

National child care promises have been made for 50 years. Will Trudeau deliver? ^[1]

Quality daycare needs to be part of Canada's economic infrastructure.

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EXCERPTS

The short walk to daycare with my two-year-old son is one of the best parts of my day. He has a lot to be happy about — we are en route to his favourite place, where he'll open the door, race toward the books, then sit down cross-legged and play with his little crew of friends.

At this small home daycare, he's learning his shapes, colours, numbers, letters, how to take turns and share with others. It's a hell of a lot better than I — or Sesame Street, or Paw Patrol or Cat in the Hat — was able to do this spring when the pandemic closed down daycares nationwide. He's a lot happier. And you know what? So am I.

Daycare is what allows me to work, to continue making some money (we could talk about women's lower income earning power in the five years after having a child, but I digress). It also gives me some personal space to think about what's next for my family and tap into my own ambition and potential. Luxuries in the middle of a pandemic, I know — single parents need daycare in order to work. And as the lockdown revealed to us, it's next to impossible both to work and wrangle small children.

“My Twitter feed this week is full of women who said how excited they were 30 years ago when this was part of the national conversation. But they, and their children, were let down.”

So I was thrilled, Wednesday, to see a national daycare strategy promised in the federal Liberals' Speech from the Throne, lighting a spark of hope in Canadians who love their children but also need to make a living.

I'm lucky to have daycare, but I only have it thanks to word of mouth and hustle — I didn't get into any of the institutional childcare spaces our municipal governments sprinkle through our communities that never seem to meet demand.

Child care is prohibitively expensive, and subsidies are hard to get. It's made for some pretty depressing barriers and solitudes between the haves and the have nots in an already patchwork provincially mandated, municipally executed system: A 2017 Canadian study found two thirds of parents with an annual income of over \$100k use childcare, while households with under \$40k coming in use it at half the rate. Plenty of childcare is unregulated — In those cases, it comes down to trust.

Quality daycare shouldn't be about luck, privilege, hustle and trust. It should be part of our national economic infrastructure. It's refreshing to see a federal government see it as a critical tool to economic health — a self-proclaimed feminist government, after all, would've been excoriated for not doing something to address the she-cession, documented by RBC as the women's labour force participation dropping from a fairly consistent historic high of around 62% to its lowest low in 30 years — 55.5% — by April of this year.

And yet, even a hopeful promise in a moment of national crisis made me skeptical: Canadians have been promised national childcare before and we still don't have a model that's anywhere close to adequate — even after more than 50 years of pushing.

Yes, half a century. That's how long it's been since the parliamentary tabling of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women report, which substantiated gender inequality in Canada at the time. It recommended a national child-care strategy to help boost women's participation in the workforce. We recognized even back then that this was how to tackle gender inequality.

Since the publication of the report in 1970, there have been stops and starts and valiant efforts that went nowhere:

The 1984 Taskforce on Child Care led by sociologist Katie Cooke — the top recommendation out of its 53 was a national childcare plan. Then the Liberals lost the 1984 election to Brian Mulroney.

The Mulroney government set up another taskforce in 1987, which ended up emphasizing tax breaks for parents over building daycare infrastructure.

“Today, as in 1970, childcare workers are paid less than zookeepers.”

Then, in 2005, we got painfully close: With his Foundations Program, Liberal PM Paul Martin promised \$5 billion over five years to launch a Quebec-style national program and managed to strike deals with 10 provinces. They even started to get it off the ground. But then it was cancelled less than a year later when Stephen Harper’s Conservative government came to power.

And here we have another taskforce promised — albeit this time, it’s critical that we understand the modern implications of a pandemic. We’ve been given a cold hard look at the cost of ignoring care work as a fundamental part of our economy — just look at the horrible neglect of long-term care homes, the risks frontline care workers — who are mostly women — have had to take just to keep the system afloat.

Political will is so important — and, in a democracy, it is inextricably linked to the power of the people. The Trudeau government’s national daycare promise is already being skewered by observers more skeptical than I, that it’s a bauble meant to entice support from voters ahead of a potential looming election (voting in a pandemic! Sounds fun!). Maybe so. Politics is a blood sport. But it’s so far past time for action. Will this minority government have the courage and support to actually make it happen?

I have other questions too: Will we prioritize the people who need childcare most? Would a robust national childcare system put someone like my son’s current childcare provider out of business, or could she get a better paying, well-supported job within this system? Is there a way to bring Conservatives aboard? Can there be some choice within a national system?

In her brief to the federal government ahead of this week’s Throne Speech, economist and Atkinson Fellow on the Future of Work Armine Yalnizyan wrote that the federal government needs to stop giving money to the provinces via transfers (as it has been) without a plan.

“Money without a strategy will simply expand a market that already fails many families,” she said. Early childhood educators should be well-compensated and trained (today, as in 1970, childcare workers are paid less than zookeepers, Yalnizyan said) and there should be a strong expansion of high quality, low cost care centres. There need to be timelines. Accountability trackers. Right now there is none of that.

Will my son’s children one day walk to daycare, clutching his hand, smiling up at him? Will he be able to rest easy, knowing his kid is getting amazing care, with a not-so-crippling hit to his monthly household budget?

My Twitter feed this week is full of women who said how excited they were 30 years ago when this was part of the national conversation. But they, and their children, were let down.

Maybe our kids don’t need to be.

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