The 'Tiny Tot' brigade [CA] [1]

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Source: Toronto Star
Format: Article
Publication Date: 24 Apr 2005

AVAILABILITY
See text below.

EXCERPTS

In the time that she has been lobbying for a national child care program, Vancouver's Rita Chudnovsky has watched her long black hair turn silver. Nova Scotia's Sharon Irwin has become a grandmother. Martha Friendly in Toronto - a young researcher when she joined the effort - now has a 25-year-old daughter in graduate school.

For a few months this year, these child care champions, together with hundreds of others from across the country, could taste victory in their decades-long fight. But now, with the Martin government precariously close to collapse, their dream is in trouble.

For a generation, they have lobbied relentlessly for a national system of child care that's accessible and affordable for all Canadian children and families. They believe that child care is the great equalizer, that it can set all kids on a path to a healthy and successful life and build strong communities. They want it to be non-profit, and they want it to be funded and regulated by government. They have pressured and persisted while six successive federal governments have all promised &emdash; and failed &emdash; to give them what they want.

Earlier this year, it seemed as though their dream was about to come true. Desperate to shore up support for his minority government, Prime Minister Paul Martin's February budget earmarked $5 billion over five years for 250,000 child care spaces. The buzz from the backrooms was that the provinces and territories were close to overcoming decades of discord on how to spend the money.

If the federal budget is passed, Ontario stands to gain some $266 million in child care cash this year alone. For Toronto that translates into funding for as many as 2,000 new daycare spots - a dent in the list of about 10,000 kids waiting for licensed child care. A Liberal defeat would mean the end of the $5 billion promise and years more lobbying.

It's enough to make a grown woman weep.

"We're so close, I just can't imagine being this close again," says Monica Lysack, executive director of the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada, a national lobbying group. "I feel I've been waiting my entire professional life for this moment. If it slips away, I don't know how I'll carry on."

In 1971, Martha Friendly had just finished working on one of the first evaluations of the American Head Start program in Princeton, New Jersey, when her husband Michael got a professor's position at York University in Toronto.

Friendly stayed home with her infant son Ethan for the first year, but it was lonely and depressing. It was time to get a job, and her husband suggested she enrol Ethan at the campus day care, a parents' co-op. She loved the spirit of the place, how it captured the freedom and the joy of childhood.

"I visited the centre and I remember telling Michael, `It's great, the kids were all running around naked,' " Friendly laughs. One of Friendly's friends and child care "co-conspirators" from the York days is Laurel Rothman, a social worker from Pittsburgh, whose husband Mitch also came to teach at York. Rothman had just fired her neighbourhood babysitter for leaving her 16-month-old son Reuven in a stroller on the sidewalk while she went into a store.

"The stigma of choosing child care and going out to work was still there for people who had a choice, and we clearly did," recalls Rothman, who worked for the Children's Aid Society and other agencies serving kids in the 1970s. "But if women were going to be equal in the labour force, then child care was a must."

In British Columbia, sisters Rita Chudnovsky and Gyda Chud were fighting for the same thing.
Chudnovsky spent the 1970s completing her Masters' degree in Education and teaching child, family and community studies in Vancouver. She and Chud &emdash; who was teaching early childhood education at Vancouver Community College &emdash; helped found what's now known as the Coalition of Child Care Advocates of B.C.

When Chud's son Julius was born in 1978, she experienced first-hand how access to good quality child care was determined by luck and affluence. She also noticed that many child care workers had to hold several jobs to make ends meet. She made it her life's work to win them respect and better pay.

On the East Coast, Sharon Irwin found herself opening a day care in Glace Bay after discovering that her 4-year-old son Brendan wasn't keen on spending the winter playing on the beach. When a mother came to the centre with her autistic son, begging for care so she could work, Irwin stumbled into child care for the disabled.

"Here was this woman with a job opportunity in a community where jobs are scarce. I just couldn't say no," Irwin recalls.

Many of these women met for the first time in Winnipeg in 1982, at a national child care conference. They realized they had been working towards the same goal, and needed to join forces to turn their passion into political reality.

Monica Lysack, then a 21-year-old early childhood education graduate from Saskatchewan, was there. She went for a flannel board workshop and found instead a group of feminist radicals plotting to change the world through child care. It was Lysack's first taste of what was rapidly becoming a pan-Canadian pressure group. Everyone seemed so smart, sophisticated and principled, she recalls.

"I remember hearing Martha Friendly speak and thinking `I want to be just like her when I grow up,'" says Lysack. "When I met these sisters &emdash; Rita Chudnovsky and Gyda Chud &emdash; I thought `I want to meet their mother.'

"I discovered advocacy and I was hooked," says Lysack, now 43 and executive director of the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada &emdash; a national lobby group born out of the Winnipeg conference.

There was a consensus that child care had to be just like health care: It had to be universal, and it had to be publicly regulated and non-profit to ensure high quality. That meant a publicly funded, national program (first recommended in the 1971 Royal Commission on the Status of Women but never implemented). They needed to convince Ottawa to put up billions of dollars, and the provinces &emdash; which are responsible for social programs &emdash; to spend it wisely.

"I think it was a real turning point for many of us," Chudnovsky says, "and it's where the beginning of many lifelong friendships were forged."

They realized the fight would take a whole new set of skills. Women who knew how to teach a pre-schooler to "play nice" or run research projects on early learning suddenly had to learn how to produce policy papers and to lobby politicians in provincial legislatures and on Parliament Hill.

They were quick studies. During the1984 federal election, in a nationally televised Women's Debate, they won pledges from all three party leaders that, if elected, they would introduce a national child care program.

When Brian Mulroney formed the government, he appointed a daycare task force that travelled the country for public input. Advocates packed the hearings, published recommendations and pushed the politicans to deliver.

"The late 1980s were heady days," says Rothman, who by then was working for the Canadian Auto Workers setting up the first after-hours child care centre for assembly line shift-workers.

In July 1988, the Conservatives introduced Canada's first child care act. But many in the movement were wary. They said the Conservative plan to create 200,000 new child care spots fell woefully short of the demand for 1 million spaces, failed to impose national standards and allowed federal subsidies to fund for-profit daycares.

Many members cheered when the election was called in October that year and the "flawed" child care act died on the order paper.

Hope was renewed in 1993 when Jean Chrétien's Liberals promised to fund 150,000 new child care spaces in their infamous campaign Red Book. But in hindsight, Lloyd Axworthy, the former Liberal minister responsible for the child care file, says delivering on the promise was an impossible task because it required a majority of provinces.

"Child care got caught up in the federal-provincial mix-master," recalls Axworthy, now president of the University of Winnipeg.

However, as the women were losing political battles, mainstream thinking was catching up. Evidence started pouring in from medical researchers and social scientists that children's earliest experiences were much more important than most people believed. Suddenly child care wasn't just about helping women work outside the home &emdash; it was about the health and development of the population, and economic competitiveness.

With new interest in child care from many quarters, Ottawa took baby steps in the early 2000s with two federal-provincial-territorial agreements that dedicated money to early childhood development and child care. But there was still no commitment to a national vision.

"Because our work over the last quarter of a century has been from the margins to the mainstream," says Chudnovsky, "we have understood that we have had to support each other, that we have to celebrate the small victories, that we have to find a way to have fun and build friendships because that's what's kept it going to a large degree."

"People who stick with a topic such as this for 30 years have to maintain a hopefulness," adds Irwin. "I'm an old fire dog. When the bell rings, I still jump on the truck."

The bell rang again during last year's federal election. Paul Martin's Liberals pledged $5 billion for child care and, in consultation with day care advocates, made it a key plank in their re-election campaign. The Liberals trumpeted the so-called "QUAD" principles of quality, universality, accessibility and developmental enrichment as a strong foundation. All they needed was an agreement with the provinces and territories on how to spend the money.

The prospect of a national agreement - one that would include commitments to future spending - suddenly seemed tantalizingly close. Last

November, the child care lobby met again at a national conference in Winnipeg. They were back where it all began in 1982, and the mood was exhilarating. Federal Social Development Minister Ken Dryden was there, and he had a message. He knew he'd have trouble forcing provinces like Alberta and B.C. to fund only non-profit day care, and he warned the lobby not to let their push for a perfect system derail his efforts to woo the provinces.

Dryden was also trying to win agreement from the provinces that they would implement plans, with goals and timetables, so that Ottawa could measure progress.

In February, when Dryden met with his federal and territorial counterparts in Vancouver, he faced stiff opposition from Alberta.

After the Vancouver meeting ended without an agreement, child care boosters said "no deal was better than a bad deal," mostly because they believed Dryden had time to bring the provinces to heel.

But today, in the wake of Martin's dramatic televised appeal for time, they are moderating their message. They fear their best chance at a national day care deal may be slipping through their fingers.

If Stephen Harper's Conservative Party forms the next government, child care will mean tax credits.

"I'm preparing myself," Friendly says, the words catching in her throat, "to see this fall apart."

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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