

# Opinion: Universal childcare at last, or will we be duped again? <sup>[1]</sup>

**Author:** Sears, Robin, V.

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## EXCERPTS

One of the hoariest political clichés is that timing is everything. But beyond the timing of an election, or a cabinet shuffle and other purely strategic calculations, there is another arena where it is equally true: new program launches.

To the eternal frustration of social democrats, who are often the first to campaign for progressive social and economic justice policies in the Western democracies, it is often a larger party to their right who finally implements them and gets the political credit.

The NDP's creation of medicare under Tommy Douglas is well known. Less well known is that Petro-Canada, election expense limits, social assistance payments, and even the first Canada Pension Plan were all CCF/NDP multi-election campaign pledges. And in each case the Liberals enacted them and claimed them as their own.

But perhaps what is more interesting is asking why the dial moved when it did. J.S. Woodsworth campaigned from 1919 onward for CPP, until Mackenzie King implemented it in 1927. What changed? Petro-Canada was an idea that grew out of the fear of U.S. domination of the Canadian oil and gas sector in the sixties; Pierre Trudeau implemented it in 1975. Election expense limits had been a demand going back two decades to the CCF, and they were implemented for the 1974 Liberal campaign.

If you examine the dominant social and political environment at the beginning, and how it shifted over the years to the final launch date, it becomes clearer that it was Macmillan's famous "events!" that were the trigger. Pensions went from "communism" to acceptance with the rise of unions and the Soviet Union, and Mackenzie King's savvy outflanking of the CCF. Election expenses happened following Watergate and two lesser scandals in Ontario and Quebec. Petro-Canada was a child of the 1973 oil price shock.

It was precisely half a century ago that Pierre Trudeau first promised a national childcare system. It popped up from time to time in Liberal campaign platforms over the decades — most prominently, perhaps, under Paul Martin. His allies often poked New Dems for killing the Martin government, only to prevent the Liberals getting the credit for actually delivering childcare. To which the orange team would reply, "Only the most credulous believed you were actually going to deliver!" Given 34 years and nine elections had passed since the first promise with no childcare, this was perhaps not unreasonable.

Childcare in Canada has a long and twisting history — from pre-Confederation days when informal day nurseries were set up in some larger communities, to 1942 when subsidized daycare spaces were created for mothers working in war industries, to the boom created by the first feminist wave of the 70s. Like capital punishment, abortion and marriage equality, the cause was litigated brutally on each side, gaining traction slowly until one day becoming "inevitable."

I think this week's speech from the throne may mark the inevitability moment for a national universal subsidized childcare system. Why now? Because the fundamental economic logic of childcare has become overwhelming — not as a social justice card, but in purely liberal capitalist terms. More working women means a larger labour force, producing greater output and tax revenues, along with a stronger and more skills-diversified economy.

The evidence is no longer debatable: childcare, done well, really does make a nation richer, as well as fairer. And no, it is not a socialist plot to indoctrinate young children with poisonous ideas while trapped for hours every day in the hands of lefty propagandists — a claim one regularly heard whispered back in the day.

Why this epiphany took so long for the mostly male political and business leaders is more puzzling. In Canada, it was partly the success of the Quebec subsidized system over more than 20 years, and B.C.'s more recent success since the election of the NDP under John Horgan. The pandemic sealed the case.

It will take longer than it should to complete the task. The provinces and Ottawa will bicker like four-year-olds over who is painting outside their lanes, who has the biggest pile of blocks, and who is cheating whom. It's Canada, after all. If by the end of this decade none of that has happened, however, please put me down as just another credulous Canadian voter duped one more time by the usual suspects.

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