

The National Post and the Nanny State: Framing child care debate in Canada ^[1]

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Introduction

It is uncommon for Canadian citizens to get a sense that their country might be on the brink of achieving a significant social policy breakthrough. This is the situation we found ourselves in with regard to child care (Polanyi, 2005) during the minority Liberal government of Paul Martin, which, for a time, survived with the support of the left-leaning NDP. Of course, with the instability inherent in a minority government, no one could be certain how much progress would be made. However, many social policy analysts and activists felt in 2004-2005 that we were closer to a real child care initiative than we had been in many years. The first step was the announcement by the federal government of a modest (but significant) commitment of \$5 billion over five years, followed by the signing in 2005 of a series of agreements-in-principles, with all 10 provinces to establish the parameters of a would-be system.

In that context, an ideological struggle unfolded to shape the view of Canadians regarding the pros and cons of a child care system and the shape(s) it should take. It is thus pertinent to examine how a major Canadian newspaper dealt with this burning social policy issue. Canada has only two national newspapers, the moderately conservative Globe and Mail and the aggressively neo-conservative National Post. The latter published, on December 7, 8, and 9, 2004, a series of articles on the child care debate under the running theme of “the Nanny State.” To ensure the message was clearly understood by all, the National Post concluded this series on December 11 with an editorial subtly titled: “Say No to the Nanny State.”

In this commentary, I will first summarize the conservative arguments presented in the National Post to construct a clear picture of the position of the political right in Canada on this issue. I will then address a number of points made or ignored by this position: the need for an organized and structured system for the supply of services; the sole reliance on a (demand-side) tax credit; the wages and unionization of workers; the type of service delivery and governance (private, public, or non-profit) envisaged; the question of choices; and the potential impact for low-income families.

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