

National child care often promised, still missing^[1]

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AVAILABILITY

See chapter text below.

Ordering information for "Speaking Truth to Power"^[2]

More about the book, including introduction and news release^[3]

Chapter text:

Forty years have passed since the Royal Commission on the Status of Women first recommended a National Day Care Act and twenty-five since the Royal Commission on Equality in Employment called childcare "the ramp that provides equal access to the workforce for mothers". Fifty-five years ago women organized to fight closure of Toronto's wartime day nurseries. Thirty-odd years have passed since the inspired day care activism of the 1970s and 1980s put childcare on Canada's political map to stay and in 1986, Status of Women Canada's Task Force on Child Care concluded that "sound child care and parental leave programs can no longer be considered a frill but are, rather, fundamental support services".

In spite of all this, today a new generation of Canadian women -- daughters of the second wave feminists who were the movers who formed and inspired the National Action Committee on the Status of Women ("NAC") -- have embarked on careers in law, medicine, teaching and science only to find that they -- like we -- must still struggle to find and pay for good childcare if they become mothers.

In the early 1980s, I was one of the optimistic and still youngish women with young children who joined Toronto's Action Day to advocate for "free, non-compulsory, publicly-funded, non-profit, 24-hour national day care". In the hey-day of 1980s women's activism, Action Day Care and like-minded groups across Canada were joined by labour union and social justice activists to form the unique broad-based childcare advocacy movement lead by the Child Care Advocacy Association. Although our approach was at first rather naive, we rapidly learned about the mysteries of federalism, the federal spending power and transfer payments, the tax system and what the Senate does. We put "daycare" (or childcare, as it came to be called) on the political agenda and explicated the key policy issues -- fair, equitable access for all and good quality for children. But in spite of many woman-hours spent debating, writing, speaking, lobbying and demonstrating, we failed to achieve or even come close to our goal -- high quality publicly-funded childcare for all who "want and need it".

Today most thinking people in modern countries have concluded not only that high quality childcare is fundamental for women's equality but the idea that quality childcare -- seamlessly delivered with childhood education -- is great for children as well as women has been well supported by research. But in Canada today the very idea of early childhood education and care is under attack by the right whose spokespeople even challenge the idea that childcare is of special interest to women.

Try telling a 30-ish woman who is thinking about starting a family -- even one whose partner is among the growing number of feminist young men -- that gender wars over issues like childcare are "old wars". Research shows that although today both mothers and fathers devote more time to their children, women -- even those employed full-time -- still carry the major responsibility for children, taking parental leave at a considerably higher rate, and, if they are lone-parents (who are primarily women) -- claiming the very lowest incomes. Most early childhood educators -- a notoriously underpaid group -- are women and activism for childcare continues to be primarily by women. While undoubtedly more men -- fathers, ECEs, trade unionists, politicians, economists -- are essential and dedicated players in the Canadian fight for childcare, by and large, the childcare movement is still mostly made up of women.

Canadian women with young children have joined the paid labour force in ever-increasing numbers for the past three decades. By 2007, their labour force participation rate had reached 77 per cent for those whose youngest child was three to five years -- a higher rate than that of many European countries. But Canada's childcare lags far behind not only western European countries but -- in some ways -- even the Anglo-American nations and some developing countries. A 2008 UNICEF report card using ten indicators of childcare access and quality ranked Canada at the very bottom of the 25 wealthy nations, achieving only one indicator. Although childcare availability has crept up marginally over the years, fundamentally, the Canadian situation isn't better than it was in the 1980s when a much smaller proportion of women with young children were in the paid labour force and we so optimistically advocated for change.

What went wrong? I would argue that childcare in Canada has been the victim of ideologies about the role of women, the role of the state in people's lives and what goes into creating "just" societies. Childcare came onto the political scene as a national issue too late to catch the wave of national social program-building that included development of Medicare, public pensions, the Canada Assistance Plan and

Unemployment Insurance and by the 1980s, social programs were already in a period of retrenchment. By the time it became obvious that women were in the labour force to stay and that private responses to caring for young children were inadequate, tax cuts and cuts to social programs in order to attack the deficit had come to drive the political agenda. Although the social program- cutting federal Liberals ultimately embraced childcare after 2000 and set out to establish Canada's first national early learning and childcare program, the Harper government immediately eliminated even the better-late-than-never first steps when it was elected in 2006. Today even the groups who have long kept childcare on the public agenda have been weakened and diminished as part of the attack on the fabric of Canada's civil society.

So a new generation of Canadian women is struggling to balance work, family and personal lives without the support of a childcare system. This isn't good for women, for children or for Canada. For all these reasons -- we who have struggled for so many years for "more daycare, better daycare", as the Action Daycare button read in 1980 won't -- and shouldn't -- shut the f*** up about childcare.

- reprinted from "Speaking Truth to Power"

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