

Commentary: It's time for Canada to implement universal child care ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Child care is not a women's issue. It is not a parenting issue, nor is it a social issue. It is an economic one.

Canada's economic stability hinges on a plan that includes universal child care. Before the pandemic hit, half of Canada's workforce was women. We require women's participation in the labour force to rebuild and grow our economy.

Wednesday's throne speech suggests the Trudeau government recognizes this. "The government will make a significant, long-term, sustained investment to create a Canada-wide early-learning and child-care system," Gov. Gen. Julie Payette said during the speech, though details beyond that were vague.

Not that I was expecting the nitty-gritty particulars; throne speeches offer big picture plans and overarching vision.

But needless to say, I was cautiously optimistic to hear child care put front and centre.

My caution is duly warranted, as this isn't our government's first kick at the can. A universal child care plan has been in the work for five long decades. The 1970 Report on the Royal Commission on the Status of Women called for a national daycare act. (The report, which highlighted the inequities faced by women noted that child care workers get paid less than zookeepers.)

Twenty-three years later, another plan was promised in the Liberal's famous Red Book in 1993, and again in 2004 and again in 2011.

Then, as recently as 2015, the NDP pledged a \$15-a-day child care plan in its bid for power, but the party lost.

All this to say, 50 years later, we are still without a national child care plan. We do not have a sufficient number of qualified caregivers or sufficient pay to retain them. So yes, I am hopeful for change — especially now.

When the coronavirus hit, many women were forced to leave their jobs to care for children as child-care facilities and schools shuttered. I have two children, aged eight and five. Looking back, I'm not quite sure how we made it through March to June, juggling home-schooling with full-time work from home.

We almost didn't. As an epileptic, I was doubling up on my medication almost daily out of fear of an oncoming seizure from all of the stress and sleepless nights as I managed more roles than I could carry. The entire summer was fraught with nerves about what "back-to-school" would look like for my children.

Like many families, we didn't have the financial luxury of choosing a pandemic pod with a private tutor or even online schooling. Our only option was to send our children back to the classroom.

However, what was a very real reality was that if schools did shutter for a second time, my career would be the one to be put on hold. I am a freelance worker; less salary, no benefits — economically, it is seemingly a no-brainer. If push comes to shove, my career will be the one to be pushed aside, even temporarily.

Nonetheless, we are among the lucky ones and recognize our privilege in that my husband and I are both still working, while so many others are not. But if one of us has to drop out of the workforce in order to manage child care, it will be me.

I am not the exception, I am the rule. A 2019 study showed that the average cost of preschool-age child care was \$1,207 per month in Toronto. Costs varied across the country: \$954 in Vancouver; \$875 in Edmonton; \$861 in Halifax.

By contrast, Quebec City had average monthly child care costs of \$179. To date, Quebec is the only province that currently provides government-subsidized child care. For many Canadian parents outside Quebec, child care costs about as much as housing.

A single year of preschool child care can cost the same as four years of university tuition.

And beyond the egregious costs, there is also a matter of availability. In our densely populated metropolises, we see parents signing up for child care spots the moment they find out there's a baby on the way.

Of Canada's approximately five million children under the age of 12, we don't have statistics on how many are in paid and unpaid care. But we do know that only 27 per cent are in licensed and regulated facilities.

COVID-19 has exposed glaring economic inequalities in our society and revealed how those with the financial least have been impacted the most by this seemingly indiscriminate virus.

Women have lost jobs at a higher rate than men. When it comes to the labour force, women have been flung back to 1990 — it feels as if we are in a time warp.

In March, women represented 70 per cent of job losses in Canada among workers aged 25-54. By June, while the employment rate was almost back to normal for fathers of school-aged children, for mothers, employment had dropped by five per cent.

A recent study by RBC shows that women's participation in the labour force is at a 30-year low. But women cannot return to the work-force unless child care is both affordable and safe.

Universal child care is no easy feat. There will be a significant investment, and I use the term investment purposefully, rather than expense. I believe this is an investment in our future which will have long-term benefits that will greatly exceed the costs.

More than 25 per cent of Canadian children start schooling with learning or social vulnerabilities that will impede their educational advancement and chances for career advancement.

We need to start paying attention sooner. U.S. research shows that every dollar invested into child care returns \$8.60 back into the economy over the child's lifetime. A U.K. study says a one per cent of GDP investment in child care will create as much as five times more jobs than an equivalent investment in construction.

Public policy must rebalance the economy to counteract inequity. We must have a measured, robust plan.

"Money without a strategy will simply expand a market that already fails many families. Building a high-quality, regulated system of early learning and child care requires a plan and targets for outcomes," wrote Armine Yalnizyan and Kerry McCuaig in a brief to the Prime Minister's Office, ahead of the throne speech.

Universal child care system may seem like an overwhelming task. But we are living in overwhelming times.

If we truly value the collective well-being and future growth potential of our country, then now is the time to invest in our youngest members of society.

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