

On Oct. 19, Canadians need to vote for a universal child care program ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Most undergraduate students probably don't consider affordable childcare to be a top issue in this federal election campaign. Faced with a challenging labour market, out-of-control housing prices and unstable employment, we are, on average, taking longer to finish school, enter into established relationships and have children of our own.

But perhaps we should be paying attention to what the federal parties have to say about childcare. After all, if we decide to start a family and leave Quebec and its universal childcare program behind for a job in Toronto, we can expect a single year of unsubsidized childcare for an infant to cost twice as much as the tuition for all three years of a Quebec bachelor's degree.

It's clear the Conservative Party's plan isn't working.

In 2005, the then-Liberal government came close to establishing a national childcare program, but the Conservatives scrapped those plans after coming to power the following year. They chose instead to launch the Universal Child Care Benefit, which provides parents of kids aged five and under with \$160 per child per month. That barely makes a dent in childcare costs; for a single infant spot, Canadian families pay average monthly fees of \$1,152 in Ontario, \$1,047 in British Columbia and \$825 in Nova Scotia.

Two national parties—the New Democratic Party and the Green Party—have unequivocally declared their support for a national universal childcare program.

The Greens argue that the bilateral agreements reached in 2005 between the Liberal government and the provinces, which have jurisdiction over the delivery of childcare, should be used as a starting point and revamped.

The NDP, meanwhile, has taken Quebec's childcare program as a model, pledging to create one million childcare spaces across the country that would cost parents \$15 per day or less. Funding, they say, will be phased in over eight years.

The Liberals have criticized the NDP's plan.

"[NDP leader Tom] Mulcair's solution will benefit families who are making an awful lot of money and quite frankly don't need subsidized childcare spaces," Trudeau told CBC Radio's *The House* in May.

It's not entirely clear from this statement why Trudeau opposes the NDP's plan. Is it because the federal Liberals feel wealthy families should be charged more than \$15 per day for a subsidized childcare spot? Or is it that they think wealthy families don't need subsidized care so priority should go to low-income or middle-class families in filling these spots? There's a big difference.

Putting daycare fees on a sliding scale based on family income and charging the wealthiest more than \$15 per day merits consideration. This year, Quebec's Liberal government decided to abandon the fixed \$7-a-day rate previously charged to parents and instead start differentiating, or "modulating," daycare fees in relation to household income. Families making less than \$50,000 a year will continue to pay just \$7.30 per day, but above that, fees will rise as income rises, reaching a maximum daily cost of \$20 when household income hits \$160,000 annually.

The rationale is that a wealthier family can afford to pay more and although the government should subsidize daycare for all families, subsidies should be greater for low-income families than wealthy ones. Though fees vary, the system remains, in essence, a universal one, since all families have access to public daycare.

A sliding fee scale thus does not, in and of itself, mean the end of a program's universality. However, it does represent an ideological shift away from thinking of these programs as a collective public good toward seeing them as principally benefiting the individual. We've made a conscious decision as a society that things like healthcare and a basic education are best delivered collectively with almost no fee at the point of service. Healthier citizens and better-educated children benefit the whole of society, not just the recipients of those public

services. It's not at all unreasonable to suggest that daycare be treated the same way and fees become very low, if not non-existent.

As for excluding wealthier families from subsidized daycares and targeting childcare spaces specifically at low-income households, that would be a big mistake. It may seem counterintuitive, but targeted programs tend not to work as well as universal ones.

That's because "universal services tend to bring together children from different backgrounds rather than reinforcing concentrations of disadvantage," notes a 2008 report by UNICEF. What's more, services specifically for the poor tend to end up being poor and underfunded services, whereas universally available services "usually command broader and more sustainable public support and engender greater public concern for quality." Basically, when everyone has something at stake in the system, there's more public pressure on the government to get it right.

The Liberals say they are in favour of a national childcare program, but even though the election campaign has now entered its second month, they haven't yet explained what type of system they'd create. The fact that the Liberals have made their proposal for a "Canada Child Benefit" the cornerstone of their family policy while mostly staying mum about direct public investment in daycare centres raises questions about the Liberals' commitment to creating a universal childcare system.

The Liberal Party's promised Canada Child Benefit would replace the Conservatives' Universal Child Care Benefit and several other benefits. The amount that a family receives would be calculated based on household income; starting with a base of \$6,400 annually for each child aged five or under and \$5,400 per child aged six to 17, the payment would decline as a family's income rises. The Liberals say a two-kid family making \$90,000 annually can expect to receive \$490 per month.

Such money would go a sizable way to reducing the financial burden of childcare on low- and middle-income families. Still, handing out larger cheques to help parents pay for childcare in the private market can't be the whole solution. There's a huge gap between the number of young children in households with working parents and the number of regulated childcare spaces. Canada needs to invest directly in childcare by providing both operating funds to daycares and capital funds for opening new childcare spaces.

Many journalists have questioned how we can pay for universal childcare, but evidence from Quebec suggests that childcare may actually pay for itself. After Quebec introduced its childcare program in 1997, women's participation in the workforce increased by 70,000 by 2008, not only promoting greater gender equality but also generating new tax revenue.

It also decreased dependency on other social-assistance programs, resulting in cost savings for the government. One study by economist Pierre Fortin suggests that, in 2008, every \$100 spent on childcare by the Quebec government generated a return of \$104 for itself and a windfall of \$43 for the federal government.

Universal childcare has been on the national agenda since women's rights groups began advocating for such a program in the 1960s. It's shameful that we've made little progress in the past 50 years. Of 14 comparable countries in the OECD, Canada ranks last in spending on early childhood education as a percentage of GDP. We need a federal government that has a clearly articulated plan to create such a system.

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