

The ideological roots of Harper's opposition to child care ^[1]

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After enduring well over a decade of broken promises, the prospects for publicly-funded child care in Canada looked good in the autumn of 2005.

The Paul Martin government proposed to create thousands of new day-care spaces and had also negotiated deals with most provinces and territories to turn a patch-work of often poor-quality services into a system of early learning and child care with national standards.

Then Stephen Harper won the election. The program was turfed and replaced by Harper's Choice in Child Care Allowance that gave \$1200 a year to families for each child under six. Along with this move that pulled the rug out from under advocates for a national program, Harper cut the GST from 7 to 6 and then to 5%, slicing \$14-billion a year from government coffers, money that could have gone towards the national system and other languishing social programs.

Fast forward eight years.

Advocates for a national early-education and child care policy gathered in Winnipeg in November, 2014 for a momentous conference aimed at generating "new ideas and strategies to put child care back on the political agenda." But in a pre-emptive strike two weeks earlier, Harper announced enhancements to his Universal Child Care Benefit, the new name for his Choice in Child Care Allowance. The Conservatives boosted the annual payment from \$1200 to \$1920 and added a benefit of \$720 a year to families with children aged between six and 17.

The new benefits will be paid out as a lump sum shortly before the 2015 election. Clever!

Along with this increased payout, Harper brought in his long-promised, income-splitting scheme for families, a tax policy that will encourage one parent, most likely the mother, to stay home and raise their children. Income-splitting will benefit only the smallest sliver of families, mostly of the high-income, single-earner variety. Nonetheless it removes close to another \$3 billion a year from potential use in a national child care program.

Harper's fierce opposition to national child care is no fluke. Child care is but the latest battlefield in an ongoing war between social democratic and neoliberal proponents of the proper role of government. A battle over whether society's dominant frame of understanding should favour individual choice alone or should include the quest for broader societal equality.

Both viewpoints put families front and centre. In the case of neoliberalism, families are expected to look out for themselves. For social democrats, families are thought to contribute to, but also benefit from, collective commitment to a common good.

The social democratic view is that child care is not solely the responsibility of individuals and that there is value - economic, social and otherwise- in creating community institutions that support families. Moreover, universal, affordable and reliable child care is seen as a way not only to build solidarity and connection between and across different segments of society, but also as a means to target and uplift lower-income and other marginalized families in the name of equality.

Harper, as you may have guessed it, sits firmly in the neoliberal fold.

His individual-choice view of family responsibility derives from the writings of neoliberalism's most influential economist, Milton Friedman. In his 1955 essay, "The Role of Government in Education," Friedman made the case that government should ensure universal access to education, but rejected the idea that government needed to run schools. He proposed a system of government-funded vouchers that would enable parents to choose the school-private, public, religious-their children would attend.

Child care isn't education, nor is it early education, but it isn't far removed. Many American states, for instance, follow Friedman's prescription for privatized education by providing vouchers for their pre-kindergarten programs. And a "benefit" -a payment made by an employer, the state or an insurance company- like Harper's UCCB is merely a step away from a "voucher"-a written affidavit or authorization. All that's missing is a piece of paper.

Friedman believed that parents should be wholly financially responsible for their children's care and education. He would not have been impressed by the New Democrats' current universal child-care proposals.

"Destruction of the family has long been a key item in the socialist litany," Friedman charged in 1988. "The family is the most important independent center of power capable of threatening the unlimited power of the state. It must be destroyed if the socialist ideal of an all-powerful state is to be achieved," he warned. "Twenty-four hour care in communal centers from cradle to adulthood is therefore the ideal socialist arrangement."

Of course, Friedman provided no evidence for these astonishing claims.

Margaret Thatcher, one of the first true neoliberal politicians, didn't go as far as Friedman in condemning social democracy. She did however, famously declare that "there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families." As Prime Minister, Thatcher froze child benefits and refused to invest in affordable child care. Instead she criticized working mothers for raising a "crèche generation." (A crèche is a nursery where babies and young children are cared for during the working day while their parents do something else, like work, study or shop.)

She made her famous remarks on society in *Woman's Own* magazine in 1987, after winning her third majority government. "And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look to themselves first" she added. Thatcher could have been describing the ethos that underpins Harper's child care policies, where support goes directly to parents because they are, in his view, the only ones who know what's best for their children.

NDP leader Tom Mulcair's accusation that the Harper Conservatives lack a "real child-care plan" must be music to the ears of those who, like Harper, believe that government planning will always lead to worse results than if the market or voluntary organizations do it. Nothing is more suspect to the right than government planning, especially when it is guided by scientific advice. For this view they have the authority of Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek, neoliberalism's leading light. In his 1944 manifesto, *The Road to Serfdom*, Hayek warned that social democracy and government planning will lead to slavery and serfdom, not freedom.

Planning will "make the very men [sic] who are most anxious to plan society the most dangerous if they are allowed to do so," he cautioned. "From the saintly and single-minded idealist to the fanatic is often but a step."

Stephen Harper, the Hayek-influenced economist, has taken this warning to heart. Not a fan of sociology or scientific expertise, Harper's elimination of the mandatory long-form census is of major consequence here too. Without the accurate, reliable information on the needs of today's families with young children provided by the census, the policy demands of advocates for early education and universal child care have less statistical support to be persuasive.

Not to mention his treasury-draining, \$1920-a-year benefit will not create a single child care space, let alone a national program. What it will do, rather, is make the introduction of any national child care that much more difficult to finance - and imagine - in the future.

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