

Are we there yet? Post-turkey reflections on childcare in 2015 ^[1]

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After the overstuffed turkey dinners, eggnog and latkes, the holidays are a perfect time to reflect on the past year before gearing up for the new one. This year, with a federal election looming and ChildCare 2020, Canada's first childcare policy conference in ten years just behind us, the holiday was an opportunity for heavy-duty musings about childcare in 2015.

Canadians are hyper-aware that the next federal election is imminent with October 19 the fixed date and a spring election evermore improbable as the economy slips and slides. Whenever it is, childcare will be an ardently debated election issue, likely to be influenced by the considerable food-for-thought coming from ChildCare 2020.

ChildCare 2020's goal was gaining consensus on a national vision for a universal, quality childcare system and strategizing to make it a reality. Its tone was set by several amazing speakers-the ever-inspiring Stephan Lewis, Quebec economist Pierre Fortin, Scotland's Bronwen Cohen and Flemish scholar Michel Vandenbroeck who reflected on big ideas-that childcare is a human right, about integrating care and education, about the pitfalls of relying on the market for childcare, and about childcare's tangible benefits to the economy-all backed by the solid knowledge that's become available in the last decade.

Former Social Development Minister Ken Dryden delivered a unique, "birds-eye" view reinforcing how much big thinking about childcare has evolved in Canada. In 2004, Mr. Dryden was tasked with implementing the Liberals' promised national childcare program only to have it abruptly undone by the Conservatives who replaced them in 2006. At ChildCare 2020, he observed that a key question that should be asked is "how does the vision turn into execution? What's the plan?" and that a good slogan would have been "From vision to implementing the vision" (not "from vision to action").

Perhaps most significantly, though, he remarked on how much childcare advocacy had "matured" since his time.

Looking back, it's evident how true this is. Twenty-five years ago, childcare movement players weren't thinking about how to blend care and education, the relationship between childcare and inequality or about how Canada's childcare market model fails to deliver. Economists like Pierre Fortin hadn't demonstrated the tangible benefits of universal childcare to the economy using concrete data.

Most important, we were less clear about why adding on bits and pieces-a training strategy here, a regulation change there, money to "create spaces"-is the wrong way to go if the goal is high quality universal early childhood education and care (ECEC) services that Canadian families want and need.

That is, we hadn't become clear about why and how building a child care *system* is paramount-fundamental to real change.

Looking back at key past childcare election initiatives shows how much childcare-thinking has evolved. In the 1993 federal election, the Liberals' "Red Book" promised to "create up to 150,000 spaces". It just touched on affordability, mentioning three-way cost-sharing: 40% federal, 40% provincial and 20% parental fees. It mentioned "quality" but only as an adjective-none of the hard stuff about the ECE workforce's low pay or poor working conditions and recognition. And it made no mention of today's front-and-centre ECEC issues-blending care and education, public management and the folly of relying on a childcare market. There were no principles, no policy framework and no building blocks for a high quality accessible ECEC system. At the time, it was mostly about spaces, spaces, spaces. (This election promise was unceremoniously abandoned after the Liberals won the 1993 election).

Fast forward to another federal election. The Liberals had been in power since 1993 but in 2004 new leader Paul Martin put forward the *Foundations* proposal for a national childcare program. Citing Europe's better developed ECEC systems and positioning childcare both as learning and care, it specified four "QUAD" principles - Quality, Universality, Accessibility and Developmental and a five year funding commitment. Provinces/territories "to receive funding under the new *Foundations* program" were to develop "action plans" and "will be invited to pass legislation implementing the QUAD principles".

The *Foundations* proposal was significantly more developed than the spaces, spaces, spaces approach. It put forward the idea that provincial/territorial programs would need to meet the national "QUAD" principles as well as the dual care/education roles of quality childcare, although it didn't tackle quality or governance issues, which the childcare movement advocated to address up front.

Although all provinces/territories agreed to it, *Foundations* too wound up on the crowded shelf of unfinished national childcare initiatives with the 2006 Conservative election victory.

Flash forward to late 2014 and the consensus at ChildCare 2020. A focus of much of the discussion at the conference was about why Canada needs a real child care system, not more of the same one-off measures. The background "vision" paper set out three principles for a national ECEC system - **Quality**, **Accessibility** (including affordability) and **Comprehensiveness** and three "System Components" needed to make the principles a reality: **A National Policy Framework**, beginning with the premise that childcare is a public good, not a

commodity; **A Long-Term Sustained Funding Plan**; and **Shared Work on System Development** such as data, research and a national quality framework.

At the conference's end, Toronto City Councillor Janet Davis called on conference participants to endorse the vision paper. They did-unanimously, embracing the conference's system-thinking. Many vowed to take their support for this approach back to their own communities.

So -- are we there yet? Canadian childcare advocacy and policy-thinking *has* "matured" considerably. We expect to be hearing a lot about childcare in 2015. The New Democrats have released their platform and the Conservative government has more-or-less released theirs with the "Family Tax Cut". But the debate is yet to come. It seems hopeful that it will be a more mature, 2015-type childcare discussion: public management and markets, integration, systems and patchwork, system-building and spaces, public goods and commodification. There seems to be good recognition that -as the labour movement's Rethink Childcare campaign has been explaining- "childcare shouldn't be a matter of luck" or a commodity but a human right.

Next year between Christmas and New Years, after the turkey, eggnog and latkes, we should be looking back at a very interesting year for childcare, and for Canada. Hopefully, it will have been a time of opportunity.

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Tags:

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