

High taxes in Europe buy better child care [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Some high-end cars now come equipped with backseat televisions. I'm sure it's just a matter of time before the backseat TV becomes a North American staple, thereby providing our kids with exactly what they need — even more television.

Over in Europe, personal consumption isn't quite so advanced. One reason is that Europeans pay significantly higher taxes, leaving them less money for personal indulgences. So, by the standards we judge things here, Europeans are worse off than we are.

Always left out of this calculation, of course, is what the Europeans get for their taxes. Among other things, they get some pretty wonderful programs for their children.

In most European countries, children as young as 2 years old are enrolled in government-sponsored early childhood education programs in which they experience day-long activities involving music, art, story-telling, outdoor exploration — all aimed at stirring curiosity and a zest for learning. The programs, held in bright, cheerful facilities with lots of playground space, are so popular that attendance is nearly universal.

In a sense, you could say that the Europeans, by going the high-tax route, have opted for early childhood programs, while we in North America, by insisting on low taxes, have opted for backseat TV.

It's a choice that many Canadians may want to reconsider, and may soon have the chance to, with a debate shaping up over Ottawa's plans to create a national child care program.

It's hard to imagine that Canadians wouldn't like the kind of early childhood programs that exist in Europe. Who wouldn't want something like that for their child and the children in their community?

But a national child care program doesn't fit with the fierce anti-tax, anti-government agenda that business and the right have been encouraging in North America for the past two decades.

They've effectively created a mindset here that automatically resists the establishment of any new government program, even one for our own children.

This has left working parents scrambling to come up with private arrangements, and turned child care mostly into a low-cost, low-frill service operating out of basements and other locations where nobody else would want to spend the day.

That could change. In the federal election last June, the Liberals promised a national child care program and recently Ottawa has been trying to work out a deal with the provinces. There are lots of unresolved issues — whether there will be adequate funding and national standards — but Canada seems closer to a national child care program than it's ever been.

This has provoked a backlash from right-wing commentators, who are eager to keep Canada on a low-tax, low-service treadmill like our neighbour to the south.

So, for instance, Globe and Mail columnist Margaret Wente last week dismissed the idea that a national child care program could offer any benefits for children: "Half a zillion studies show that who minds the kids in early life makes virtually no difference to how they turn out."

Half a zillion studies show that? Actually, does even one credible study show that?

As child development experts Jack Shonkoff and Deborah Phillips wrote in *From Neurons To Neighbourhoods*, a book published by the U.S. National Academy of Science: "the positive relation between child care quality and virtually every facet of children's development that has been studied is one of the most consistent findings in development science."

Wente implies that the current push for a national child care program in Canada is the work of the "day-care lobby," and she tosses around the term as if what we're dealing with here is a powerful set of interests not unlike the oil or tobacco lobby.

What we're actually dealing with here is a group of committed women who've put endless hours of their time for years into championing a cause that offers little or no personal gain.

But it's not too late to stop this powerful daycare juggernaut. If you don't, your child could end up in a program with art, music and story-telling — not just flipping channels in the backseat.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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