

Poverty, child care should top political agenda^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Canadians will head to the polls again on May 2. Unfortunately, the main news headlines about the upcoming election are as predictable as they are discouraging. The Edmonton Journal headline of March 27, for example, expresses the widely held belief that voters face "an election about nothing." But this does not have to be the case. Indeed, it should not be the case. But it is up to all of us to demand otherwise.

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At the top of the agenda should be two issues the major political parties have all failed to address despite much rhetoric and promised action: first, the continued tragedy of child and family poverty; and second, the failure to introduce a national child-care strategy.

On Nov. 24, 1989, the House of Commons passed a unanimous, allparty resolution to eliminate child poverty by the year 2000. Sadly, over 20 years after the announcement, and over 10 years after the date for the ending of child poverty, children and their families continue to face the daily struggles that living in poverty brings. Despite good economic times and not-so-good economic times, national governments of different political stripes have failed to deliver on their own promise of eliminating child poverty. In a country as rich as Canada this is both a national tragedy and a disgrace.

Across the country, the rate of child and family poverty stubbornly remains at over nine per cent -and in individual communities is much higher. Aboriginal children and their families continue to face rates of poverty that far exceed the national average, as do new immigrant families in our major urban centres and single parents. Even during the recent boom a job was not sufficient to guarantee many of these families a move out of poverty.

Child and family poverty has a high price that we all pay. Children who grow up in low income families tend to do worse in school, earn lower incomes as adults and require higher levels of social, health and justice services. The evidence is clear. Child and family poverty hurts us all.

Almost as disconcerting as our collective national failure to address child and family poverty is our persistent fumbling with respect to a national strategy for early childhood education and care. For more than a quarter of a century politicians have made promises on a national child care strategy. Brian Mulroney's Conservative government first introduced such a notion in the mid-1980s, followed by subsequent Liberal promises and belated actions in the 1990s and early 2000s. In 2006, the minority Conservative government finally pulled the plug on a national child-care strategy when it cancelled the bilateral agreements with the provinces to support early learning and care.

Given that the vast majority of young children now spend much of their early years in some form of non-parental care, the absence of national leadership in this area remains mystifying. While almost all of the other developed nations have national funding and delivery strategies in place, Canada, outside of Quebec, remains in an early learning and care limbo. International studies from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and UNICEF reveal Canada's shameful position at close to the bottom of early childhood education and care rankings with other nations leaving us trailing in their wakes. There are regulated child-care spaces for only one in five children under five, and licensed child care remains unaffordable for many middle-and low-income families.

In our modern, fast-paced world, early childhood education and care represents a vital social infrastructure that supports families and their children. Research clearly shows the value of high quality early childhood education and care and the positive social and economic returns that flow from public investments in this type of infrastructure. High quality early childhood education and care supports the healthy development of young children, enables parents to participate fully in the labour force, and creates local community jobs and well-being.

And so, as we shake off the last vestiges of winter and head to the polls May 2, it is critical we take this opportunity to ask our political leaders where they, and their parties, stand on the key issues of child and family poverty and early childhood education and care. Their answers should be clear and unequivocal. They should include a well-thought-through policy agenda and a commitment to act. No spinning is required here and the time for vague promises and further study has long since passed.

The health and well-being of any society rests on its ability to support and nurture its children. The children of today are the workers, parents and citizens of tomorrow. If we invest wisely in them we will secure both their futures and ours.

An election, even the fourth in seven years, is the time to send our would-be political leaders the clear message that in Canada the well-being of all our children and families matters, and that it matters a great deal.

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