

# Opinion: Federal budget has only one thing on the childcare menu <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

The federal budget proposes national childcare. However, it is just for children in daycare. No offence to daycare, but no kid at the park should get all the marbles.

When I left school teaching to have a baby, I knew I was giving up income. I was surprised the state thought I was ending usefulness. When government funded care of children but only in daycare, this seemed inconsistent with equality. It did not just exclude me. It ignored parents taking turns tending the child and earning, parents who get care by a sitter, grandma or nanny, work-at-home parents. This “inclusive” budget still excludes a lot of people.

I hear the rationale, that the plan empowers women. But if women can be anything, why not caregivers? Stage 1 of feminism was to get the vote; Stage 2 to get pay equity; Stage 3 to value roles in the home. During the pandemic, we are told women “dropped out” of the labour force. Wrong. They made sure their families were fed, protected, safe. They became front-line workers for the recovery. When the budget says women at home are not meeting their potential, who’s against women now?

I have a copy of the 1970 Royal Commission the Status of Women. This budget quotes it as a promise of universal daycare. Wrong. It proposed a small emergency daycare but recommended a substantial cash allowance paid directly to mothers so that “fewer mothers would be forced to work outside for financial reasons.” This budget ignores that.

We could have a birth bonus like Australia or a family allowance like in Europe. We could permit income splitting like in the U.S. or for single mothers like in France. We could have maternity benefits based on maternity not on paid work. We do none of those.

This budget is like a universal nutrition program, promising pepperoni pizza for every child. Could I get chicken? No, sorry, just pizza. Catch 2, the money goes directly to the pizza restaurant, not parents. Catch 3, you have to pay for the pizza even if you don’t eat it.

That makes me think of a board game. Do not pass Go to collect any money. There is also a Catch 4. The federal government will give money to the provinces, but only for daycare. If they object, they get nothing. Why does that make me think of the Godfather movie?

An economy is like a bridge with a key pillar being the care role in the home. This pillar is the first tier of healthcare, education, mental health. GDP, however, does not count it. Feminist economist Marilyn Waring noticed this oddity. J. K. Galbraith said economists would get a sudden increase in GNP if they included unpaid labour of women. We remain blind to it.

If we force all women out of the home, that pillar cracks. The sick will stay longer in hospital. Care of the elderly, handicapped, young will all have to be funded at professional rates. The costs will skyrocket. Birth rates in Quebec dropped with universal daycare until they chose to fund maternity directly.

Someone has to have babies for society to go on. We should fund care wherever it happens.

The federal plan promises flexibility: part-time or full-time daycare. That is like Ford saying you can have the Model T in any colour as long as it is black.

Years ago, I saw a young mother crossing a street with a baby in a backpack and a toddler in a stroller. She had her purse and packages wrapped around the stroller handles and watched for traffic as she crossed. If someone called out to her, I am sure she could have raised a hand to wave. The government of Canada says this woman is not working. They are the only ones who think that.

Beverley Smith is an activist for women’s and children’s rights. In 1997, she made a successful complaint at the United Nations about bias in funding of care.

**Region:** Canada <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** federal budget <sup>[4]</sup>

mother's labour force participation <sup>[5]</sup>

flexibility <sup>[6]</sup>

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