

The foundation is finally ready to build national child care ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

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The first time a national child care promise appeared in the Liberal's election Red Book was back in 1993. Which is bound to breed cynicism from those who have been waiting, and yawns from others.

Children in need of child care in 1993 are in university now. Meanwhile, with nearly 73 per cent of Canadian mothers with children under 16 in the workforce, some are still arguing over whether governments have a role to play in supporting quality child care.

At least in the political world they are still arguing over the issue, while all parties promise millions in various tax credits and child credits aimed at families. On the ground, meanwhile, families are scrambling to find the best quality child care they can afford -often a losing game.

Do governments have a role to play in supporting good quality child care? If you believe governments have a role in providing anything beside police, prisons, defense, roads and clean water - and I do - then child care should be high on the list. Without a coherent child care system, families whose children have the greatest need of high quality early childhood education and care are the least likely to get it. Enrichment in the early years, according to experts, is what separates those children who will go on to lead productive lives from those who will struggle. It is good for individuals and good for the economy.

But, in fact, it might be a good thing that it has taken so long to create anything resembling a coherent, accessible, affordable childcare plan in this country.

While federal politicians have been busy making promises and arguing about whether Canadian families need day care, provinces have been quietly putting the foundations of such a program in place. When Canada does get some semblance of a national day-care program - and I am certain it will - it will be better integrated into the institutions Canadian families already use, namely schools, and it will be smarter and less costly than it would have been if it were created from the ground up 20 years ago.

Full-day kindergarten, which was introduced recently in Ontario and is either in place or in the works in a number of other provinces, makes a natural link to day care. It is a system that can easily be built on to close the gap between parental leave, which a Senate committee not long ago suggested be extended from the current one year to 18 months, and school. And the growth of all-day kindergarten programs across the country is likely one reason why Ignatieff's daycare promise during this election campaign is cheaper at \$500 million than earlier Liberal promises of \$1 billion a year. If the Liberals did away with the Conservatives' child tax credit, which they should, it would make even more financial sense.

To be fair, the Paul Martin government got beyond the promise stage with plans for a \$5 billion (over five years) child care program. It had been signed by all provinces and was in the beginning stages when Stephen Harper's Conservatives won a minority government in 2006 and dismantled the fledgling program in favour of a Universal Childcare Benefit of \$100 a month to parents of children under six. For the Conservatives, giving money directly to families allows parents to have a choice over how their children are cared for. The difference between the child-care benefit and day-care funding is a cornerstone of the way the Conservatives view the government's relationship with families.

Diane Finley, human resources minister in the previous Conservative government, put her party's views on the matter this way during a raucous session in Parliament earlier this year: "It's the Liberals who wanted to ensure that parents are forced to have other people raise their children. We do not believe in that."

To hear Finley, you might believe that the majority of Canadian families still have one parent at home who takes care of the children full-time, which is not the case. You might also believe that most Canadian families think that child care -whether day care, preschool or home care -means you are not raising your own children, which is also not the case.

It is time Canadian politics turned the page on this false choice: Canadian parents do not choose whether to work or to raise their children. The vast majority of them do both and would like some help making sure their children can get high quality child care while they are on the job.

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Region: Canada ^[2]

Tags: election ^[3]

school system ^[4]
federal programs ^[5]
full-day early learning ^[6]

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[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/11/04/foundation-finally-ready-build-national-child-care> [2]
<https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7864> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/election> [4]
<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/school-system> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/federal-programs> [6]
<https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/8149>