

International perspectives: Canada- A brave campaign for state provision ^[1]

Author: Penn, Helen

Source: Nursery World

Format: Article

Publication Date: 10 May 2010

AVAILABILITY

Read online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

Canada is a country where childcare is low on the political agenda. In the UNICEF-IRC ranking of the well-being of young children in rich nations, published last year, Canada came bottom of the list, along with Ireland, with a ranking of 1 out of 10, because its childcare provision was so bad, and there was no coherent national policy to promote early education or childcare. (The UK was ranked 5 out of 10.)

Canada is a federal country, so one of the difficulties has always been the financial and legal relationships between the government and the different provinces of Canada. The provinces are very different from one another in their attitudes and policies. For instance, oil-rich Alberta has a very right-wing administration, and a thriving private sector childcare market. Ontario, which includes the buzzing city of Toronto, is traditionally more liberal, and is trying to extend its school system downwards to provide care and education for all children from the age three.

French-speaking Quebec has a more universal-type childcare system. It publicly funds services so parents pay only C\$7 (4.50 pounds) a day. Childcare in Quebec has expanded very rapidly, and women have returned to work in large numbers. But much of the care is provided by childminders, and all the research suggests that quality is far from optimal, partly because the funds haven't gone into the kinds of training and development programmes that raise quality. Quality has not matched quantity.

In the prairie provinces of Saskatchewan and Manitoba, the large, disaffected indigenous population is especially vulnerable. This is the generation which, as in Australia, was taken away from their families and brought up in residential or boarding schools, with the result that they no longer speak their native language, and are culturally disorientated. For them and their children, compensatory policies are a big issue.

HUNG PARLIAMENT

There is currently a hung parliament in Canada, and a far rightwing Conservative government just holds on to office. So bringing some coherence to early education and care, and having some national targets and funding, is an unlikely scenario. The prime minister, Stephen Harper, takes the view that the family is the best place to bring up children, and that childcare is not really necessary for most families.

During his term of office Mr Harper has cut federal budgets for childcare and reallocated the money to increase family benefits - but only by a small amount. There will be an election soon in Canada, where the erosion of an already poor system of childcare is expected to be an issue.

Because it had tighter banking regulation than the UK, Canada didn't experience economic collapse and is not in dire financial straits. It can afford to develop early education and care, but chooses, at the moment, not to do so.

OPTIMISM AND ENERGY

How do you keep pushing for what you believe in early education and care, when the outlook is bleak and the likelihood of change is minimal? To my surprise, there is a vigorous advocacy movement for early education and care in Canada, full of optimism and energy. It is inspired by provision in European nations, especially the Nordic countries (9 or 10 out of 10 on the UNICEF rankings).

I recently attended the national policy forum of the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada (CCAAC) in Ottawa to hear discussions on tactics and strategies for the coming government elections.

CCAAC is a remarkable association. Its members are drawn from across Canada and come from many different kinds of organisations - childcare workers from non-profit or community nurseries (the main form of childcare in Canada), parent groups, unions, charities and social enterprise organisations, people working in government at a provincial level in health, education and social services, and academics and lecturers from universities and colleges.

Some of the 40 or so people who were mandated to attend had been working in the field a long time, and were seasoned campaigners, but there were plenty of younger faces as well. It would be difficult to think of any umbrella group in the UK that could bring together such a diverse group of people.

The meeting was sponsored by the unions, and the women officers from the trade unions were especially impressive. A number of unions have full-time workers whose job it is to promote policies on childcare and early education. They have a good overview of the issues.

The level of discussion at the policy forum was inspiring. Many of the representatives had been working together for some time, and there was a warm camaraderie and feeling of mutual support - lots of funny jokes and raucous laughter, but also serious discussion, sensitively handled by the facilitator Morna Ballatyne from the Public Service Alliance of Canada.

HONEST APPRAISAL

The delegates were very honest in their appraisal of their position. They were not interested in showcasing their own work, which is what so often happens at meetings where different groups come together, and they were prepared to set aside vested interests if there was likely to be a campaigning advantage.

It was a significant meeting of CCAAC, because they were debating a shift in their policy of promoting community childcare initiatives to a position supporting state-provided early education and care. Some of the most stalwart supporters of community nurseries stood up and confessed how tired they were of being volunteers, sitting on management committees, juggling funds and keeping afloat.

What was once a labour of love and an expression of personal commitment to a belief that parents should be actively involved and share as much as possible in the daily activities of a community nursery, had become too burdensome to continue. They still believed parents had an important role to play, but they no longer felt parents should have to take on the whole responsibility for organising childcare. Nor did they want to see a for-profit sector, especially not commercial chains, who provided what they called 'robot childcare'.

Their long-held view has been that it is wrong to make a profit out of the needs and vulnerabilities of women and children. Canada provides a national health service which is highly regarded nationally and internationally, so why not national funding for early education and care?

UK ELECTION

Visiting Canada raised many questions for me, especially in view of the elections here. It is hard to remember back to the 1980s and 1990s, when you felt you had to justify yourself in order to be a working mother. Current Tory policies here sound not unlike Stephen Harper's promotion of family values in Canada.

The Labour party, since 1997, has certainly shifted attitudes and made work for mothers respectable. Childcare now seems a normal arrangement, but at a price. Childcare might be more available now, but many mothers regret being forced back to work early and paying astronomical fees for childcare.

Nursery schools, the very best of our provision, are being closed down. Nursery education may be free for three-year-olds, but a majority of it takes place in private premises. (Childcare providers are not even required to provide good or even any outside space, yet this was once regarded as an essential for nursery education).

We could have had a much better and fairer system had we tried to campaign like the Canadian advocacy groups. Perhaps it is not too late, and MPs can still be quizzed about their stance.

Here's a brief prospectus: better maternity and paternity leave, so mothers do not have to return to work so early; publicly funded, publicly provided full-time nursery education with properly trained nursery teachers; and support for grant-aided, non-profit childcare. Does that sound too ambitious? If it is possible to campaign on this basis in Canada, it should be a piece of cake here!

-reprinted from Nursery World

Region: Europe ^[3]

Tags: advocacy ^[4]

privatization ^[5]

public management ^[6]

Source URL (modified on 27 Jan 2022): <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/research-policy-practice/10/05/international-perspectives-canada-brave-campaign-state-prov>

Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/research-policy-practice/10/05/international-perspectives-canada-brave-campaign-state-prov> [2]

<https://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/news/article/analysis-international-perspectives-canada-a-brave-campaign-for-state-provision> [3]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/region/europe> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/advocacy> [5]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/privatization> [6] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/8166>