

The key to Canada's economic recovery is obvious. Why isn't anyone talking about it? ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

QUEBEC CITY—Elise Paradis is baffled about why Canadian mothers aren't banging on the doors of their politicians to demand a daycare system like Quebec's.

For four decades, Paradis has witnessed how subsidized, regulated child care can dramatically change family dynamics and the shape of the workforce, and she hasn't just been a bystander.

These days, the 62-year-old heads up a regional network of more than 140 child-care providers, advocating on behalf of them in and around Quebec City. But she's seen child care from all sides, starting out as a child-care worker herself in 1979.

Back then, she recalls, mothers routinely chose to stay home with their kids mainly because the cost of going out to work was just too high. That calculation was turned on its head in 1997, when Pauline Marois, then the education minister in a Parti Quebecois government led by a frugal Lucien Bouchard, won support for subsidizing \$5-a-day child care for all four-year-olds in the province.

"We saw the mentality completely change," Paradis recalls in an interview in her home near the National Assembly in Quebec City.

Over the years, the policy has had its ups and downs. It was expanded to include younger children and infants, and the daily price paid by families has climbed modestly. Yes, there's a shortage of spaces right now, child-care workers need better pay, and advocates like Paradis say successive provincial governments have not invested enough. But the effect on the economy has been consistent: a decline in poverty, an increase in women in the workforce, and fewer mothers depending on social assistance, says Paradis.

But in a federal election campaign in which the Liberals are committing \$30 billion to implement the Quebec model in the rest of the country, and in which the Conservatives have a \$2.6-billion counter-proposal for refundable tax credits for child-care expenses, the role of child care in the economic recovery seems to be an aside.

Spending on child care is by far the biggest difference between the Liberals' fiscal policy and the Conservatives' approach.

But public opinion polls rank child care as a secondary driver of votes in this campaign at best, and it's certainly not top of mind when candidates knock on doors to solicit support. When Abacus Data asked potential voters which issues would determine where they cast their votes, only four per cent said "making child care more affordable" would be a factor.

In my interviews with candidates and voters in Ontario, Quebec and the Maritimes, child care comes up when asked, but often only when prompted.

It's really no wonder if you consider how child care has been framed in the campaign.

When the party leaders dove into that subject in the French-language debate on Wednesday night, they treated it in isolation.

For sure, they argued their points about how their platforms would benefit parents of young children. Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau accused Conservative Leader Erin O'Toole of robbing the provinces of billions in federal transfer payments that would create daycare spaces, cut costs to \$10 a day for families, and improve wages for child-care workers. O'Toole stressed that his tax credit approach would help low-income families in particular and he would figure out later how to compensate Quebec for the missing billions in funding that the provincial government has already negotiated with Ottawa under Trudeau. And NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh put a curse on all their houses, saying too little too late.

But the discussion about the benefits of child-care investment seems to fade from there. Just a few minutes earlier in that same debate, for example, the leaders were asked how they can resolve labour shortages that have sprung up across the country, hurting firms' abilities to recover from the pandemic and dragging us all down. To a person, they all talked about increasing immigration, training and skills.

What about women in the workforce?

As the pandemic made so painfully obvious, without reliable child care, mothers are less productive and have more trouble getting out from under the housework and into the paid economy. Child care — having a space available and knowing it's reliable, affordable and of good quality — makes all the difference.

"The government realized they couldn't open the economy if they couldn't keep daycares open," Paradis points out.

The federal budget estimates that a national child care program would add about 240,000 workers to the labour force. And since those workers are already here in Canada with Canadian credentials, integration into the labour force is seamless.

An in-depth study of the economic impact of investing in early childhood education by Deloitte chief economist Craig Alexander shows that serious investment in high-quality child care boosts economic growth, reduces poverty, enhances equality, and sets the younger generation on a path to take on the world.

But all those wider economic benefits from investing in child care are so obvious to Paradis that she is surprised the entire electorate isn't clamouring for more. Her own network certainly is.

Investing in child care is as close to a silver bullet for recovery as we can get, not just for moms but for workplaces short on labour, for fiscal sustainability and for equality of opportunity. Let's not lose sight of that.

Region: Canada ^[3]

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