

National child care: How can we afford not to? ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

In 1970, when a national child-care program was first proposed as part of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, many girls across the country weren't allowed to wear pants in high school. That seems bonkers, right? In 2005, when Paul Martin's government proposed yet another child-care plan, the country was having a ferocious debate about same-sex marriage. That also seems unbelievable now. Imagine the absurdity of not allowing two adults to get married because of their sex.

Maybe in 20 years we'll look back at the transformative Liberal budget that finally brought Canada a national child-care and early-learning program and wonder how the hell it took so long. I'm hoping we'll look back from a country where all parents, no matter their income, can access safe, good-quality care for their kids, where women don't have to choose between their careers and their children. Maybe the cost will be slightly different than the \$10 a day the Liberals envisage, but it surely won't cost the nearly \$1,700 a month that's needed to put your child in care in Toronto (if you can find a space).

This federal government is putting a lot of money on the table, \$30-billion over the next five years and more than \$8-billion a year after that. (I don't think it's a coincidence that this propulsive budget was delivered by the country's first female finance minister, one who has school-age kids.) The automatic response has been, "How can we afford this?" But a better and more useful question is, "How can we not?" We knew before the pandemic that child care was a shambles across the country, unaffordable or inaccessible in many places, a deterrent to young couples who might have wanted kids but couldn't imagine how they'd make it work.

The disaster of the last year has been more disastrous for some – for women (especially racialized women), mothers, people in vulnerable housing situations. An RBC report in March revealed that during the pandemic, 12 times as many mothers as fathers left their jobs to care for kids, and immigrant mothers were hit hardest of all in terms of unemployment.

Giant cracks need a lot of glue. This is a big and necessary expenditure, and there are many ways to sell the benefits to the Canadian population. You could, for example, point to Quebec's affordable child-care strategy, which has boosted women's participation in the labour market as well as the birth rate. You could point to studies from abroad, such as research from the think tank IPPR in Britain, which shows a gain of \$35,000 in government revenue over four years for every woman who returns to the work force full time. The Liberals estimate that their early-learning and child-care plan will help the economy grow by as much as 1.2 per cent.

It's become fashionable, and in some circles controversial, to refer to child and elder care as fundamental parts of a society's infrastructure. Controversial, because we have for years been trained by gender norms to think of infrastructure as the stuff built by a dude with a hammer and a metal lunch box. As Anne-Marie Slaughter recently wrote about a similar debate in the United States, "Insisting that there is actually a fixed definition of what infrastructure is – bridges, but not baby care – perfectly encapsulates the ways in which the world is still shaped by men."

Now we have, after 50 years of false starts and broken promises, a chance to bring all people into that process and design an infrastructure for the future. We know what happens when we fail to invest in infrastructure: We see bridges collapse in Italy or power grids disintegrate in Texas storms. The failure to nurture our children's potential or women's capacity to work is less visible, but even more harmful in the long run. Again, the question is how could we afford not to make this investment?

There will be challenges along the way. A future federal government could upend the cart. (We've seen it happen before.) There will need to be buy-in from the provinces and territories, but that's where voters come in. If you believe in this plan for growth, insist that your provincial politicians do as well. Make sure that it's a priority when election time comes around.

The alternative is too unpleasant to entertain. We don't want to be looking back in 20 years wondering how it all fell down again. We want to be looking back, proud of the bridge we built to the future.

Region: Canada ^[3]

Tags: federal budget ^[4]

mother's labour force participation ^[5]

child care workforce ^[6]

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[4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/federal-budget>

[5] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/8142>

[6] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/child-care-workforce>

[7] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/affordability>