

Porter: Why child care is a big election issue ^[1]

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Source: Toronto Star

Format: Article

Publication Date: 28 Apr 2011

EXCERPTS

When you vote next Monday, think of Anila Omeri.

You'll find Omeri in a basement room -- decorated with bunnies and Easter eggs -- at Earl Beatty school, doing up 2-year-old Quinn's brown jacket. She is an early childhood educator and, by all accounts, an excellent one.

Nine years ago, Omeri didn't have a career, she didn't have a home, she didn't speak a lick of English. Fearful of another civil war in her native Albania, her young family immigrated to Canada. The first time she came to this centre, she stood shyly behind her husband.

She had enrolled in an ESL class upstairs, he explained to the centre's director, Lisa Winters, in broken English. They needed someone to care for their two young sons for 2 1/2 hours a day.

Winters agreed -- waiving the fee -- and soon the Omeri boys were enrolled full-time in the daycare and she was volunteering there daily. Kids are the perfect language playground -- lots of practice, little judgment.

A year later, Omeri was offered a part-time job, then a full-time one. Three years ago, at Winters's urging, she enrolled at night school to study early childhood education. Her spoken English was good, but writing essays was tough, so her colleagues helped during naptime -- constructing arguments, correcting grammar. By her final essay, "she could totally do it on her own. She didn't need my help," says workmate Geoffrey Brown.

Omeri graduated last December.

Now, her oldest son -- a high school soccer star -- volunteers at the centre during summers.

Beatty Buddies is the whole family's home, which is exactly what a good child care centre should be.

"I don't know what I would have done without this place," says Omeri, 36. "I'd be home taking care of my children."

On Monday, you should think about Omeri because two of the main political parties have plans to establish a national child care program and one does not.

Both the Liberals and the NDP have budgeted about \$3.3 billion over four years to building affordable, high-quality child care centres across the country. Their plans are more similar than different. Most importantly, both are committed: Universal child care is the first promise the Liberals make in their platform, and the NDP vow to enshrine it in law -- like medicare -- so a new government couldn't scrap the plan without a debate in the House of Commons.

That's important, as that's basically what happened in 2006. After a painstaking year of negotiating agreements with each province and territory, the Liberal minority government launched a \$5 billion program to build new child care spaces across the country. Then, a non-confidence vote triggered an election, and the Conservatives came to power. One of the first things Harper did was kill the program.

This brings me to the Conservative plan for child care, which is no plan. It does not make the party's priority list of jobs, troops, sovereignty and victims of crime. It is mentioned only once in their platform, with a reference to the "Universal Child Care Benefit" that the Tories created after axing the Liberal program. The benefit is a cheque for \$100, sent every month to parents of children under six. It is meant to "support all parents," the platform says, "and to respect their right to choose the form of child care that's best for their families."

This might sound good to you. Who doesn't like cash? Except with \$100, you can't choose any child care. I hire a 12-year-old down the street to look after my kids when I'm in a bind. She charges \$5 an hour -- for both my kids. The Conservative plan covers five days of child care by a 12-year-old, as long as she skips school and I leave work early.

What about a real, licensed daycare centre with trained staff? Could I choose that with the Conservative plan? On Wednesday morning, I bumped into the director of the daycare where my daughter used to go. (If only other experts dropped from the sky for interviews like that!) She told me the Tory plan won't pay for a single day at her centre, where it costs \$1,500 a month to send your infant. But, even if the Harper government sent parents \$1,500 a month, most still couldn't choose to take their kids to a regulated non-profit daycare. They have no room. Winters recently admitted a few children who had been on the waiting list for five years.

Without a federal long-term commitment, there's no money to build new centres.

The irony is the Conservative plan costs \$2.5 billion annually -- more than the Liberal and NDP plans combined. Although individually less

than the cost of a monthly subway pass, those \$100 cheques add up to a lot collectively.

I could bore you with all the individual and social benefits of good child care, proven in a dizzying array of studies. I could remind you that Canada scored last in UNICEF's report card on child care of the world's 25 most developed countries. But in the end, it all comes back to Omeri.

Those 2 1/2 hours of child care were the first step on a ladder for her and her two sons. They made the difference between English lessons, a job, an education and a community, and none of those things. Perhaps Omeri would have found a 12-year-old to look after her kids at first. But without stable support, it's unlikely she would have persisted.

There are millions of women like Omeri in Canada, immigrant women, poor women, single mothers, working women with kids. I'd rather some of us got the support of child care -- knowing our kids are learning from well-trained, caring people -- than none of us. Wouldn't you?

Remember Omeri when you go to vote on Monday.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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