

Tories take us for a ride in their "little red wagon" [CA-ON]^[1]

Author: Landsberg, Michelle

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EXCERPTS

There's a seismic shift happening in Canada. From Nova Scotia to British Columbia, serious child care for all is on the agenda - high quality child care, otherwise known as early childhood development. In Ontario, however, our government has still got its thumb in its mouth as it toddles along, pulling its metaphorical "little red wagon".

Let me explain. The acclaimed Early Years study by Dr. Fraser Mustard and the Hon. Margaret McCain, commissioned by the provincial government and delivered two years ago this spring, stirred attention across the country for powerful ideas about children's learning. The very best beginning - if we are to raise healthy, socially gifted and intellectually agile youngsters - includes universal access to enriched, educational, regulated child care.

Study after study ---the University of Toronto's is just the latest - affirms that society gets back at least \$2 in benefits for every \$1 spent on good child care. A terrific day care can erase the disadvantages of poverty. UNICEF, the U.N. children's agency, calls it both economically sound and morally imperative.

The European Union urges that its members spend 1 per cent of GDP on enhancing child care.

Ford and I.B.M. in the U.S. have launched massive child care programs for their employees.

Quebec's dramatic introduction of \$5 a day child care galvanized Canadians' attention. Manitoba and British Columbia have both recently mandated affordable, universally accessible, publicly funded child care.

The federal government announced a \$2.2 billion Early Childhood Development Initiative that will give Ontario \$844 million over 5 years.

There is, in short, absolutely no argument for inaction and no excuse to stall.

Yet Ontario's much-touted Early Years programs are mired in confusion. For month after month Ontario held on to its federal money - \$114 million this year - and refused to spend it, while steadily eroding publicly-funded day care by 15 per cent.

The Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care and the Canadian Union of Public Employees recently completed a 10-location tour of Ontario, holding workshops for child care workers and public forums for parents. In Niagara, Kingston, Windsor, Peterborough, Ottawa, Sudbury, Thunder Bay, Toronto, Durham and Waterloo, the tour heard, over and over again, about unendurably long waiting lists for subsidized spaces, the need for extended hours, the plight of child care workers earning poverty-level wages. Arguably our most valuable workers, those who tend babies and toddlers earn about the same as parking lot attendants.

In the heart of the richest and supposedly most advanced province, day care funding is in the stone age. In Toronto alone, 24,000 children are on waiting lists for licensed day care. The tour heard heart-breaking stories about single mothers struggling to stay in the work force, with their minimum wage barely covering the cost of regulated care.

And these were the boom years, the years when surpluses rolled in and the Tories boasted of overflowing coffers.

Now the Harris government has finally announced how it will spend the federal money. Some excellent projects will benefit, but not a penny will go to day care, the very bedrock of early childhood development. And the Tory habit of cronyism, it seems, has delayed and derailed the creation of the infrastructure for Early Years projects. In many of the 37 health districts, citizen committees have already hired experts for short-term co-ordinator jobs.

Recently, they were quietly ordered to re-open the hiring. John Baird, Children's Minister, sent staff to sit on the hiring committees. In Muskoka, for example, the committee had already chosen a highly qualified candidate. Then it was forced to interview an unqualified assistant, out of a job when her Tory cabinet minister boss resigned.

What a farce this government makes of democracy. The pork-barreling and Politbureau strong-arming make backwoods Alabama look like ancient Athens.

Last winter, I carefully read the ON booklet - dim-witted government propaganda, paid for by you and me - which explained (I swear) that "the image of Ontario's Promise for children is a little red wagon". The adult, you see, pulls the wagon when the road is bumpy, until the child is strong enough to take over.

The whole world is spending serious thought and money, investing in childhood development. But Ontario is trundling along with its little wagon full of empty images and hollow words, spilling a few goodies for its friends along the way - but careful not to dispense one red

penny for real, accessible, day care.

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