

# Leah McLaren: Child care affects all of us. It's time our politicians took notice<sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

Whenever a newly pregnant friend asks for advice on preparing for the arrival of her first baby, I say the same thing: Think about child care. Be realistic about what you will need and what you can afford. Sit down (with your partner if you have one) and draw up a budget. Do the math. Do not wait until you are exhausted, unshowered and three months into a maternity leave to start panicking about daycare waiting lists, government subsidies and nanny shares. Try to figure out a realistic solution as early as you can if you have any interest in protecting your career, autonomy and sanity as a new parent.

Usually, my pregnant friends look slightly crestfallen. Probably they were hoping for recommendations on local baby massage classes and gender-neutral nursery colour schemes. But no matter, I'd think. Soon they will understand.

The single most shocking thing to me about becoming a mother was the lack of affordable child care, both in Canada and in Britain (where I was living when my son was born). It was an issue I had heard responsible people around me banging on about for years, but one that had sort of floated above my comprehension, like the sound of the grown-ups talking in the animated *Charlie Brown*.

Like car insurance or taxes, I expected organizing child care to be a pain – one of those annoying but ultimately surmountable aspects of grown-up life. What I did not expect it to be was a financially crippling, life-paralyzing quagmire.

In Canada (as in Britain), I was shocked to find little or no access to affordable child care during my son's first years of life. Like most families, we shouldered the heavy financial burden of full-time child care all on our own with no help from the government or extended family (everyone lives out of town). It was either that or one of us quit working. Not a pretty choice, or a realistic one for most parents, either.

This week in Ontario, the provincial government rolled out its new regulations for unlicensed daycare. The news is good in theory (daycare should be safe and regulated) and potentially bad in practice (it will mean more low-income parents get their kids chucked out of what might be their only affordable child-care option).

More importantly, it serves to highlight the larger problem: What Canada has long needed, and in fact very nearly once achieved, is a universal, federally regulated and provincially implemented child-care program.

Just in case you are a new parent, or recently pregnant, or someone who, for whatever reason, wasn't paying much attention to boring grown-up issues, such as "affordable child care" or "maternity benefits," when Stephen Harper came to power eight years ago, I'd like to tell you a little bedtime story.

Once upon a time there was a prime minister named Paul Martin.

In 2005, his government developed a national "early learning and child care" program. The Martin Liberals negotiated agreements with all the provinces and territories, which set out public action plans to proceed as directed by the federal government. The vision was a new, Scandinavian-style era of universal child care for Canada – something that experts, task forces, the National Action Committee on the Status of Women and the majority of Canadian parents had spent decades calling for.

The provinces, starting with Manitoba, even began to spend the new multiyear federal funding. Then, in 2006, Stephen Harper was elected and immediately cancelled the program.

The end.

It doesn't quite have the soothing effect of *Goodnight Moon*, does it?

"The problem in Canada is that early-childhood education and child care is currently a marketplace, not a system," says Martha Friendly, executive director of Canada's Childcare Resource and Research Unit, which provides public education, resources and consultation on

early-childhood education and child-care policy.

“If we really cared about supporting child care, we’d be putting money directly into the services, not sending it out to people. We’d treat it more like health care – something to be planned federally and implemented province-by-province. But for that to happen, we need a federal government with an overarching child-care plan.”

Access to affordable early childhood education and child care is a public good. It’s also something that Canada needs to be a fair, democratic, equitable and economically successful society.

In Quebec, the \$7-a-day daycare system has proved hugely popular and fiscally practical, acting as it does as an engine for workplace productivity and gender equality in that province.

It’s an election year, one of the few times we can count on policy makers to discuss child care publicly. This year, the NDP has introduced plans for a program, not dissimilar to Mr. Martin’s, that would cost parents \$15 a day and be rolled out over eight long years. The federal Liberals have yet to unveil their child-care platform, but there are rumours it will go head to head with the NDP’s federal platform. Meanwhile, the Conservatives, apart from their so-called “Christmas in July” child-care benefit payout, don’t appear to have a platform at all.

Child care is not a women’s issue. It’s not even a family issue. Like health care or education, it’s an all-of-us-in-it-together issue. And yet it’s also something many of us don’t think about until we are hard up against it, confronting the impossible life choices that materialize when you live in a society with a lack of affordable daycare – a society that sentimentalizes children but not the act of actually caring for them.

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**Region:** Canada [3]

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