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Cashing in on kids [CA] [1]

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EXCERPTS

Lynne Wannan is hard to ignore. The petite policy analyst and child care expert from Australia has a definite gift - getting people to listen to what she has to say.

In the age of 30-second sound bites, this is indeed an exceptional skill. During a forum in St. John's last week she was riveting with her clear, concise, no-nonsense, yet passionate message. Of course, that delightful Aussie accent didn't hurt.

That doesn't mean that what she had to say was all peaches and cream. In fact, her message, while powerful, was downright scary. It was a tale of government policy gone awry, and of corporations reaping millions and millions in profits - not from mining gold, nickel or oil, but from child care.

Wannan, chairwoman of the National Association of Community Based Children's Services in Australia, was in St. John's as part of a Canadian tour and as a guest of the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada.

She has been sharing information about child care, Australian- style - which in the majority of cases means big-box, corporate child care centres bursting at the seams with toddlers and pre- schoolers.

Child care in Australia is big business. It seems unfathomable that the early learning and care of a country's smallest and most vulnerable citizens would be delivered by shareholder companies whose main job is to make money for their investors. We would never accept such a scenario in the K-12 school system, yet somehow it is acceptable for children under the age of five. Canada, too, has a mix of private and public, not-for-profit child care centres, but as of yet we do not have huge commercial chains.

"I wanted to come to Canada," she told about 75 people gathered to hear her speak of the lessons learned from Down Under. "Australia has got it wrong."

She says shareholder companies, those trading on the stock market, have no place in child care. "Shareholder companies have to increase their profits. That's why they exist."

And they are doing this by reducing costs.

Australia's child care nightmare started in 1991, when the federal government changed its funding rules, making fee subsidies available to individual Australian families rather than to the centres or services. These subsidies had previously been available only to the not-for-profit sector. At the same time, it stopped issuing capital grants to the non-profit, community-based centres. They stopped growing, while corporate child care grew like wildfire - all the way to the bank with millions in public funds.

The big corporate chains started out small and are merging, getting bigger. For example, one Australian child care corporation is worth more than $700 million, has 900 child care centres and represents 23 per cent of the entire centre-based child care sector in Australia.

Wannan says Australia has lost the community building part of its child care, and the government has a big problem on its hands. She worries child care in Australia is no longer affordable, nor is it sustainable, especially when the driving force is shareholder profit.

Wannan's message is timely. The Canadian government will enhance child care by $5 billion over the next five years, and if the federal and provincial governments really stick to their QUAD principles - quality, universally inclusive, accessible and developmental programming - we would have a community-based public service.

Will Canada be tough and keep the profiteers out of child care? With a federal election around the corner, this is one promise Canadians should be demanding of their prime minister before it's too late and Canada goes down the Australian child care path.

- reprinted from St. John's Telegram
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