

Time is right for a national child care plan ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

If this is an election campaign, there must be a daycare photo op somewhere. So it was hardly surprising to see Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff perched at a small table among a group of Winnipeg preschoolers to announce that, if elected, the Liberal party would bring in a national daycare strategy.

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 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. 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, defence, roads and clean water, then child care should be high on the list. Without a coherent child care system, families whose children have the greatest need of 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.

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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 when Stephen Harper's Conservatives were elected 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 daycare funding is central to 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: "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 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.

- reprinted from the Victoria Times-Colonist

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