The promise of national child care [1]

Source: Rise Up! - A digital archive of feminist activism
Format: Fact sheet
Publication Date: 18 Nov 2021

AVAILABILITY
Access online [2]

EXCERPTS

The Promise of National Child Care...

November 20th is Children's Day, coming in 2021 almost exactly seven months after a budget announcement last April that the federal government would be providing more than $30 billion over five years to establish a national child care program (with ongoing funding of $9.2 billion a year). The budget announcement in April came as welcome, albeit long awaited, news. During the recent federal election, the future of these commitments was uncertain, but with the re-election of the Liberal government there appears to be a consensus that the election was a victory for a national system of early learning and child care.

It's been 37 years since the idea of a national child care program in Canada first received real consideration by a federal government. Although the issue of a national child care program had previously been raised by the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, it wasn't until the Pierre Trudeau government appointed a task force on child care in May 1984--led by Katie Cooke--that the issue found a place on the federal policy agenda. Months later, at the "women's debate" held as part of the 1984 federal election, the three major parties identified child care as a priority for the country.

In 1986, the task force on child care published its report, recommending the establishment of "complementary systems of child care and parental leave that are as comprehensive, accessible and competent as our health care and education systems" (p. 309 of .pdf). The then-Conservative government, however, did not act on the report's recommendations, having instead set up their own Special Parliamentary Committee on Child Care. The Special Committee's report was widely opposed for making recommendations that would do little to improve access to child care, and that would provide funding to for-profit providers.

Since the 1980s, there have been several false starts regarding a national child care strategy. The most recent major attempt occurred in 2004, when the Liberals signed bilateral agreements with the provinces to establish child care programs across the country. After an election loss, however, the Harper government cancelled the agreements, and parents were left with the $100 a month universal child care benefit—hardly a substitute for affordable, high-quality child care. Since then, progress had stalled…until the 2021 budget announcement.

While the federal government does not have control over child care—as a social program it falls to provincial jurisdiction— Ottawa can use its spending power to allocate money to the provinces with some conditions. So, as child care activists have been working tirelessly—in the media, on expert panels, in demonstrations, on social media, and in their lobbying efforts, and elsewhere—their goal has been to ensure that the federal government uses the spending power to facilitate programs that are "universal, affordable, inclusive, and high quality".

In other words, advocates of national child care have focused on these four concerns:

Universality: All families in Canada deserve access to child care regardless of their language, socio-economic status, racial background, immigrant status, culture, disability, and so on. The idea of universality implies that what's needed is investment in a child care system, rather than giving money directly to parents via tax credit. To this end, providing tax credits does not work to create new, accessible space, and also does little to address affordability. The principle of universality is consistent with the 1986 Cooke report, which put the provision of operational funding for licensed childcare at the centre of its recommendations.

Affordability: Child care fees should be affordable (or no cost) across the country. The principle of affordability means that the cost of child care should not be prohibitive or cause undue hardship for people who want to access it. Currently, child care is priced out of many families' reach--up to $1,774 a month in Toronto for infant care (based on data from 2019). In contrast, Quebec parents pay the lowest in the country--only $179 month for infant care--due to the cap on fees set by the province. It is notable that other places with provincially set fees, such as Manitoba and Prince Edward Island, while much more expensive than Quebec, still tend to be much more affordable than other jurisdictions. Affordability is critical to a national child care system.

Inclusiveness: A national child care system should ensure that services are flexible and provided with sufficient resources to welcome the needs of children with physical and/or mental disabilities. Existing child-care spaces are not necessarily accessible insofar as "structural issues such as operation hours, staffing, and professional role definition have contributed to the exclusion" of children with disabilities. An

inclusive system would ensure that children with disabilities have their needs met and that they are not excluded from the opportunities available to other children. Inclusivity also requires that resources be committed to culturally appropriate and responsive child care.

High Quality: Providing high quality child care has many components. Central among them is having "highly-skilled staff, with only a few children for every adult." Child care workers and early childhood educators are typically underpaid, receive few (if any) benefits, and work in poor conditions. The undervaluing of this labour has long meant that those engaged in the critical work of child care experience stress and burn out, affecting their ability to remain in their positions long-term.

Another critical component of providing high-quality child care is to make sure that programs are set up as public or not-for-profit, going forward. The federal government seems to support this approach, insofar as there have been federal commitments to work "with provinces and territories to support primarily not-for-profit sector child care providers to grow quality spaces across the country." This is particularly important as research has demonstrated time and again that for-profit child care does little to improve access or affordability, while having a negative effect on quality of care. Not-for-profit care is also associated with better outcomes relating to: "wages, working conditions, early childhood educator training, staff turnover and morale, compliance with regulations, staff harshness/sensitivity, staff/child ratios and group size."

In early July 2021, the first new child care agreements between provinces and the federal government were signed: British Columbia signed theirs first, and Nova Scotia followed soon after. These agreements heralded a serious new direction for early learning and childcare. They promised to fund a system of care, creating $10-a-day childcare by 2026 and to allocate spending dedicated to Indigenous child care, to transform wages and working conditions for early childhood educators, and to focus on the expansion of public and non-profit programs. By August, similar agreements had been signed with seven provinces and the Yukon Territory. In the wake of the election, advocates have been continuing to exert pressure to ensure that similar agreements are negotiated with the remaining provinces, and an agreement with Alberta was announced earlier this week. There are only a few more provinces (Ontario, New Brunswick) and territories to go.

As these remaining jurisdictions negotiate their bilateral agreements, it is critical that the pressure continues, and that progress is made. And while there is still a lot to be done, it is worth taking a moment to celebrate the possibility that this time—decades after the publication of the Cooke report—it might really happen.

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