

Election 2015 blog: "Fertile ground" for 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.

"Fertile ground" for a national child care program is the ninth blog in the series.

All blogs in this series may be found on the [CRRU's website](#) ^[3]

"Fertile ground" for a national child care program

It may sound like wishful thinking but several encouraging markers suggest that a national child care program may really be on the horizon. The never-ending story of the 2015 election began for child care in September 2014 when the New Democrats made it central to their platform. This was quickly followed by the Tories' announcement of their own "child care" platform of expanded cash payments to parents and the Family Tax Credit or income splitting.

As the two platforms are as different as chalk and cheese, the terrain was laid early on for a sharply polarized debate about early childhood education and child care (ECEC). With the release of the Liberal and Green Party child care platforms, it became plain that two distinct approaches to child care have been at play in this election, with the Conservatives taking one tack and the NDP, Liberals and Greens adopting a fundamentally different approach.

Susan Prentice described this as: **"three out of four: Canada needs a national childcare program"** ^[4]. She notes that while there are certainly differences among the three platforms, their broad brush strokes are similar. For the Greens, New Democrats and Liberals, child care is seen as positive for families, children, women, and the economy—all are identified. While the three platforms tend to use the term child care rather than early education or learning and to focus primarily on child care's family support role, the early learning, education and inclusion aspects of ECEC are clearly identified as well. The three all envision a national approach and highlight the centrality of federal, provincial/territorial cooperation. And of key importance is that all three focus on services or "spaces", not giving cash to parents as to facilitate "choice".

From a policy perspective, signals indicate quite a different future for ECEC in a Liberal, NDP and/or Green Canada than Canada under the Tories. Thus, as the campaign ends, there is a real chance that there may soon be a government in Ottawa with a commitment to moving a national child care program forward.

Appraisal of provincial/territorial data for the last two years (in comparison with the rest of the past decade) shows a second encouraging marker. In 2006, when the Liberals' emergent child care program was cancelled by the incoming Conservatives, Canada's ECEC had recently been assessed by the **Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development** ^[5] as "in its infancy"--critiqued for unsatisfactory quality, limited access, weak policy and insufficient public funding.

When Mr. Harper abrogated the agreements between the federal government and provinces/territories, it meant that 13 "action plans" for space expansion and quality improvement had the rug pulled out from under them. As CRRU's 2008, 2010 and 2012 reports showed, improvements slowed right down. Budget increases, space expansion, training and wage improvements for the **underpaid, mostly female workforce** ^[6] languished while the **market-based approach** ^[7] reinforced inequitable access and uncertain quality in most of Canada.

The data in CRRU's 2014 report [8] shows less stagnation than in the previous few years. Though modest and admittedly uneven, there appears to be some provincial/ territorial impetus. Provision of regulated child care grew by about 39,000 spaces for 0-5 year olds, public funding is up, expansion of for-profit child care has slowed after some years of rapid growth and full-day kindergarten is now offered to five year olds in eight jurisdictions.

Although this in no way represents the universal, high quality child care system Canada so desperately needs, it does suggest that provinces/territories and a different federal government may have the appetite for working collaboratively to put the long-dreamed-of plan for affordable, equitable, high quality services shaped by a national policy framework and driven by the best available evidence in place.

A third marker also suggests why a national child care program may be on the horizon. This is simply that it's so needed by today's young families. The families who need and want early childhood education and child care cross income categories, lifestyles and regions. And while families have their own individual needs, preferences and desires, it's also pretty clear that the world of Leave it to Beaver isn't any more than a black and white TV rerun in 2015.

Data on mother's employment in CRRU's report this week shows it continuing to rise despite the Harper government's multi-billion dollar 10 year Universal Child Care Benefit that purportedly gives mothers the choice not to be employed. The data show that 70% of mothers with youngest children 0-2 years were employed in 2014---the first time this group has reached 70%. For these parents, the improved parental leave benefits promised by the political parties, together with a plan to make quality, affordable infant child care a reality, will be hugely welcome.

A media story about CRRU's ECEC 2014 data report observed that "Government spending on daycare exceeds \$4.2-billion, an all-time high". However, while public child care spending did increase substantially, it's noteworthy that Canada's highest spending point still falls very far below the international benchmark for public spending on ECEC—at least 1% of GDP for 0-5s. Regulated child care's \$4.2 billion comes only to .21% of GDP and even adding a generous estimate [1] for kindergarten expenditures (to make Canada's data consistent with other countries) would bring this up to only .35% or .4% at best.

In an election that has profiled middle class families, child care has been identified as one of the necessities of family life in a modern country and many parents have indicated they want the next government to step up. But child care isn't just a middle class issue. A variety of different kinds of affordable quality ECEC options need to be accessible for all families—middle class, low income [9], the 1%, non-standard hours and precarious workers [10], those living in the biggest cities, small towns and Indigenous communities.

Good quality early childhood education and care not only has the capacity to support families and offer an opportunity for all young children to thrive but can be a key part of reducing inequality, strengthening communities and building a better Canada for us all. And this time, there seems to be fertile ground for the long-awaited national child care program to become a reality.

[1] Figures on public spending on kindergarten are unavailable.

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[3] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/research-policy-practice/15/08/child-care-now-blog-%E2%80%93-election-2015>

[4] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/research-policy-practice/15/08/child-care-now-blog---election-2015>

[5] <https://childcarecanada.org/publications/briefing-notes/04/09/oecd-thematic-review-canadian-early-childhood-education-and-care>

[6] https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2015/09/OS120_Summer2015_Workforce.pdf

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https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2015/09/OS120_Summer2015_Child_Care_Market_to_Child_Care_System.pdf

[8] <https://childcarecanada.org/publications/ecec-canada/15/10/preliminary-data-early-childhood-education-and-care-canada-2014>

[9] https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2015/09/OS120_Summer2015_ECEC_and_Poverty.pdf

[10] <https://childcarecanada.org/publications/occasional-paper-series/15/09/work-around-clock-snapshot-non-standard-hours-child-care->