

# Daycare is a tough electoral sell, but kids are about more than politics <sup>[1]</sup>

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EXCERPTS

If only children could be folded away like ventriloquists' dummies, stuck in a suitcase while you were busy doing other things. If only they could be carried to work with you, and spoke only on command.

Alas, children will insist on being ambulatory and vocal. They demand moving about and stimulation and food and all kinds of other wearisome things, at least until they become teenagers and cease motion altogether. (The food requests keep coming, though.) When they're little, they must be parked in a place where they can hit their friends over the heads with Thomas the Tank Engine while their parents are at work, merely dreaming about hitting colleagues over the head with Thomas the Tank Engine.

Once again, we find ourselves staring at the intractable problem called "the national daycare debate." For 30 years, this has been the magical unicorn of Canadian public policy, sometimes glimpsed at a distance in the forest but never actually captured. Occasionally, a brave politician tries to lasso the unicorn, but, faced with the scorn of the electorate and political rivals, slinks away in despair.

Enter the New Democratic Party, with its bold if optimistic pledge to bring in a national child-care plan, in tandem with the provinces, at \$15 a day. Meanwhile, the Conservatives argue that their \$100-a-month child-care payment, teamed with a possible income-splitting tax allowance, is the best, most flexible option.

Because we are a year away from a federal election, these positions are, perhaps inevitably, framed as ideology rather than in terms of what's best for families. In this light, the Conservatives want the li'l woman to stay home looking after the kids, and the NDP plan is child care as Soviet collective – Thomas Mulcair wants to "raise your kids for you," the Conservatives warned. (By the way? Excellent idea. Take my kids, Tom. They think Mountain Dew is a food group and they'll watch 25 episodes of Doctor Who in a row. Please have them back by 2020.)

Looking at the daycare debate solely through a political lens is hugely dispiriting, especially as the problem is enormous and getting worse, as my colleague Erin Anderssen outlined in a fine Globe series last year. There are waiting lists for child care across the country, and costs if you do get in are among the highest in the developed world: \$925 a month in Ontario, \$1,200 in Vancouver, but just \$140 in subsidized Quebec.

If you want to know about the outcome of such disarray, read *Careless About Child Care*, the Ontario ombudsman's report into the province's unlicensed daycares, which came out this week. "As waiting lists and the costs associated with licensed child care have grown, many Ontarians have turned to cheaper, more readily available informal options, often unaware of the rules and of the risks," it notes.

The report was sparked by the deaths of four children in unregulated care in a recent seven-month period, and it uncovered a horrifying list of overlooked warning signs and loopholes in provincial legislation that led to shoddy and dangerous conditions. (There is new legislation in the works to overhaul the province's early childhood care.)

It's not an electoral issue – or at least it's not just an electoral issue – because political cycles are short by nature, and focused on the bottom line, whereas this is a problem that will affect the whole shape of the country for decades to come. Do we actually want young people to keep procreating? (Laugh if you will, but economic constraints are one of the main reasons people have fewer children, or none at all.)

If both parents work, do we want a safe place to put children during the day – a place where they might actually be in the care of well-trained, happy professionals? Do we want kids to have a running start – all kids, not just the ones who won the birth lottery? Do we want women to feel they can afford to work outside the home, if they choose? Are we willing to invest in these things – not for our own children, because it's too late, but for theirs?

It would cost a lot, and it would take a long time. The NDP plan wouldn't even kick in for another four years, and even then, it would only provide about 370,000 spots. Within eight years, for \$5-billion, the target is a million spots. (We would have to spend \$16-billion a year to catch up to those child-loving Swedes and their Nordic dream of daycare.) The NDP would retain the Conservatives' child-care payment, under the principle known as "a spoonful of sugar might not actually feed you, but it helps the medicine go down."

It's going to be a tough sell, which is probably why the unicorn has remained free all these years, kicking up its heels. Framed solely as an election issue, it's only a winner for the segment of the population that currently has drooling small people clamped to its sides. But the droolers have a way of growing up, being useful to society and becoming voters themselves. Look at it that way, and it's a winner.

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