

From House to crèche, women are still juggling bébé and work ^[1]

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EXCEPRTS:

Three-month-old Skander-Jack, son of NDP MP Sana Hassainia, had to leave the House of Commons this week, despite the fact that he seemed to be both quieter and better behaved than many elected members. There was, it seems, a bit of commotion because MPs wanted to take pictures of the adorable baby. (This is completely understandable: Skander-Jack knows how to rock an orange onesie, and I'd be wearing one myself if it didn't make me look like an escapee from a maximum-security prison.)

The reason Ms. Hassainia left the House with her baby became shrouded in confusion – it seems the issue was the MPs taking photographs, not the baby himself. Still, it was unclear to Ms. Hassainia whether the child was welcome in the House. One thing is clear: A mother and MP, trying to serve her constituents, was left juggling childcare and work. It's a dilemma millions of parents face every day, although with fewer cameras to record the struggle.

"We don't want privileges, we want to be able to work and take care of our families," Ms. Hassainia told reporters, and Green Party Leader Elizabeth May noted that, "If we're going to fully integrate women in the House of Commons, that includes babies. If you're going to be a working mom, then you need to have the institutions prepared to accommodate."

Absolutely, except it's not just the women in Parliament who need to be accommodated, but all working mothers across the country. It's almost six years since the Conservative government decided that a national childcare policy should be shunned in favour of \$100-a-month allowance to families with young children. It's just about a year since Diane Finley, the Human Resources Minister, revealed the government's contempt for daycare: "It's the Liberals who wanted to ensure that parents are forced to have other people raise their children."

Try to dispel the image of children as tiny veal calves shoved into pens by callous farmhands, if you can, and instead consider that in many parts of the world it's perfectly acceptable, even favourable, to have other people raise your children. That is, if the government has invested in a system where child-care workers are valued, where children's well-being is valued, and – this is crucial – women's ability to work without bankrupting themselves or losing their sanity is also valued.

Take France, for example. The most interesting part of the new parenting memoir *Bringing Up Bébé: One American Mother Discovers the Wisdom of French Parenting* is not, in fact, about little Guillaume's perfect table manners, but about the state system of subsidized child-care that allows Guillaume's mom to leave him at his nursery without worry. "French mothers go back to work, in part, because they can," writes Pamela Druckerman, the American in Paris who wrote the book. "The high-quality crèches, subsidized shared nannies and child-minders all make the transition logistically possible." It is not a perfect system, but it works because everyone buys into it. There is no stigma, Ms. Druckerman adds, to having someone else raise your children, if it's the right someone else. The women who chose to go back to work aren't bathed in guilt or swimming in debt.

Parisians fight to get their children into daycare. In London, where I live, there's a network of state-subsidized nurseries that are entirely free from the age of 3, but it's easier for a rich man to pass into the kingdom of heaven than for Imogen or Archie to walk through the gates of the free nursery. My children were lucky enough to get into one, which meant I could go back to work without selling the family silver (or, in my case, the family zinc.) My neighbour, a busy doctor, spent a day measuring the distance to the nursery with a yardstick trying to prove to the council that his children were in the catchment zone. The council didn't buy it.

Freeing women for work makes economic sense: Britain's Institute for Public Policy Research calculated that millions of pounds in tax revenues would be raised every year if the government invested in a system of free child care, enough to offset the outlay. The prohibitively high cost of daycare is a main reason for Britain's low rate of female employment. But universal daycare is a long-term, costly – and as we've seen in Canada – politically divisive issue.

It sometimes feels that we've been chewing over this problem since Sir John A. was a pup. Still Canadian parents are caught in a web of daycare waiting lists, last-minute calls to grandpa – or taking the baby into the House of Commons because you can't find your husband to do the handoff at the last minute. Maybe things will be better by the time Skander-Jack's old enough to vote.

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