

Child care is an integral part of our post-pandemic recovery. Let's go big and act now ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The pandemic has acted like a prism, bending and distorting how some people in power see existing issues.

Sometimes we see something new. Most health ministers used to think that their main job was to make universal medicare more accessible. Many now see health care as something that not only is distributed unequally, but has discrimination itself built into the system.

Or we see our old efforts with new clarity. For years, provincial governments have increased health care spending. But the pandemic has shown there simply weren't enough dollars for mental health treatment, or for the long-term care or hospital sectors.

As with medicare, so with child care. Many policy-makers have now changed their perspective, discovering the inadequacy of previous efforts. The pandemic forced many working parents — overwhelmingly women — to pull out of the workforce or make choices they were unhappy with because they had no other option. At the same time, the incremental public dollars that were added to the system in past years still kept child care out of reach for many parents.

A broad cross-section of leaders across sectors now see child care as an economic policy issue, not only a "women's issue" (as if the two were separable to begin with), understanding the need for transformative public investment. And so the federal government's bold commitment in the April budget of up to \$30 billion — with a goal to cut daycare costs to an average of \$10 per day in five years — is both good public policy and good politics.

But there's no guarantee the commitment will lead to more affordable and better child care for Canadians. It requires deals with individual provinces, ruled by governments that may not yet feel they have to act, or that might have legitimate policy quibbles on how to implement what the feds have announced.

How do Canadians, who have heard big promises on child care from their leaders for decades, avoid being disappointed?

Provinces will need to meet two tests of credibility in response to the federal offer. The first is one of commitment. Are they moving with urgency to strike meaningful deals?

Let's hand the prism to provincial leaders. Because child care has now been reframed as an economic policy issue, it is an integral part of our post-pandemic recovery. And because previous efforts haven't built an accessible system, new commitments need to be significant. In other words: act now and go big.

The other test is one of detail, of viability. Does the plan actually build up a high-quality, accessible child-care system in the province, led by well-trained and well-paid workers?

This in turn depends on the resolution of a number of policy issues. The Toronto Star and First Policy Response, a pandemic policy project I help run at Ryerson University, co-hosted federal Families Minister Ahmed Hussen, experts and front-line workers for a town hall this week.

The discussion featured nuanced exchanges on issues related to private delivery, the role of tax credits and why we should focus on building a system of early learning that goes beyond child care — questions where experts are converging on similar answers.

The subsequent virtual breakout room, with early childhood educators (ECEs) and leaders from across Canada, felt very different. It was about mobilization, not persuasion on policy. These ECEs live in provinces with conservative governments, and have neighbours who might believe in child care, but think it's a family responsibility more than the state's.

The Ontario Liberal Party's recently announced plan is a good model. It acts big (embracing the federal targets), acts now (proposing to cut before- and after-school fees right away) and shows a degree of flexibility (maintaining and enhancing the Conservative tax credits to families with children).

We don't all change our views on a dime. We can't quickly land on the expert consensus on all the details. But we can evolve quickly based on values we already hold. After a recent interview with President Joe Biden, New York Times columnist David Brooks concluded "Biden hasn't really changed; he's just doing everything bigger."

The job for modern progressives — on child care or on any other idea that helps us "Build Back Better" — is to lend the prism to others, and to make these new perspectives, based in shared values, as widely shared as possible. To convince Canadians to commit, go big and act now.

Region: Canada ^[3]

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federal budget ^[5]

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