

Child care at the Broadbent Institute's Progress Summit 2015 "Building a better Canada" ^[1]

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AVAILABILITY

Broadbent Institute's Progress Summit 2015 ^[2]

At the March 26-28 Progress Summit held by Ottawa's Broadbent Institute, the need for a national child care program arose again and again. "Standing out among all policy ideas, a national #childcare program was the most mentioned and the most cheered", tweeted Toronto's Tim Ehlich.

Formally, child care was highlighted in two places at the Summit: as part of a panel discussion "Canada's inequality problem: What's the fix?" and as part of the Ignite session that closed the conference. The presentations that were part of these two sessions are below.

1. Panel: "Canada's inequality problem: What's the fix?"

Moderator: Heather Scoffield, Bureau Chief, Canadian Press

Craig Alexander, TD Bank

Miles Corak, University of Ottawa

Stephen Kakfwi, Ex-Premier, Northwest Territories

Martha Friendly, Childcare Resource and Research Unit

Friendly: A national system of high quality universal child care is part of a more equal Canada

On this panel, I'm the sole presenter who is speaking about a particular policy lever - a national universal high quality early childhood education and care system.

I want to stress that while child care is integral to any agenda to "turn the tide" on inequality, child care by itself is not a magic bullet. Rather it should be seen as one piece of a progressive public policy "package".

So - what IS a "national" system of high quality early childhood education and care?

I'm using the term "national early childhood education and child care system" to mean publicly-managed publicly-funded care and learning services that are available and affordable for all children everywhere in Canada (whose parents choose it) from around the end of their first year (following a well-paid mat/pat leave) up to compulsory school age. This includes means centres, nursery schools, regulated home child care and kindergartens-as well as outside-school-hours services up to age 12.

These programs play multiple roles for children, families and society and can be designed to blend care, learning, and support for children and families at one and the same time, and all levels of government should play roles in making this happen.

Why DOES action on child care matter-how is child care a policy lever that can help combat inequality?

I would argue that child care is one of the best all-around policy levers because it fits into so many parts of an equality agenda-parts that will be hard to address without a real child care system. That is - quality child care is indispensable in many ways.

If you think about:

- how low income single moms can get education, training and employment to make ends meet; or how young , modest income couples can both find and keep good jobs;
- or how young women who have taken their mothers' advice can keep up with professional careers;
- or how newcomers to Canada can reassert their credentials, get training or job experience and learn English or French;
- or how Indigenous Canadians can overcome generations of oppression;

...to tackle any of these, and others, needs what is now often the missing puzzle piece-reliable affordable high quality child care.

I also want to emphasize the pitfall of overlooking how important it is that child care is high quality.

Based on everything we know, the importance-from the perspective of children's development and wellbeing-that child care is good quality cannot be overstated. Research shows that high quality child care is beneficial socially and cognitively for children but poor quality child care may even be harmful-even, occasionally, dangerous.

Simply put, IF it is well-designed, high quality universal child care plays many roles, thus being part of combating Canada's various inequalities.

This means that high quality child care is a linchpin in strategies to address gender, generational, racial and income inequalities.

It is also a two-generational policy lever, as high quality child care is beneficial both for young children (especially - but not exclusively - those who are disadvantaged) and for their parents (especially-but not exclusively -women).

The last point I want to make is about what needs to be done to tackle the issue of child care so it can contribute to "turning the tide" on inequality. Specifically, what can the next Government of Canada do?

We all know that Canadian child care is a patchwork rife with inequalities of all sorts that fails to meet most families' needs. Canada's reliance on a child care market-in which governments take limited responsibility-is the key explanation for this persistent patchwork.

What this means is that Canadian child care is mostly developed and delivered by market forces including a growing, increasingly corporatized-for-profit sector. It's primarily paid for by parent fees or public funds delivered through effectual, privatized, demand-side schemes such as cheques to families, tax breaks and fee subsidies.

Not only does the federal government not have a child care policy but the provinces/territories have not developed full well-integrated systems either.

At the same time, comparative research shows that government leadership is essential for creating the solid public policy frameworks and sustained public funding that are shown to be central to creating a system of high quality early childhood education and care that can contribute to reducing inequality and creating a fairer, more inclusive Canada for all.

What's the remedy?

The next government of Canada needs to commit to bringing in a national early childhood education and care system based on several ideas or principles:

First - that universal child care is a public good, a human right and part of building the equal, inclusive, just Canada that we value;

Second - that high quality is key for children's development and well-being;

And third - to ensure that the needs and desires of families of all types, inclinations and circumstances can be met, we need a COMPREHENSIVE system of child care services and related family policies-this is the way to ensure that it isn't "one size fits all".

Putting this in place requires first, a national policy framework - a long-term well-designed plan developed by the federal government together with provinces, territories and Indigenous communities;

It also means provincial/territorial plans for service design and delivery that are consistent with the overall principles;

It also means long-term sustained public funding, to keep child care affordable, to pay ECE's decent wages and keep quality high;

And finally - it means much more public management (such things as planning and good data) with all levels of government collaborating to build a system for the care and educational needs of young children and for supporting parents in work, education and training.

Finally, to conclude -

Child care also fits into an agenda for a more equal Canada though its direct link with human rights. Access to high quality child care is a children's right, a women's right, and a human right, as defined by various United Nations agreements and thus part of Canada's (and the provinces') human rights obligations.

Child care as a right means ensuring that children and young families get a fair share of our collective resources. This means shifting the way we think about child care from considering it a dispensable commodity to the idea that it needs to be a basic part of our social infrastructure, recognizing that inequality for families and children undermines Canada as a protector of human rights and a good place to live.

Note: These remarks are mostly based on a **Broadbent Institute** commentary for the Inequality project ^[3] and on the "vision" paper ^[4] prepared for the ChildCare2020 conference last November.

2. Saving the progressive state, with Harry Leslie Smith, author and WW II veteran

Response and ignite session

Moderator: Mike Layton, Toronto City Councillor

Hans Marotte, Mouvement Action-Chômage de Montréal

Katrina Pacey, Pivot Legal Society

Kofi Hope, Community Empowering Enterprises

Sharon Gregson, Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC

Gregson - My name is Sharon Gregson. I work on the \$10aDay Child Care Campaign in British Columbia.

In this election year, I am working with my colleagues in BC and across the country to ensure that child care is the issue on which people decide their vote.

You all know the reality for families with young children;

- far too few quality spaces
- parent fees are sky high
- mothers are short-changing their careers,
- early childhood educators earn poverty wages
- commercial child care chains are growing
- even the Quebec child care system is under threat.

Canada ranks last on child care - last! - among developed countries.

But it doesn't have to be this way.

Countries that value children, women and caregiving make child care a public good instead of leaving it to fail in the marketplace, as Canada currently does.

Countries that invest in building a child care system realize benefits for children, women, families and communities.

Public investment in child care pays for itself and creates a more equal society and a more sustainable economy.

In other words, child care is about much more than child care in this federal election. It's a proxy for the kind of Canada we want to live, work and raise families in.

The recent Conservative and NDP announcements related to child care provide two competing views of Canada's future.

Faced with rising inequality and a weak economy, the federal Conservatives propose an increasingly individualized, pay-your-own-way Canada where the richest get income-splitting tax breaks and Harper tries to buy-off parents with cheques in the mail.

In contrast, Tom Mulcair and the NDP have opened the door for us to collectively create a more equal, family-friendly and economically strong Canada with a commitment to invest in building a child care system that costs families no more than \$15 a day.

Women, and men like Harry Smith, built the systems we cherish today. The systems they built were public policy responses to social and economic realities facing Canadians at the time. Systems like public K-12 education, post-secondary, healthcare, libraries and emergency services.

Similarly, building a child care system is a public policy response to today's realities; realities that affect - directly or indirectly - the majority of Canadians.

Child care is a transformative and radical issue in Canada. It is a building block for the better Canada we all want that must include Indigenous children too. A vision for child care must recognize the different history of Aboriginal Peoples and their autonomy in how they care for their children.

So, I say - to the Liberal politician who asked me if kids wouldn't really be better off at home with their mum, or to the BC cabinet minister who said if women have kids they should stay at home and look after them....

Those are 19th century views.

21st century women of Canada demand real options and child care creates that.

Since launching the \$10aDay campaign we've moved from just describing the current child care crisis to advancing a concrete solution. Our list of supporters represents 2 million British Columbians and grows larger every week. We have momentum and we have moved the dial on this issue in our province.

I always make sure my friends, neighbours, my hairdresser, my kids friends, and people next to me on airplanes, all talk child care...

But my pledge to you for progress in this election year is to ramp-up...

I pledge to help everyone understand the value of mothers in the workforce.

... the benefits of offering young children a quality early childhood education.

And, I pledge to help everyone understand that if we want a Canada with a strong economy then...

We must elect a government that will invest in child care.

Region: Canada [5]

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