

Coming up short in early childhood care, education [CA]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

"What we are now witnessing across the industrialized world can be fairly described as a revolution in how a majority of our children are being brought up. And to the extent that this change is unplanned and unmonitored, it could also be described as a high-stakes gamble with today's children and tomorrow's world." -- UNICEF Innocenti Report Card 8.

Crisis and opportunity. It is not every day that a government's plan to survive a confidence motion in the House of Commons would necessarily include a massive deficit.

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It is a chance to use fiscal levers to will Canadian society into a new direction. And it is a chance to do it in the name of creating jobs and retooling a staggering economy, a response to a global economic crisis, a mess clearly caused by someone else. It is an opportunity to revolutionize Canada.

Last Tuesday's federal budget was a buckshot of spending announcements and tax reductions. It may help hasten the end of the recession. More likely, it will cause inflation, and longer-term, reduce taxation and government revenue.

And in the end, the budget will be revolutionary. Regrettably so.

Hang on.

In the days following Governor-General Michaëlle Jean's decision in December to prorogue Parliament, the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre released *The Child Care Transition*, Innocenti Report Card 8.

Report Card 8 is a first attempt to evaluate and compare early childhood services in 25 OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries, toward establishing a set of international benchmarks for early childhood care and education.

Canada was tied for last with Ireland, having only met one of 10 benchmarks. Our North American partners fared better: Mexico and the U.S. met three.

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Notwithstanding our federal government's stance toward child care, Report Card 8 is clear about the need for you and me and policy-makers to come to grips with the fact a majority of the OECD's newest generation "are spending a large part of their early childhoods not in their own homes with their own families but in some form of child care."

And according to Report Card 8, about 80 per cent of the rich world's children aged three to six, and about 25 per cent of OECD children under three years of age are in some form of early childhood care and education.

In short, "out-of-home child care is a fact of life for ever more children at ever earlier ages and for ever longer hours" across industrialized nations surveyed.

Report Card 8 is also clear that the long-term outcomes of this "mass movement toward out-of-home child care" for our newest generation, for society, for the emerging world, evidenced by "a parallel revolution in understanding the importance of early childhood (that) has been quietly unfolding" in the area of neuroscientific research, rests in our response to this transition.

From a public policy perspective this is one issue for which the benefits of doing it well --and the costs of doing it poorly -- are well established by multidisciplinary research across the globe.

To me, good public policy regarding early childhood care and education is somewhat unique in that it can be supported by neuroscience, child development research and years of program evaluation.

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Good public policy on this front is also unique in that it does not involve a balancing of what is good for society against what is good for the

individual.

Cost-benefit analysis shows that taxpayer investments in quality child care and education yield future cost savings to the health, justice and education system, and social assistance, many times that of the investment.

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It is about moulding Canada's youngest citizens to be empathetic, confident, productive, fulfilled.

The report card concludes, "ultimately the issue of whether today's children will benefit or suffer from these changes will come down to the availability of effective parental leave and to the availability, affordability, and quality of early childhood services."

Crisis and opportunity.

- reprinted from Guelph Mercury

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