

Essential investment overdue ^[1]

Friday's Editorial

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EXCERPTS

Some grumpy old guys - especially the grandfathers of youngsters whose parents can't find decent, affordable daycare - may bridle at Rachel Notley's explanation this week for one of Alberta's longest enduring shortfalls in social services.

But as they watch our federal government prepare to blow the doors off its budget helping families who can afford to keep a parent at home, they may grudgingly wonder if the leader of Alberta's New Democrats may not have a point.

Glaciers have receded faster than daycare has advanced over the past three decades. If, the day before Public Interest Alberta released its Childcare Survey this week, you had rounded up some journalists reaching retirement age and asked them to predict its findings, they'd have rattled off the key points like jaded movie buffs reciting dialogue from Casablanca.

" 'Government subsidies aren't high enough to pay for quality care. There are too few subsidized spaces available for those who qualify. Children with any form of special needs get short shrift. Many daycares don't take infants.' I wrote that story before computers were invented!"

And Premier Jim Prentice's reaction was straight out of the old notebook, too: "I'm very concerned about it. I met with parent groups over the summer and heard their concerns. It's not clear to me exactly what the solutions are." (For which, read: "It's not as though they are struggling farmers. As ever, we're only eager to help with the little tykes if doesn't cost much money.")

Assuming the politicians really do care about kids, what alternative is there to Notley's characterization of "a 43-year-old government run by a bunch of grumpy old guys who don't understand the modern-day realities and needs of Alberta's young families"?

To enjoy a standard of living similar to their own parents, both parents in most two-parent families have to work these days, and that means those with children under five need child care that doesn't cost more than the second parent earns. In a province that constantly moans about labour shortages and makes a big deal about helping people avoid social assistance, it is truly bizarre that government doesn't seize upon daycare as an essential investment.

In fairness, the question is complex, and will remain so until society gives the notion of universal, government-supported child care the same acceptance currently granted to education.

If only some are to receive subsidies, what should the cut-off be?

If you aren't going to arbitrarily limit the number of subsidies, how do you make sure government has control over program costs?

If you are going to rely on the private sector and non-profits to create spaces, what can be done to make sure the pressure to keep full-fee spaces affordable doesn't squeeze either the quality or quantity of spaces the market is prepared to supply?

How big should subsidies be to ensure that the option of working makes financial sense?

And how is government to foster a consensus on these issues among people with young children, those without and those whose children are past the point where new spending would help them?

Well, for starters, it could recognize that children with special needs should have priority, rather than being placed at a disadvantage in a seller's market for daycare spaces. Surely, we can all agree both parents and children in such cases deserve, at the very least, a level playing field in these crucial years.

Second, government could demonstrate it understands modern families - and the connection daycare has to other social challenges - by making sure a system of subsidies ensures that all low-income parents have a realistic opportunity to stay in the workforce.

This formula probably won't solve the grumpiness. Old guys don't surrender that pleasure easily.

But it would help them relate better to people who weren't born when the current ruling party took power.

Region: Alberta ^[3]

Tags: funding ^[4]

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