

Election 2015 blog: "The more we get together"... to build a national child care program ^[1]

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Child Care NOW federal election 2015 blog series

Child care has become a key issue in Election 2015. To support the public interest and political debate, the Childcare Resource and Research Unit's blog, Child Care Now, will be published each week between August 12 and October 19. Blogs will be topical, based on such questions as: What is a "national child care program"? Why does Canada need a national child care program? When we say "high quality affordable" child care, what does this mean? What else do families with young children need, and what's the difference between other family policies (like a child benefit) and child care? The blogs may be based on available documents, some may be written by guest bloggers and they may also be circulated by sources other than the CRRU website, such as rabble.ca ^[3] and the [Broadbent Institute](http://BroadbentInstitute.org) ^[4].

"The more we get together"...to build a national child care program is the third blog in the series.

All blogs in this series may be found on the [CRRU's website](http://CRRU.org) ^[5]

"The more we get together"... to build a national child care program

It's pretty clear that in the often fractious environment of Canadian federalism, Canadians do better when the multi levels of government and political parties work together to put people's well-being first. This goes for all sorts of things -- environmental protection, trade, securities regulation, infrastructure. Nowhere is it clearer than in the social policy arena-health, welfare and social provision^[1].

At the risk of sounding saccharine, I'd say that the old Raffi song "the more we get together, the happier we'll be" was right. This goes for a lot of things -- not least of which is child care.

If Canada is ever to have a workable, high quality, universal national child care program, it will take all levels and stripes of governments across the country working together to build it. At this point, this would mean all political parties putting their child care platforms on the table for public debate and provinces/territories to be defining their plans for improving child care. This would be constructive in anticipation of the possibility that after October 19, there could be a government in Ottawa that is committed to a national child care program.

Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne has been clear that she supports the idea of a national child care program and about the failure of the Harper government's approach. Last November, her caucus supported an (Ontario) NDP motion: "this province should partner with the federal government to ensure that every parent in Ontario has access to child care at a cost of no more than \$15 a day per child".

The recent spat about whether or not the Ontario government sees eye to eye with the federal NDP on their child care platform or with their fellow Liberals on theirs (which is yet-to-be announced) suggests that child care may be resonating with voters in this election campaign in a new way.

It's no wonder. Canada lags way behind most of its peer countries on child care. There is no doubt that in the absence of a modern approach to child care provisions, families across Canada experience hardship and stress. While this is certainly linked to the absence of a national program, it's also the sad fact that none of the provinces/territories -- which have constitutional responsibility for child care and early education (ECEC) -- can point to a comprehensive joined-up, scaled-up ECEC program either.

While there have been many ECEC initiatives in the last decade -- from Quebec's significant move to base-fund affordable child care rather than subsidize individual parents, to Ontario's full school-day kindergarten for all four^[2] and five year olds, to PEI's more publicly-managed Early Years Centres, to Newfoundland's Capacity Initiative, to Manitoba's Commission now studying ECEC redesign (and others) -- there's no place in Canada where one can say ECEC works well for families.

There are daily media stories about the impact of ill-advised policy on families. Under Quebec's budget cuts for example, school-age fees are slated to double and fees for 0-4s to rise while the poorer quality for-profit sector has burgeoned. In the wake of introduction of full-day kindergarten, Ontario features Canada's highest child care fees, Toronto's subsidy wait list reaches almost 18,000, there have been multiple closures of municipal centres and college lab schools while most families still fall back on unregulated child care. In Nova Scotia, the media has reported thousands of centre violations (which did motivate some rule changes) and a Nunavut report has cited the lack of child care as keeping Inuit parents out of the workforce.

But the child care penny may have dropped for voters. A recent Forum Research poll found that 2/3 saw the Conservative's big pre-election "child care" benefit cheque as a vote-buying ploy despite that fact that 70% responded that they needed the money. Few NDP (5%) or Liberal (4%) supporters said the cheque will encourage them to vote Tory. Despite incessant right-wing attempts to paint a national

child care program as "folly" and "too costly", it does seem that the winds may have shifted.

Last year, cross-Canada child care advocates gathered at ChildCare2020, a national policy conference, to ascertain support for a vision that begins with federal leadership to put a national child care program in place. The vision calls for treating child care as a public good, taking a universal approach with affordable, fully inclusive services for all families and making a firm commitment to excellent quality. It envisions moving from child care's marketized patchwork to a not-for-profit, publicly-managed, publicly-funded, publicly-accountable system based on solid evidence.

Integral to the vision is "getting together" to advance common goals-in Canadian federalism this means collaboration among the levels of government. This collaboration would include defining federal/provincial/territorial/Indigenous community roles and responsibilities, plans for expansion, transition to public management and to public (base) service funding, ongoing quality improvement, a human resource strategy and public accountability including data and research.

The vision acknowledges that developing an accessible, high quality child care system is a complex task that will require that the multiple stakeholders from across Canada "get together" more, as the song goes.

So to get back to Raffi: those of you who are what he calls "belugagrads" (or who are on Twitter) may know that Raffi has a new song out called "I Want My Canada Back" [6]. For me, part of getting Canada back would be finally getting that universal high quality national child care program -- one designed to include all children and all families. Doing this well requires that governments and political representatives "play well with others" -- that they "get together more" in the interests of furthering the public good.

For many of us in the child care world, and perhaps for many other Canadians, this would go a long way to feeling good about Canada again.

[1] In education, where many argue child care fits, there is no federal funding or policy role and only limited provincial/territorial collaboration.

[2] A majority of provinces/territories have full-day kindergarten for five year olds but only Ontario provides for all four year olds.

Tags:

election [7]

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