

Child care's merry-go-round ^[1]

Child care crunch

Author: Rabson, Mia

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EXCERPTS

In a radio interview, a well-known national journalist and social activist did not mince words when describing the state of child care in Canada.

"Large numbers of children are being cared for in questionable and often hazardous private arrangements," she said.

That quote was delivered on CBC Radio by June Callwood on March 5, 1966.

Don Giesbrecht, CEO of the Canadian Child Care Federation, said someone could have said the exact same thing yesterday.

"It's so poignant," said Giesbrecht.

Nearly five decades since Callwood added her voice to those calling for a national child-care strategy, there is nothing of the sort in place.

Between 1984 and 2014, some form of child-care pledge has been a major plank in all but one election. Every major national political party -- the Conservatives, the Liberals and the NDP -- have offered varying options and different amounts of cash. The issue has been studied, restudied and studied some more. But for one reason or another, most national plans to create a Canada-wide system of affordable and high-quality early childhood education have fallen apart.

Seventy-five years ago, the federal and provincial governments saw the benefit of a national child-care program, when essential wartime industries were struggling to find workers with so many men fighting overseas. To get more women into those jobs, Ottawa and the provinces agreed to the Dominion-Provincial Wartime Agreement, one aspect of which established day nurseries for the children of mothers who worked in war-effort industries.

The cost was shared 50-50 between Ottawa and the provinces, and women were charged a small daily fee -- 35 cents for their first child between ages two and six, and 15 to 20 cents for each additional child. It is the equivalent of between \$2 and \$5 in today's market.

Only Ontario really took advantage of the program -- provinces such as Manitoba were simply too small to have enough wartime industries to make it worthwhile.

In 1946, after the war ended, Canada pulled out of the program, and that was that. Ontario tried to keep some of it going, even passing legislation in 1946 to set standards and training requirements, but Canada's great foray into early childhood education was essentially over.

Between 1946 and 2014, there have been dozens of commissions, task forces, studies, policies, promises and initiatives on child care. Two national commissions recommended a national child-care program. A federal task force in 1986 called the situation critical.

Canada came close to a national child-care plan in 1988 under Brian Mulroney's Conservatives, when the Canada Child Care Act would have flowed funding for new spaces and offered tax breaks to parents.

But it died when the 1988 election was called and was never reintroduced as Canada said it could no longer afford it.

The Liberals under Jean Chrétien promised a new version in 1993, but again never went forward when all the focus turned to slaying the deficit.

There were some bits and pieces for child care in the early 2000s with federal-provincial agreements and initiatives. But it wasn't until 2004 that prime minister Paul Martin put a national program back on the table.

Giesbrecht said Martin's plan is the closest the country has ever been to having a national child-care program. Martin's promise -- \$5 billion over five years to create 250,000 more spaces -- was followed up with agreements signed with each province to allow flexibility for how each province would spend its share.

Manitoba was going to use its share on training and wages for early-childhood educators. Alberta was going to help stay-at-home parents enrol their kids in preschool programs.

Giesbrecht noted the Alberta option is critical in the debate about national child-care programs. It's not, he said, intended to compel parents who want to stay at home with their children, to enroll them in full-time school. Rather, early-childhood education programs take many formats, he said. Daycare is a big part, but preschools, parenting classes, even mommy-and-me play groups, all contribute to helping kids get the early start on learning research has shown is critical to brain development.

"The Paul Martin plan, it was signalling something big," said Giesbrecht. "The money was being put to really good use."

But it was not to be. Prime Minister Stephen Harper and the Conservatives called the plan too bureaucratic and inefficient and set aside all those provincial agreements in favour of the Universal Child Care Benefit. The UCCB -- initially a \$100-a-month payment for all children under six -- costs \$2.5 billion a year.

It is billed as a way to give parents a choice in child care, with the Conservatives fond of saying nobody knows better how to raise a child than mom and dad.

Heading into the 2015 election, child care is on the agenda again. The Conservatives are coming to the table with an expanded UCCB, increasing it to \$160 a month for kids under six and adding \$60 a month for kids between six and 17 years old. The NDP, meanwhile, offered up a universal national child-care program to create and maintain a million child-care spaces nationwide at a maximum cost of \$15 a day.

It is heavily based on the Quebec universal child-care program established in 1997.

The Liberals have not yet announced their stance.

In the last 30 years, the demand for child care has grown as more and more families can't afford to have a stay at home parent, Giesbrecht said. Between 1976 and 2009, the percentage of women in the workforce more than doubled to 67 per cent from 31 per cent.

In 2011, Statistics Canada said nearly two-thirds of parents with kids between two and four years old relied on some form of non-parental child care.

Yet Giesbrecht notes, as Callwood did nearly 50 years ago, many of those kids are in care situations we know little about, have little ability to ensure even basic standards are being met and situations some parents say they have no choice but to accept. Statistics Canada reported one in 10 parents of kids under 14 chose their current child-care arrangement because it was the only option they had. In Manitoba, that figure is one in five.

Giesbrecht said it is troubling that almost 40 years after Callwood called for safe, quality and affordable child care, it still has not happened.

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