

# The view from the west [CA]<sup>[1]</sup>

Opinion, Winnipeg Free Press

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**Source:** Winnipeg Free Press

**Format:** Article

**Publication Date:** 26 Nov 2008

## AVAILABILITY

See text below.

## EXCERPTS

The federal Conservatives' "choice in child care" program is an oxymoron.

The government's decision to scrap the Liberals' \$5-billion national child-care and early-learning program immediately upon coming to office in 2006 and replace it with monthly \$100 cheques to parents for each child under six has slowed to a trickle new affordable, accessible and reliable child care in Canada.

Manitoba Family Services Minister Gord Mackintosh put it bluntly last April: "The withdrawal of robust federal support for child care in Canada was one of the biggest U-turns in modern-day social policy."

The U-turn has been devastating for parents, for children and for society. Although demand is growing rapidly, just 26,661 new day-care spaces were created in the Conservatives' first year, according to ChildCareCanada.org. By comparison, spaces increased by 50,831 annually between 2001 and 2004 and another 32,668 annually between 2004 and 2006, when provinces were awaiting federal matching dollars.

The respected charity Save the Children publishes an annual index rating on the prospects of children internationally. In contrast to previous years, Canada received a poor grade for the treatment of its children in 2007. After placing fifth in 2006, Canada plummeted to 25th.

Canada invests the equivalent of 25 cents for every \$100 of its gross domestic product in early childhood education, while most other developed nations invest up to \$2.

There is one huge exception to all this: Quebec. The Parti Québécois government created a universal \$5-a-day child-care program in 1998. By 2007, it was serving 364,572 children at a cost of \$1.8 billion and had raised its daily charge to just \$7.

New statistics show that Quebec's child-poverty rates have dropped by 50 per cent, school test scores have gone from among the lowest to the highest and the percentage of mothers in the workforce is also now the highest. Significantly, tax revenue from working mothers now covers 40 per cent of the program's cost.

Late last month, Parti Québécois Leader Pauline Marois received the inaugural award for excellence in advocacy at Toronto's Ryerson University from the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care.

Marois, who introduced the program as minister of education and family in Lucien Bouchard's administration, said the government believed it had to provide better reconciliation between work and family to stimulate job growth and fight the deficit. Quebec's child-care program is not statist, Marois emphasized. It follows a social development model and the main actors are the parents. "The entire milieu gets involved, including parents and municipalities, which oversee matters such as identifying possible sites and issuing necessary permits," she said. "Community groups also play a role as do banks and caisses populaires."

There is also Conservative-style "choice in child care" for parents who wish it, Marois continued. "To respond to all the choices of parents, a tax regime was set up that allowed any parent who wanted to keep their child at home to be able to deduct the equivalent costs of a day-care worker from their revenues."

The program is now a basic social service, she said. Quebecers regard child care "on an equal footing with issues such as health, education, road infrastructures and the environment."

Marois' enthusiasm is validated in large part by a new report on Quebec's universal child care released this month by the Institute for Research in Public Policy. Its author is Christa Japel, a special education and training professor at the Université du Québec à Montréal.

"In order to create better conditions for children at the start of their lives and to ensure that, as much as possible, all children have the same chances for success in life, a major investment of public funds is needed," Japel writes.

Problem behaviours, notably physical aggressiveness, hyperactivity and opposition, are observed especially frequently in children who

spend most of their preschool years in a vulnerable situation, she says.

"The duration of attendance at a child-care service has an impact on the development of the cognitive skills of all the children."

Quebec's plan still has a long way to go in terms of improving quality and reaching the most disadvantaged children, Japel continues. But she underlines there is no question that greater investment in early-childhood services avoids "the significant outlays in public funds associated with the consequences of a poor start in life."

One such significant outlay of public funds required to offset a poor start in life that springs to mind is the Conservative proposal -- perhaps now in limbo -- to sentence some 14-year-olds to life terms in adult penitentiaries.

Surely universal child care is cheaper.

- reprinted from the Winnipeg Free Press

**Region:** Quebec [2]

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**Source URL (modified on 27 Jan 2022):** <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/08/12/view-west-ca>

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