

A silly fuss over PM's nannies, a serious issue for families ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

This week, global leaders gathered in Paris to dream up strategies to save the planet. The Syrian refugee crisis continued as Britain conducted air strikes on Islamic State targets and Germany voted to join the military campaign. Yet another mass shooting – 14 killed – in the U.S., with this one being investigated as an act of terrorism.

And we're freaking out about a couple of nannies.

So, yes, shocker: The job of Prime Minister of Canada comes with some hired help – including that most crucial area for many families, childcare.

Cue the uproar – heightened by the news that he employs not one but two nannies (or “special assistants”).

I guess I missed the part where people were upset about taxpayer-funded cooks or other household staff that come with the job. So, we're okay with that, but not the childcare? Do I have that correct?

Justin Trudeau is the Prime Minister and, as such, has a lot on his plate (and not just what a taxpayer-funded chef may have prepared). He is mending fences, implementing campaign promises, pledging to make Canada a leader on climate change, trying to deal with the scandal-plagued Senate. (And you thought your week at the office was busy.) With that kind of workload and three young children, of course childcare is a top priority. And employing two nannies seems reasonable given the job's gruelling schedule, which requires Mr. Trudeau – and his wife – to be out of the house a fair bit. Running the country is not a 9-to-5, Monday-to-Friday job. One nanny would be run ragged.

I recognize the optics problem – as one of Mr. Trudeau's campaign promises involved the Universal Child Care Benefit. He declared wealthy families such as his didn't need it.

But Mr. Trudeau was talking about a universal, indiscriminate benefit – where the very wealthy receive the same payment as the very poor. He was right about that. That doesn't mean he has relinquished the Prime Minister's right to taxpayer-funded childcare. The job comes with perks. For a reason. He and his wife are busy, busy people, and Mr. Trudeau should focus on running the country rather than the household.

The griping about this seems petty. We can't find a more deserving scandal? This is small potatoes.

But it is also an opportunity.

Here is an opening to address a crucial issue: the need for a universal – or at least affordable – childcare system.

So many conversations at baby group begin with “so, what are you doing for childcare?” This, I can report, may lead to maternity-leave-countdown breakdowns, right there on the colourful puzzle-piece foam mats, as parents discuss waiting lists and weigh their limited options.

I was not able to nab a daycare spot for my son until he was nearly four (and that was probably because I stalked the co-op daycare with repeated inquiries).

I'm one of the fortunate ones – until then, I was able to employ a nanny by splitting her salary with another family. Even with her reasonable rate and the nanny share, however, the cost was onerous and it was a financial sacrifice.

It was also a great investment. An amazing woman helped raise my child (she is still his after-school caregiver), saving the day repeatedly over the years – not only playing with and caring for him, but also finding lost library books, cheerfully working overtime when I had to deal with breaking news, counselling me (and not abandoning us) through our family's bedbug crisis.

She has made my life better and helped my son become the person he is. And, in the absence of family in town, she is one more person for him to love.

Things worked out for us. But not everyone has the means to do this. I have seen the stress on many families as they desperately try to secure a daycare spot – and then figure out how to pay for it. Because even if you get one, it's not cheap.

So while we're on great investments: We need a national childcare program. You want a waste of taxpayers' money? Look no further than the insufficient (even when enhanced) UCCB, which barely puts a dent in daycare costs. Take that money, pool it, create a system that will benefit us all – but especially the most vulnerable.

Look at Quebec: I worked on a Globe series a few years ago on work-life balance (struggling with this issue, I volunteered) and was tasked

with finding companies offering innovative perks. At L'Oreal Canada's Montreal distribution centre, I learned, the on-site cafeteria offers take-home dinners. I can't tell you how often I think about that program (still operating) as I break a sweat running home from the SkyTrain station, weighing the pros and cons of perogies over chicken strips. (Oh, to have a prime ministerial chef in my employ.)

Surely neither Mr. Trudeau nor Sophie Grégoire-Trudeau is performing that 5:50 p.m. weeknight dash. They have staff to help – as they should. Mr. Trudeau has an important job to do. I hope his nannies give him the space and comfort to help him do it. But his to-do list must include spearheading a national strategy for daycare that will lessen the load on working families and provide good care for our children, preparing the next generation to lead and populate an environmentally sound, healthy, peaceful, economically productive, artistically rich and thriving democracy.

Because, you know, it's 2015.

Region: Canada ^[2]

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