

We need national daycare [CA] ^[1]

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Source: Montreal Gazette

Format: Article

Publication Date: 31 Oct 2007

AVAILABILITY

See text below.

EXCERPTS

A national system of daycare would come as a relief to Canada's working parents and a boon to the economy. But it is still something the Conservative government cannot bring itself even to contemplate.

Instead, the Conservatives are clinging to the wreck of their 2006 campaign promise of using tax credits to persuade employers and not-for-profit organizations to set up child-care centres across the country. For months after its 2006 electoral victory, the Conservatives continued to say that tax credits would create 125,000 child-care spaces over the next five years.

But thanks to a report by the Globe and Mail based on documents obtained through the Access to Information Act, we now know that in fact companies and other groups did not believe that the tax credit would "create an adequate incentive" for them to create new child-care spaces.

Responding to a government survey, companies said child care was not "their line of business" and they felt that daycare was too expensive and complicated for smaller companies to organize and operate.

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The child-care benefit of \$100 a month per preschool child introduced by the Conservatives in lieu of a national day-care network covers barely a fraction of the real cost of providing care.

Covering the real cost did not in any case seem to be the point of the benefit. Its message was more ideological: Taxed within a two-earner family, albeit for the lower earner, the benefit really is designed for families with a stay-at-home spouse.

Whatever the Conservatives' thinking on the proper role of mothers, a national network of child care would benefit Canadian women. Kevin Daly, the Goldman Sachs economist whose research, published this spring, determined that gender equality can substantially boost a country's GDP, says that most women want both an independent income and children.

In countries where women find it difficult to have both, they will choose - and not always the way governments want. In Japan, for instance, because women have been expected to leave work once they marry and have children, women have postponed childbearing. The result is that Japan's birth rate has plunged.

Speaking this fall in Britain, Daly said that in Scandinavian countries women are supported by the state through job protection, paid leaves, state-paid childcare and child allowances and as result, they have more children and at a younger age.

It is an oddly fortuitous result, given that Sweden's child-care policy was never geared to encouraging a higher birth rate. From the beginning, it has had two goals: to allow parents to combine family life with work or study and to support and encourage children's development and learning.

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Canada is not any different from Sweden or Britain or France. It is a developed economy with a rapidly aging workforce and a low birth rate. One of the results of state-supported child care in other jurisdictions is a higher birth rate. This is also true in Quebec.

The obvious solution is for Canada to follow suit and set up a national, state-subsidized system of child care. What is standing in the way is a government wrongly persuaded that state-subsidized care is in some obscure way morally suspect.

On the contrary, what is questionable is the government's attachment to solutions that don't work, that no one wants and that ultimately shortchange children, their parents and the economy.

- reprinted from the Montreal Gazette

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