

Most families count on child care ^[1]

Opinion

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EXCERPTS

Today is the International Day of Families.

It's a day that was set aside two decades ago by the United Nations to reflect on the importance of families.

It comes this year at the end of Child Care Week in Canada, which the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada used to kick off a campaign urging Canadians to "vote child care" in 2015.

The NDP -- which right now has the only campaign pledge on the table to create a universal, national child-care program -- spent most of the week needling the government on the child-care issue and demanding to know why the Conservatives don't support a national universal program.

The Conservatives pushed back that the NDP program is an insult to families that don't use child-care centres.

The NDP program -- unveiled by NDP Leader Tom Mulcair last fall -- would ramp up over eight years until the government is spending \$5 billion a year to subsidize one million child-care spaces so parents pay no more than \$15 a day.

Mulcair told the Free Press in an interview last winter the NDP program will be different in each province because child care is a provincial responsibility and each province will get a say in how it looks and how it is run. That includes things like what kind of child care it can apply to and standards of care.

But in politics, a lack of detail lets your opponents tell people what you are going to do. So it is that Minister of State for Social Development Candice Bergen has decided the NDP plan is only going to help families who use child-care centres, even though Mulcair told the Free Press in March that isn't true. And she says that means it is good for less than 10 per cent of families.

Bergen's office confirms that figure is based on a 2014 Statistics Canada report, that shows 46 per cent of parents with kids under 15 used child care, and one-third of those parents used a child-care centre. Even giving Bergen the benefit of the doubt that the marker should be parents of kids under 14 and not parents of kids under six, who are far higher users of child care in general, her math is off by more than five percentage points.

But I digress. Bergen and the Conservatives want us to believe a program that specifically funds paid child-care arrangements is insulting to parents who don't use it.

The Conservative plan, she says, benefits everyone.

The Conservative plan has two main components -- the Universal Child Care Benefit and family income splitting. It is true the UCCB will benefit every family with monthly cheques of \$160 for all kids under six and \$60 for kids aged six to 17.

But what about family income splitting, a tax plan that lets families with two parents transfer up to \$50,000 in income from a higher-income earner to the lower-income earner so those funds are taxed at a lower rate? It can save up to \$2,000 a year on a tax bill.

The Conservatives themselves say 1.7 million families will benefit from income splitting.

But there are 9.4 million families in Canada, and 5.6 million families with kids. So the Conservatives can't deny the second main component of their plan only helps, wait for it, some families. In fact, it only helps about one-third of families with kids. Single parents are left out completely, as are families where incomes are similar.

The NDP has sworn upside down and sideways it plans to keep the UCCB and its \$8-billion price tag.

So in reality, both parties have components of plans to help families with kids that don't reach every single person.

In fact, most government programs don't help everyone. Whether it's boutique tax cuts or aid for the poor, some programs just aren't

meant to be universal.

Yet somehow the debate about whether or not Ottawa should participate in funding actual daycare spaces is turning into that age-old war between working and stay-at-home parents. You know, the kind that make everyone feel crappy about their lives. The kind that makes a working mom (full disclosure: I'm one), feel guilty all the time or the kind that makes a stay-at-home parent feel inadequate.

There was even a discussion between Bergen and NDP social development critic Jinny Sims in question period about what makes a "real family," with Bergen arguing the NDP is insulting parents who don't use child-care centres with a program that doesn't include them, and Sims barging back with allegations Bergen is ignoring the "real families" who are crying out for help to pay for child care.

The reality in Canada is more than two in three moms of young children work outside the home. For some moms, it's because they can't afford not to work. For some moms it's a lifestyle choice, because they enjoy their job and feel they are a better parent if they work. For some moms it's both.

And for some moms, they can't work because they can't afford child care.

Those are the realities of "real families" that should be the crux of this debate.

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