

Opinion: Child care will be the defining issue of the election ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

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After months of speculation, it is happening: Canadians will be heading to the polls in September, a month typically defined by a return to packed lunches, school and child care. It is a time for routine, for systems that work.

This is exactly what Canadians have craved since the world we knew was turned upside down in March, 2020. More than a year of school and daycare closings and lingering uncertainty has been a wake-up call. For those who did not already know that child care is a lifeline for parents and the economy, it became abundantly clear during the pandemic. So clear that business organizations such as the Canadian Chamber of Commerce have joined long-time child-care advocates in identifying child care as key to our economic rebound, especially to power the return of women to the workforce.

This is why the 2021 federal election must be about child care – how we build it and how we pay for it. We are at a fork in the road when it comes to what we want post-pandemic Canada to look like in terms of creating the best foundation for our kids. Do we want a publicly funded child-care system that will support both children’s development and boost the economy? Or will tax credits in a patchwork market suffice?

For perhaps the first time, there is broad public and political consensus that we have a Canada-wide child-care crisis. But there is also, finally, a growing consensus that we know how to solve the crisis. We might be at a fork in the road, but we finally have a roadmap.

The federal election race kicked off with eight provinces and territories having inked child-care deals with the federal government, including three Conservative-led provinces – PEI, Manitoba and Saskatchewan. With \$30-billion on the table from Ottawa, provinces are thinking seriously about a new approach to child care: funding the services.

Here is what we know: Tax credits and deductions are policy tools favoured by many governments, but they do not build child-care spaces or reliable care systems. And the mostly market-driven child-care “system,” as it exists, does not work. In most parts of the country, especially in our major cities, child-care fees are unaffordable. Spaces are too few in number, especially in rural areas and lower-income neighbourhoods. The sector, which relies on the labour of lower-income, racialized women, suffers from a grinding workforce shortage driven by chronically low wages. Tax credits and deductions cannot solve these problems. We have tried that road for decades, and it has not brought us to the system we need today.

Here is what the pandemic has taught us: When there is no child care available, women leave the workforce en masse. Informal and unreliable arrangements are patched together. Children end up in less stable, less safe, far less educational situations. Child care is not only critical for parents to go to work, but also to go back to school or attend training and skills development programs so they can find work in the first place, which will be key for pandemic recovery.

The pandemic has also taught us that, with political will, a new kind of child-care system is possible. Just look at emergency child care offered to front-line workers in many provinces. The federal government has committed to increasing the number of child-care spaces within the nonprofit and public sectors because they reinvest their profits back into programs and staffing, which ultimately protects quality of care. The private sector has a very different, profit-driven agenda. We do not want what happened in our long-term care homes to happen in our child-care centres. Nonprofits and the public sector are well positioned to offer a variety of flexible, high-quality child-care choices that do not compromise quality of care, safety and working conditions.

Taxpayers who are concerned about our government finances can look at it this way: Decades of evidence from Quebec indicate that their child-care system increased that province’s GDP by 1.7 per cent while providing a return on investment to both levels of government, which offset their initial funding costs.

So when canvassers knock on your door this fall, ask them this about child care: What is their plan and how will it set our kids up for the best possible future? How will it make it easier for you to start a family and build a life, or for your grandchildren to do so? This country is at

a crossroads on child care, and the direction we take will be determined at the ballot box on Sept. 20.

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