

Pandemic realities offer a chance to address Canada's long legacy of broken promises on child care ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

It's easy to be cynical about government commitments to child care in Canada, given our long legacy of false starts and broken promises.

Fifty years ago, the Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women drew a straight line between child care and women's equality, and the responsibility of governments to build an early learning and child-care system. Two federal task forces followed (one Liberal, then one Conservative) debating how to proceed.

We got plans, but no action. Child care was in the Liberals' 1993 Red Book. Their "Children's Budget" in 2000 was eclipsed by historic tax cuts just months later, leaving the cupboard bare. A mini agreement with the provinces and territories in 2004 preceded Paul Martin's 2005 Foundations Program, only to have it first up for the kill when Stephen Harper took office a year later. A decade would elapse before the newly elected Liberals negotiated another round of child-care agreements in 2017.

This week, the Throne Speech promised a "significant, long-term" commitment to a Canadawide early learning and child-care system. So why celebrate now? Ironically, pandemic realities offer hope for a new approach. The Throne Speech lays promising groundwork for an equitable economic recovery, starting with recognizing the significance of the world's first she-cession, recovery from which is throttled by the lack of child care and a fitful school reopening. Simply put, there is no recovery without a she-covey, and no she-covey without child care.

Prepandemic, half of Canada's employees were women. Women took the biggest hit in lost jobs and hours of paid work in the past six months. Young mothers especially are having trouble regaining ground. The availability of good child care and safe schools has become the choke point. Recovery is poised to stall out and reverse course because while schools are publicly secured, child care is not. Schools won't disappear, but child care is market-reliant, and operators are folding under the weight of pandemic economics.

In Canada's biggest labour market, Ontario, 40 per cent of child-care centres remain closed. In Quebec, centres operate well below capacity. And while the pandemic increases the costs of delivering care, uncertain parents and nervous staff aren't showing up, creating the conditions for a market failure.

If any minister of transportation announced that 40 per cent of her jurisdiction's roads and bridges were closed, everyone would understand: people couldn't get to work and businesses couldn't function. Facing economic collapse, the government would have to devise a plan to restore the system's function.

Now consider: Household spending is the primary driver of GDP (57 per cent in Canada, almost 70 per cent in the U.S.). The largest spending block is young families with children. Women contribute 40 per cent of incomes of households with children. Reduce their capacity to earn and less purchasing power for these households means a slower economy for all.

This is where good child care rides in. Not just warehousing kids so mommy can get back to work. But getting ready for what's next.

Even without a pandemic, Canada was looking at decades of slow growth, the impact of population aging. Soon, we will need all hands on deck. A system of early learning and child care provides all kids with the foundations for learning and for life. Maximizing the potential of every child maximizes society's potential.

Child care pays off in the short term, too. It can be a source of good jobs for educators as it frees parents to find and keep work. Together they contribute to tax revenues, draw less on social programs and spend their earnings in their local communities stimulating economic growth. Evidence from Quebec shows that every \$100 in subsidized care returns \$147 to the province and to Ottawa.

The key is quality, not just quantity. And quality depends on well-trained and resourced educators. Poor pay and working conditions drive qualified educators out of the field. Quality concerns are found everywhere, including in Quebec, the leader in affordable child care.

That makes the Throne Speech's reference to Quebec as the model to build on understandable, but worrisome. As brilliant a pioneer as the Quebec system was, it has since struggled with declining quality and a growing presence of commercial providers gobbling up ever-greater

amounts of public funding. Quantity is not quality. While public investment counts, how the money is spent matters more.

The for-profit share in Canada's early learning and child-care sector is growing as the pandemic craters the market. And, frankly, even large non-profit operators are acting like their commercial competitors. Both are adept at scooping up public cash and charging parents high fees while barely paying minimum wage to undertrained staff, with little resistance from governments.

Making deliberate, strategic choices with our shared resources is more important than ever. We can spend funds on building a system, or expanding a market. The former buys change, the latter deepens a dysfunctional status quo.

As we head into an era of slowness (slow or no growth) due to population aging, the smallest working-age cohort in 50 years will need all the help it can get. The legacy social and economic-policy achievement for this generation will be early learning and child care. But if we are going to pour in more public funding, we need to ensure better public management and accountability – clear targets, timetables and tracking of progress – not just more volume. Gaps in access to quality early learning and child care need to be closed, and outcomes need to be better integrated with public education.

Functionally, there is no daylight between early learning and education. Why should the education of our school-aged children be publicly funded, managed and delivered, but not the education of our youngest learners? Shouldn't they be offered even better guarantees of high-quality care? Money without a plan is not a strategy.

COVID-19 viscerally revealed that the Essential Economy is underpinned by the Caring Economy. Without child care, elder care, health care and education, the ability to generate GDP is hobbled. We can choose to warehouse people too old, too young and too sick to work, so workers can get back to work; or we can choose a humane approach that expands everyone's future.

Economic growth is intertwined with well-being. The path ahead could unleash great potential, or squander an immense opportunity. It's our choice. As the pandemic has shown, the future depends on what we do, now.

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