

Why the NDP's childcare proposal has irritated all the right people ^[1]

Author: Rozworski, Michal

Source: Ricochet

Publication Date: 18 Oct 2014

EXCERPTS:

The proposal is modest, but the debate is illuminating

The NDP's universal childcare proposal has the right wing up in arms. Political opponents are playing up the spectre of big government. Their mouthpieces in the media are also predictably upset. The proposed program will be big spending, freedom limiting and unaffordable, they say. Social media too has lit up with the pundits out in force, trying to score gotcha points. This reaction is wholly unsurprising, even when in reality the NDP's proposal is modest.

The program is designed to be universal, but the provinces will decide how to deliver it. Parents who use it will pay up to \$15 per day. It will be implemented gradually. Yet with the welfare state slowly withering away, even this relatively barebones social-democratic reform considered elemental in many Northern democracies is a big ask.

The right talks the language of equality

Much about universal childcare rankles the right wing, some of whom have recently taken up the torch of equality to defend us against the horrors of childminding for all.

Specifically, much has been made of the fact that in the first two years of Quebec's \$7-per-day childcare, use of the program went up according to income. Around half of all households with children in the top three-quarters of income distribution used the program, yet only a quarter of those in the bottom 25 per cent of income distribution did so. (There is no data, but certainly the very richest percentiles were less likely to use it; they can afford nannies or the best of private care centres.) In one sense, this equality talk shouldn't cause surprise. The unequal distribution of the costs and benefits of programs such as universal childcare reflects on the grossly inegalitarian society in which we live. The lowest paid have the most precarious work, often part-time and at odd hours, while subsidized childcare is primarily 9 to 5.

As inequality ratchets upwards, the heyday of the welfare state falls farther into the past. Government expenditure as a percentage of GDP has recently fallen to record lows not seen since the 1940s, continuing a long downward trend started in the 1980s. Even the Quebec childcare program, while nominally universal, actually covers just 68 per cent of childcare needs outside the home.

In essence, the right wing is using the effects of neoliberalism to argue against any attempt to reverse long-term cutbacks to public services.

In fact, using equality as a defence against universal childcare ignores evidence that elsewhere it has worked to alleviate some long-term inequality. For example, a study of universal childcare in Norway produced a very interesting finding. The authors tracked two groups of people into adulthood, those born in municipalities that had childcare and those born in municipalities that didn't. At first, the authors found that average salaries in cities with childcare were a bit lower. Looking more closely, however, they saw that working- and middle-class adults in cities with childcare were getting a sizeable earnings boost. The average effect was close to zero because those at the top experienced the opposite. In short, universal childcare worked to, as the authors write, "level the playing field."

Missing the target

Overall, the experience of 20th-century welfare states shows that public services have a far greater chance of sustaining broad popular support if they are universal and funded enough to achieve high quality. Otherwise, as Petter Nilsson writes in relation to Sweden's threatened welfare state, they become a "'fall back alternative in a dull grey color' and the system collapses." A strong universal service today would necessitate a wide coalition of the middle and working classes, ready to tolerate some inequities to accomplish a broader, long-term political goal.

In the meantime, the right wants exactly the opposite. Targeted programs that seek to provide small-scale solutions to the most "deprived" are their measure of choice - ideally privately provided on the market. This is the liberal model that fills the gaps caused by a shrinking welfare state, rather than expands the welfare state to equalize society.

Indeed, some of the main forms of delivering new social services under the most recent Conservative and Liberal governments have been transfers as well as tax credits, rebates and exemptions. Such measures are the basis of the current patchwork childcare system, but they merely support incomes rather than directly provide services. This includes the Conservatives' main childcare policy: the monthly \$100

transfer for every child under the age of six (rumoured to soon include all children under 13). Incidentally, this transfer is universal - so much for targeting.

Transfers and tax measures have their place, but they are not in themselves transformative of the conditions that generate inequality. So Quebec, for example, has a tax refund for those who do not use subsidized childcare that is slowly clawed back with higher incomes, but this is on top of a universal program.

If the right is so suddenly concerned about equality, there are lots of measures to advocate for, including those that could help fund universal childcare. The list is long: from not squandering billions on income splitting to fully taxing capital gains (such as labour income) to reversing corporate tax cuts and more.

While caring for children is an essential task, it is also an unequally distributed chore according to gender and made difficult by unequal material circumstances. A universal system of childcare would at least give more mothers more choice about how to use their time and facilitate their participation in the workforce if they choose. In addition, and especially if it were publicly delivered, it could improve working conditions for childcare workers, standardize curricula and levels of care and increase efficiency via economies of scale.

Idealism right and left

For the moment, the NDP proposal fits the times. It is expansive in form with limits on content. The leeway given to provinces to design their own systems means that they could simply fund spaces at for-profit childcare centres. The \$15 per day will still pose a struggle for some families. Keeping the \$100-per-month Universal Child Care Benefit put in place by the Tories will assuage that, but the question is whether it is worth keeping the credit rather than increasing funds for direct public childcare delivery to augment quality.

None of this detracts from the need for a universal program. Even with these limits, the challenge to implement any universal program will be political, not technical. It will be much harder to build a large constituency of support than a final policy document.

Indeed, when the right talks about the need for funding targeted at those with the lowest incomes, it is they who are being the most idealistic. Where is the political constituency to provide an expensive \$1,000-per-month subsidy to only the lowest income families? Employers, for the moment, appear happy to gain more workers and manage labour costs via means other than getting more women into the workforce.

Altogether, any struggle for a universal program in the present is bound to be contradictory. The challenge that the growth in inequality poses for motivating and implementing universal programs is a symptom of something deeper. The lopsided recovery from the financial crisis is but a scene in the ongoing restructuring of the Canadian economy - one featuring uneven development in commodity extraction and real estate, benefitting not only business and the wealthy, but also sections of Canada's working and middle classes, which makes broad coalition-building harder.

Yet if we reflect on ideals beyond these difficulties, then we will find plenty that can underpin universal public programs. Here are just two: increasing democratic control over important social services and moving aspects of life outside for-profit market logic.

That such arguments are largely absent from public debate is another measure of the conscribed political space today. But within that space, the NDP proposal has sharpened the debate. It has irritated all the right people and should be pushed forward. We need all the breathing room we can get.

Related link:

Political Eh-conomy Radio: Looking towards childcare in Canada, with lessons from Sweden [2]

Region: Canada [3]

Tags: federal programs [4]

Source URL (modified on 27 Jan 2022): <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/14/10/why-ndp%E2%80%99s-childcare-proposal-has-irritated-all-right-people>

Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/14/10/why-ndp%E2%80%99s-childcare-proposal-has-irritated-all-right-people> [2]

<http://rozworski.org/political-eh-conomy/2014/10/16/political-eh-conomy-radio-looking-towards-childcare-in-canada-with-lessons-from-sweden/> [3]

<https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7864> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/federal-programs>