

A national child care system...“because it’s 2015” ^[1]

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The best line of the Trudeau government’s first day— widely reported and praised in the international media—was the new PM’s. In response to a reporter’s question about why he’d chosen to create a gender-parity cabinet, he rather matter of factly observed “because it’s 2015”. This ostensibly simple statement summed up a complexity of attitudes, beliefs and even world views in three words. For those feminists who remain doggedly optimistic after a decade nasty enough to slay the optimism of Anne of Green Gables, it raised hopes that the first day’s lustre could foreshadow more significant changes to come.

Mr. Trudeau’s observation aptly fits another feminist “ask”—one that’s been a pillar of the feminist agenda for 45 years. This is the kind of solid universal publicly-funded early childhood education and child care system that many other countries have— well-designed so it simultaneously advances women’s equality, supports young families across the income spectrum and is good for children.

Feminists are just but one of the constituencies who passionately believe that 45 years after the report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, the answer to why a coherent national child care system of high quality services is needed is simply “because it’s 2015”.

“Because it’s 2015” stands in for a host of no-brainer rationales. Child care is still the ramp to women’s equality in employment. Economic research shows how child care helps stimulate the economy through mothers’ paid work. Child care helps “generation squeeze” mothers and fathers balance work and family and make ends meet. Without child care, it’s impossible to help families out of poverty or help newcomers settle. And substantial research has accumulated that shows that if it’s high quality and inclusive, early childhood education and care provides a terrific environment in which young children thrive whether they’re middle class or low income, abled or disabled, francophone, Anglophone or Indigenous.

Most women with children —more than 77% with three to five year olds—are employed or engaged in studying, language learning and other activities. Yet a crucial piece of the social infrastructure needed to support them is still missing in Canada in 2015. And many families who don’t “need” child care choose to have their children participate in early childhood programs for socialization and learning as children do from about age two and a half in many other countries.

Now that the dust from the election has settled and the new government gets down to work, it’s timely to review campaign commitments to child care. The Liberal platform stated “We will develop a child care framework that meets the needs of Canadian families, wherever they live”, and “we will meet with provinces, territories, and Indigenous communities to begin work on a new National Early Learning and Child Care Framework, to deliver affordable, high-quality, flexible, and fully inclusive child care for Canadian families. This work will begin in the first 100 days of a Liberal government and will be funded through our investments in social infrastructure. The framework we design together will be administered in collaboration with, and in respect of, provincial jurisdictions”.

The platform also made an explicit commitment to “research, evidence-based policy, and best practices in the delivery of early learning and child care”. As one of the world’s child care laggards, Canada is in a position to learn a great deal not only from our own experience but by using evidence from other countries about best (and worst) ECEC policies and practices. The body of research and analysis could be important because there is now substantial evidence about the best ways to move forward on the universal, high quality, publicly funded and managed early childhood education and care system long sought in Canada.

In a video outlining directions on child care developed by the Liberal Party for last November’s ChildCare2020 conference, Mr. Trudeau declared that “As a country, we need to prioritize access to child care for every family that needs it. It must be affordable, available, and of the highest quality possible. When we’re talking about our kids’ development, we can’t cut corners”. On CBC Radio’s The House last spring: “We’re committed to making sure parents have affordable, quality early learning for their kids, there’s no question about it,” concluding with “I think there is a need for national leadership to make sure that early learning and child care happens”.

The child care platform is one of three components in a “Greater Economic Security for Middle Class Families ^[3]” package. In addition to child care, it includes a new geared-to-income Canada Child Benefit which amalgamates the existing Canada Child Tax Benefit (CCTB) with the Harper government’s Universal Child Care Benefit (UCCB) cheques, and Flexible Work, including more flexible parental leave benefits. The funding for child care, however, which is part of the Social Infrastructure Fund, is not earmarked specifically for child care. Thus, the new government’s commitment to a national child care program—while it includes many of the key elements needed to make it work—still leaves important pieces to be fleshed out.

The 2015 federal election was the first in which child care was a major election issue and the first in which three of four political parties—for which 70% of Canadians voted— made commitments to a national child care program. Noting that it had primarily been the NDP championing child care in the campaign, the Toronto Star’s endorsement of Mr. Trudeau observed, “If he wins power, [a national child care program] ought to be on his agenda”. The Star noted that “a national child care program is something that is long overdue” and that it would be firmly within the Liberal Party’s tradition if revived, as “Paul Martin’s government first proposed such a national plan more than a decade ago”.

In 2015, it's dreadfully evident that our patchwork, marketized child care situation fails just about everyone and that young Canadian families live in one of the few wealthy countries that fails to support them well. While not a simple task, taking on the challenge of beginning to create a real evidence-based national child care program in 100 days when the new federal government meets with the provinces would be consistent with creating the gender-parity, diverse and talented cabinet revealed yesterday.

And it would be absolutely appropriate if for no other reason than simply... "because it's 2015".

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