

Canada is showing that it's possible to have universal, affordable childcare. Is the UK brave enough to follow? ^[1]

If we treated this service as vital state infrastructure, it could make a huge difference to parents – and to the economy

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AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

Excerpts

You can't get much for £5.50 nowadays. A takeaway coffee and a muffin, maybe; a pint and a packet of crisps, outside London. But in parts of Canada, roughly that amount can buy you a day's childcare. Or it can, at least, if you can find a nursery place.

The country is now three years into a post-pandemic social experiment, offering parents heavily (and expensively) subsidised childcare for what is by envious British standards a staggeringly cheap C\$10 a day. The idea is that ultimately this multibillion-dollar state programme will pretty much pay for itself, thanks to the boost in GDP expected to be provided by more parents going out to work. But arguably, its biggest insight has been treating childcare less as some kind of perk the state sadly can't afford right now and more as what Chrystia Freeland, Canada's deputy prime minister, calls "social infrastructure": an essential part of the national plumbing, like commuter trains or fast broadband or any other thrusting great multibillion-pound building project we are wearily prepared to believe will ultimately be worth it.

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Back in Britain, on the other hand, a survey from the campaign group Working Families this week found one in three parents of under-11s had to cut their working hours because they either can't find or can't afford childcare. Another quarter were relying on someone else in the family – a grandparent or a partner – sacrificing paid work in order to help out. Though ministers are now trying to honour a Conservative pledge of 30 hours a week free childcare for children over nine months by next autumn, the education secretary, Bridget Phillipson, says bluntly that it "won't be the sunlit uplands promised by the Tories", arguing that her predecessors failed to put in the groundwork or the cash to make it a reality. It's probably not entirely a coincidence that deaths in this country are now outstripping births for the first time (outside a pandemic) since the 1970s. Who could blame millennials for going on baby strike, when they see colleagues with kids hanging on at work by their fingernails?

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Two years ago, for the women's magazine *Grazia*, I interviewed a politician who seemed to get that growth is about people, as well as bricks and mortar. She scoffed at ministers' fondness for posing in hard hats and hi-vis jackets to talk about raising productivity, pointing out that for many women the single biggest barrier is good childcare. She talked, too, about how the consequences of that reverberate through generations: her own mother had, she thought, retired earlier than she otherwise would have because managing work, her own elderly parents and helping out with the grandchildren was too much. If you haven't guessed by now, that politician was Rachel Reeves, and she was very keen to talk about how a woman in the Treasury might see growth a little differently than all the men who had gone before. If so, then now is the time to show it.

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