

Choosing work... and family [CA] ^[1]

Author: Bagnall, Janet

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EXCERPTS

Last month's census data confirmed several long-standing and problematic trends: a lower-than-ever birth rate, a higher-than-ever median age of nearly 40, with the West younger than the East mainly because easterners have moved west to work in the oil boom.

Immigration continues to be held out as a kind of instant fix to these problems. Bring in enough young, well-educated immigrants, it's argued, and they will be able to keep the economy running, generating enough money to pay old-age pensions and provide social services as the baby-boom generation retires.

But immigrants by themselves cannot make up for Canada's aging population. They arrive for the most part already in their 30s and it does not take long for their birth rate to fall to the same low level as native-born Canadians.

Canada has always had the option of trying to encourage a higher birth rate to maintain its population, yet only Quebec has gone down that road.

Canada by and large does not provide inexpensive or accessible child care. Canadian parents, excluding Quebecers, pay on average twice as much for child care as Europeans. Barely one in five single Canadian parents has access to subsidized care.

Despite the fact that Quebec's system of generous state support for parents has proved successful in raising its birth rate, other provinces and the federal government have all pointedly -- and wrongly -- ignored it as an example to follow.

Not only does state support work in Quebec, it has proved its worth in most places where it is tried. In a study published this spring, economist Kevin Daly of Goldman Sachs dismissed as a myth the idea that women in developed countries must choose either to work or have children.

According to a report in the Economist, Daly's study compared levels of women's labour-force participation and family size country by country. He found that in societies that made it easier for women to combine paid employment with children -- Sweden, for example -- the rate of women's employment and the birth rate were both high, although not among the highest in the world, of course.

Large numbers of women would work, or work more, if affordable child care were available, Daly said. Yet many countries make it nearly impossible for women to combine work and family.

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Canada has a record number of people nearing retirement, according to the census. The number of Canadians aged 55 to 64 jumped 28 per cent between 2001 and 2006, to 3.7 million. By comparison, the overall population grew only 5.4 per cent over the same period.

In Canada, much of the political opposition to subsidized child care and generous tax breaks to working mothers is ideological.

Opposition to it has been couched in recent years in terms of offering "choice." But in fact, the choice is between a small cash supplement and a functional, fully funded system of dependable care.

It's not hard to guess which will help boost women's employment and the birth rate. Canada will need all the help it can get to weather the coming economic crunch -- even if it means funding child care.

- reprinted from the Montreal Gazette

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