

# Canada's history of the never-was national child care program <sup>[1]</sup>

Know thy history: Looking back on child care

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This week in child care history.....Canada's third major attempt at a national child care program was cancelled by the Conservative government (Feb 6, 2006).

The **Royal Commission on the Status of Women** <sup>[2]</sup> (1970) was the first to propose a national child care program. Since then there have been three major attempts by federal governments to develop a national child care strategy: the 1986 Task Force on Child Care (Katie Cooke Task Force), the 1987 Special Committee on Child Care, and the Foundations Program, cancelled February 6, 2006.

A look back.... beginning with the major child care initiative of Trudeau's government:

## 1986 - The Task Force on Child Care (Katie Cooke Task Force)

Shortly before the 1984 federal election, the Liberal government announced a Task Force on Child Care to be led by BC sociologist Katie Cooke. The Task Force was a Ministerial Task Force with four expert members, under Status of Women Canada. Its mandate was to: "examine...the need for child care services and paid parental leave...as well as the federal government's role in the development of a system of quality child care in Canada."

- **Task Force to study day care in Canada** <sup>[3]</sup>, Calgary Herald, May 31, 1984

"The federal government has set up a four-member group to study day care in Canada, Status of Women Minister Judy Erola said Wednesday.... The group is expected to report on the current status of day care including space shortages, effectiveness of current programs and other possible child care arrangements that could be developed..."

Before the Task Force finished its work, the Liberals had lost the 1984 federal election and been replaced by the Mulroney Progressive Conservatives. However, the Task Force was permitted to continue its work. Its report was released in a press conference by Brian Mulroney's Status of Women Minister, Walter McLean, on International Women's Day, 1986.

- **Report urges national plan for child care** <sup>[4]</sup>, Ottawa Citizen, March 8, 1986

"The child care situation is 'critical' and must be replaced with a new federal-provincial cost-sharing arrangement similar to the public health and education systems, says Victoria sociologist Katie Cooke. 'We can no longer take an ostrich-like approach, burying our heads in the sand while ignoring the developing crisis around us.' Topping the list of 53 recommendations in the 400-page report is a call for a national system of child care to be introduced in three stages, changes to extend maternity benefits and parental leave and the appointment of a cabinet minister responsible for children."

By this time, the majority Progressive Conservative government (Mulroney) had already announced plans to hold their own study of child care and shelved the Katie Cooke report .

## 1987 - Special (Parliamentary) Committee on Child Care

- **Committee will study entire day care issue** <sup>[5]</sup>, Leader-Post, November 27, 1985

"The [Mulroney] government set up a parliamentary task force on child care Tuesday, 16 months after the idea was first raised by Conservatives as an election campaign plank.... Health Minister Jake Epp said the parliamentary task force will be encouraged to take into consideration the findings [the Katie Cooke] task force on day care set up by the former Liberal government."

The Special Committee was an all-party committee of the House of Commons made up of Members of Parliament. When it came time to issue the final report, there were in fact three reports, one from each political party. The committee's Conservatives issued the majority report, *Sharing the Responsibility* in 1987. It recommended tax breaks for parents, grants to for-profit centres and business incentives to create workplace child care. The plan was widely criticized:

- **Report on day care condemned** <sup>[6]</sup>, The Phoenix, March 31, 1987

"A parliamentary committee report on day care was widely condemned Monday for emphasizing tax breaks for parents instead of building child care centres for the thousands of children needing spaces. Stuffing more money into parents' pockets won't do anything to relieve the present day-care crisis in Canada, said opposition party leaders and spokesmen for several national organizations."

As Martha Friendly (2000) describes, the Special Committee's

"recommendations aroused the ire of the social activists who had lobbied hard for universal, publicly-funded child care services, and opposed the tax deductions for parents, and for-profit services the Tories proposed. The recommendations were widely criticized as reducing federal leadership, failing to establish federal principles or standards, and expanding the role of the Minister of Finance in a social program....Why did the Conservative's National Child Care Strategy fail? The Mulroney government's public opinion polling showed that there was a public perception that the Conservatives were weak on social policy, and analysts believed that they wanted to pass the Child Care Act before the election was called as a centrepiece of the campaign. But the strategy provoked so much criticism that the unpopularity of the proposals may have made child care a no-win situation for the government. The Child Care Act died as the 1988 federal election was called."

- **Child care and Canadian federalism in the 1990s: Canary in a coal mine** <sup>[7]</sup>, Childcare Resource and Research Unit, 2000

## 2005 - Foundations Program

Most of the 1990s saw child care off the national political agenda after the Liberals' Red Book commitment to improve and expand child care at the national level was not fulfilled.

- **Women blast Liberal 'broken promises' Feminist group expresses 'disappointment' at Ottawa protest** <sup>[8]</sup>, Toronto Star, June 13, 1995 (Abstract only-full article pay-per-view)

After the Red Book, child care was off the national table until 2003, when Human Resources Minister Jane Stewart hammered out the Multi-Lateral Framework Agreement - which she called the "first step to a national child care program" - with the provinces/territories.

- **National daycare plan being hammered out** <sup>[9]</sup>, Globe and Mail, Dec 12, 2002
- **Child care's time may have come** <sup>[10]</sup>, Toronto Star, Feb 17, 2003

But it was under the government of Paul Martin and Social Development Minister Ken Dryden, that a national child care program came closest to reality.

- **Child care program coming, PM promises** <sup>[11]</sup>, Winnipeg Free Press, October 2, 2004

"The minority Liberal government will make good on a pledge to bring in a national child care program worth \$5 billion over five years, Prime Minister Paul Martin said yesterday. Previous proposals have always foundered over the question of provincial funding, but the federal government plans to go it alone in hopes the provinces will join in, Martin said. 'This is the first time the national government has said we want to bring in a national system. We want to work with the provinces, but we will fund it and we would like to see it grow over time,' Martin said."

The Foundations Program was centred around four "QUAD" principles: Quality, Universality, Accessibility and Developmental [Programming]. After failing to reach one (multi-lateral) agreement with all provinces, the minister succeeded in coming to individual (bilateral) agreements with all ten provinces.

- **Manitoba makes a deal on daycare** <sup>[12]</sup>, Toronto Star, April 28, 2005

"The federal government has reached an agreement to roll out a child-care program in at least one province, sources say. It is expected that when Prime Minister Paul Martin visits a Winnipeg daycare centre tomorrow, he'll announce the terms that will govern how a federally funded child-care program will be built in Manitoba. The daycare deal, the first federal-provincial pact of its kind in the country, will be worth \$25 million, the Winnipeg Free Press reports."

- Dryden achieves 10 child care agreements <sup>[13]</sup>, Globe and Mail, November 25, 2005

"Social Development Minister Ken Dryden achieved his goal of obtaining early-learning and child care deals with all 10 provinces as his Liberal government counts down its final days in office. Agreements yesterday with New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island leaves just the three territories to sign on to Mr. Dryden's plan to create a national system of child care for Canada -- a promise the Liberals have been making for more than a decade."

As part of the election campaign in the 2006 federal election, the Conservatives made cancelling the bilateral agreements a high priority. When the Liberals lost the election in January 2006, despite protests from child care advocates and provinces, the Harper government cancelled the bilateral agreements, making the Foundations Program another close-but-no-cigar for Canadian child care.

Region: Canada <sup>[14]</sup>

Tags: federal programs <sup>[15]</sup>

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