

\$15 child care: Canada's hottest new political pledge? ^[1]

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As Canada's Twitter elite (economists, pundits, partisans) broke out into a virtual policy brawl over yesterday's NDP national affordable child care pledge, I couldn't help but think the party might have hit a political sweet spot.

Of course there were the typical Twitter arguments between Liberals and New Democrats that break out every time one of them makes a political pledge.

But another line of argumentation unfolded on my Twitter news feed - one designed to exploit class tensions. The argument advanced by a few well-off Twitterati asserts that universally accessible, affordable programs, like child care, aren't progressive because rich people can afford to pay for these services themselves.

It's an example of how the politics of the rich are readily deployed these days to scupper universal policy solutions that overwhelmingly benefit the poor, the working and middle classes but invite buy-in from everyone because, well, they're universal.

Of course Canada's rich can afford to hire whatever nanny they wish, or enrol their children in any private early learning opportunity of their choosing. Ensuring the rich can still pay market price on child care was never the policy challenge [though creating a system where children of the upper crust are socialized alongside children from diverse backgrounds has a lot of social upsides and any economic imbalance can swiftly be addressed through progressive taxation].

The policy challenge has long been: how to provide good quality child care to parents of all economic backgrounds, no matter where you reside in Canada.

And that takes me back to a group of parents in Fredericton, New Brunswick.

It was a cool rainy night in 2011, and I was sitting behind a two-way mirror listening to a focus group of parents of young children talk about how tough it was to find decent paying work in a depressed economy.

They talked about how they couldn't afford to put their children in daycare.

They talked about how one parent would be forced to quit his or her job during the children's early years because, otherwise, you were "just working to pay child care".

They talked about barely scraping by. They all sounded depressed that night, and it was beginning to rub off on me.

But when the focus group facilitator told them that, just next door, Quebec offered \$7 a day child care, their eyes lit up and a hopeful energy filled the room.

Affordable child care would enable them to go back to work, they said. It would be good for the economy, they said. And even a stay-at-home parent could enjoy a break once in a while, they said.

Everywhere we went across Canada, child care affordability was the top of mind worry. Except in Quebec, where child care is already more affordable than anywhere else in Canada.

In Quebec, the complaint was that there weren't enough spaces to meet demand for their super popular program. Note to policy makers: build a universally affordable child care program and they will come.

We wondered how parents in Canada would "sell" a universal national child care plan to fellow Canadians. The words came flying fast and loose:

"Free."

"Affordable."

"Accessible to everyone."

"Good for families."

"Everyone seems equal."

"Quebec has it. How come we don't?"

That was their sales pitch.

Some wished for universally free child care. Others hedged. Someone suggested parents pay \$5 - "just something, it should be something. You should contribute." Someone else suggested the core day should be free, but after hours should come with an affordable price tag.

\$5, \$10, \$15 - it was all good. It was a heck of a lot cheaper than anyone outside of Quebec has been paying. Parents loved the idea - as long as the program was of high quality and as long as the country could afford to make it a reality. We Canadians are, at heart, pragmatic and socially responsible, after all.

In Newfoundland, where the economy was booming, participants seemed primed for a campaign that pledged new supports for parents and their children as a sign of progress - an 'it's time' campaign. They understood that this was something this generation of Newfoundland prosperity might be able to achieve for everyone; something their parents' generation couldn't have afforded.

In oil-rich Alberta, parents struggled with work/family balance issues and affordability issues - especially during boom times because that's when both parents had to work to take advantage of the wave. Once they learned about Quebec's child care program, they could imagine a stable, safe, affordable child care program as a counterpoint to an otherwise unstable boom/bust life cycle.

"It would just explode in this town," one Edmonton parent said. "They're in the middle of a boom and they say we need workers and people say, 'I wish I could work but the kids are young'."

One Edmonton parent acknowledged a bit of frustration: "Wow," he said. "Makes me disgusted, because we're in the richest province and we don't even have this kind of access. It's wrong."

In political circles we often hear child care framed as 'choice', but we heard parents talk about the desire for more 'options'. And while parents would like to see more flexible, affordable, high quality early learning and care options, there is no culture of entitlement.

Everywhere in Canada, parents engage in a social and financial calculus to determine whether one of them stays home instead of working 'to pay for daycare', whether they work opposite shifts so that one parent is always home and to yield cost efficiencies, or whether they wade through a range of possibilities - from having grandma look after the children to placing the child on a child care waiting list immediately upon conception.

Parents displayed a tenacious resourcefulness, often patching together services and supports with limited means to pay for them. It's like they perform quiet acts of heroism, day in and day out.

In the end, it was the economic argument that proved to be a potent force. They understood affordable child care as a service that would enable parents to work and contribute to the local economy and, in turn, contribute to the tax base - which they understood is how a country pays for a universal program that benefits everyone.

These were the arguments advanced by real parents, struggling in real time to make ends meet and keep their kids safe and warm and fed. They just quietly go about doing as best they can. And, suddenly, there's a political pledge that holds out a glimmer of hope.

As campaign pledges go, it's one of the more interesting ones to hit the federal political scene in a long while, precisely because of its broad appeal.

Region: Canada ^[3]

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