heard from experts that the country needed about \$2.5 billion just to maintain the existing daycare spaces, says NDP MP Lindsay Mathysen, who sits on the committee. The MPs also heard from both business interests and child care advocates that maintaining child care is essential for a recovery strategy.

For sure, child care and education are provincial responsibilities. But health care is a provincial responsibility too, and that hasn't stopped the federal government from acting during the pandemic.

The NDP would go further and have Ottawa adopt a national child care act that would ensure equal standards and accessibility across the country, getting rid of the "mishmash" that is our system right now, Mathysen says.

It's hard to imagine that kind of intricate negotiation happening during a pandemic. But adequate funding for safe conditions in daycares and schools that are gearing up to reopen in two weeks? That's a lot more straightforward. It's also urgently needed, and not something that should be unnecessarily delayed by prorogation.

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