


It took a crisis to solve a crisis: The how and why behind Canada's universal childcare plan ^[1]

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Source: University of Toronto

Format: Report

Publication Date: 6 Dec 2021

Attachment	Size
 Case study paper - It took a crisis to solve a crisis.pdf ^[2]	234 KB

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Excerpted from case study introduction

In alignment with tradition, Canada's Minister of Finance presented the 2021 Federal Budget in a pair of new shoes, and for the first time, they were high heels. On April 19, Canada's first female Finance Minister, Chrystia Freeland, unveiled a bold plan to bring universal, affordable childcare to all Canadians as part of her maiden budget. The decision represents a marked departure for the current Liberal government, which, since elected in 2015, has prioritized other family policies like child benefits. The shift in policy is so dramatic that it warrants this case study, in which I explain how and why childcare is now at the forefront of the federal institutional agenda after decades of inaction and outright failure.

First, it is crucial to explain the institutions, ideas, and interests behind why, for five years, the current Liberal government avoided taking meaningful action on childcare. Institutional restraints and ideological opposition impose significant barriers to the implementation of a national program. Furthermore, it is associated with a hefty price tag, and the federal government may have believed that the cost commitment did not justify the potential risks. In contrast, the institutional challenges associated with child benefits are substantially less. Their political return and short-term impact are more pronounced, with the related costs much lower. Consequently, the federal government opted for the path of least resistance by championing child benefits, a more politically-expedient and low-risk alternative to universal childcare.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic and recession have changed everything. In effect, it has been a focusing event that has produced new social and economic problems and exacerbated existing ones. Publicly-funded ELCC has emerged as a potential policy response to address the pandemic-incited crisis in childcare and the decline in labour force participation. Childcare is now recognized not only as a social issue but an economic one as well, in no small part thanks to the work of advocates, researchers, and decision-makers. Additionally, childcare was a winning idea in the context of a pandemic election called shortly after the plan was announced. In the last section of this paper, I apply the Multiple Streams Analysis framework to summarize the arguments and frame the policy puzzle in the language of policy studies.

Region: Canada ^[3]

Tags: policy analysis ^[4]

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