

National child care: Important part of fight against child poverty ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Fifteen years ago, at the urging of then NDP Leader Ed Broadbent, the Parliament of Canada committed itself to eradicating child poverty in this country by the year 2000. But, now, in 2005, there are 1,065,000 Canadian children living in poverty.

One of the many factors contributing to this sorry situation is the absence of access to affordable, quality child care across Canada. In 2003, the Organization on Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) did an intensive review of early childhood policies and services in Canada. It found that, in comparison to most OECD countries, Canada fared rather poorly.

While early childhood education and care is not primarily an anti-poverty program, it must be an important part of any serious plan to fight child poverty. Child care gives needed support to vulnerable families. Where child care is available and affordable mothers are able to seek and obtain employment or training for skilled jobs. Employment, of course, is crucial for lowering the incidence of poverty in our society.

Sault Ste. Marie MP Tony Martin is to be commended for taking a leading role in the campaign for a national early childhood education program across Canada.

A public opinion poll conducted in late 2004 showed that a majority of Canadians support the establishment of a national child care program. Seventy-four per cent of Canadians favour federal spending for child care throughout our country.

The same poll indicated that 47 per cent of Canadian parents were finding it difficult to get high quality, affordable child care for their children. More than 70 per cent of Canadian kids, aged 3 to 5, have mothers who work in the paid labour force. Many of those parents need good child care programs to enable them to continue working outside the home to support their families. The federal and provincial governments must respond to this obvious need for early childhood education programs.

In designing a national program, the federal Liberal Government must ensure that new additional child care spaces are provided by qualified not-for-profit agencies. Public funds are just too tight to allow part of the money allocated for child care to be siphoned off as private shareholders' profits. If the Government allows private sector for-profit companies to bid on child care contracts, it will be very difficult to prevent the for-profit sector from gaining a dominant position in Canadian child care.

International trade agreements would prevent governments from denying private foreign child care corporations the right to bid for contracts. Inevitably, that would result in profits being made at the expense of quality care for kids.

Trade rules would also prevent governments in Canada from specifying the qualifications for child care workers or setting high standards for the licensing of child care institutions. Private for-profit child care companies might put their obligations to their shareholders ahead of quality standards for child care, as appears to be the case in Australia. For instance, companies would likely cut to the bare minimum numbers and qualifications for child care staffing.

Outside of Quebec today, over 90 per cent of early childhood education workers in Canada earn about half of the national average income for all occupations. Despite having a higher level of education than the general population, early childhood education assistants only earn about \$19000 per annum.

Child care workers who care for and interact with our kids daily deserve higher recognition, respect and compensation for their work. Theirs is very important work. They have a direct impact on our children's experiences and development.

Public spending on early childhood education helps to improve the lot of children and their parents. And all Canadians would benefit from a truly national child care program as well. Obviously, our society would benefit if single parents could obtain employment, rather than being caught in the welfare trap as they care for their kids at home, probably in poor living conditions. The whole country would benefit by ensuring that children get better starts in life, so they can grow up to be responsible, productive adults.

A universal public early childhood education program will ensure proper standards are established across our country. All children should

benefit from the opportunity to obtain high quality care regardless of their parents' incomes or the kids' individual abilities or backgrounds.

Canada needs a publicly funded, national, affordable, high quality early childhood education program that is not undermined by opening it up to corporate interests. That's what Tony Martin is striving for. If he is successful, all Canadians will benefit in the long run.

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