

How the 'Nannygate' outrage missed the point^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Parenting is sometimes called a thankless job. Politics is like that too. But here and now, Canadians owe Justin Trudeau and his wife, Sophie, a hearty show of gratitude. The controversy this week over the Prime Minister's alleged hypocrisy of having publicly funded nannies for the couple's three kids has illuminated the challenges of balancing work and family. It's also sparked enough outrage to hopefully provoke improvements to child care in Canada—or at least a deeper understanding about the child care crisis itself.

For days, Trudeau has been lambasted for hiring two women as "secondary caregivers," and paying for them with taxpayer dollars. During the election campaign and before then, Trudeau promised to replace the Conservatives' Universal Child Care Benefit with another program tied to income. "Stephen Harper thinks that government should provide child support payments to millionaires," declared the Liberal platform. "We will end that unfair giveaway." For Trudeau, who has admitted in speeches that he is among the wealthy, having government-paid nannies doesn't look so good.

On the surface then, "nannygate" symbolizes a rebirth of Liberal entitlement. For Trudeau, "the honeymoon is over," says Andrea O'Reilly, a professor of gender, sexuality and women's studies at York University, and founder of Demeter Press, which publishes parenting research. O'Reilly appreciates people's frustrations regarding Trudeau's misstep. But in her view, there is more to this scandal than that: "We're not talking about the things we should be."

Namely, and firstly: How little nannies are paid in Canada. The Trudeau nannies earn between \$15 and \$20 per hour during the day; at night, they get \$11 to \$13 an hour. That, according to the Association of Caregiver and Nanny Agencies Canada, is the average rate across the country. "House cleaners make between \$25 and \$30 an hour," says O'Reilly, who is shocked by "the horrifically low wages of nannies." All the more so in the case of the Trudeau nannies, who "must be the most highly skilled in Canada to have gotten that job."

Secondly: How many families need help to make it through the day, every day. That the Trudeau nannies have been spotted in plain sight caring for the children is an unabashed admission that Justin and Sophie can't do it all alone. About half of Canadian parents use some type of child care for their kids under age 15, according to Statistics Canada. Finding a safe, convenient, educational and affordable option is often difficult. A universal child care strategy would mitigate that, says Martha Friendly, founder and executive director of Childcare Resource and Research Unit. "To me, the [issue] is not whether the Trudeau nannies are being paid for. It is that other people's child care should be paid for also."

Lastly: How judgy people can be about the child care choices others make. A colleague of Friendly's repeated to her a comment made by someone confused about why the Trudeaus would require nannies. "Why doesn't Sophie look after her own children?" was the thought. And not one nanny, but two! While the Prime Minister's spouse doesn't get paid or have an official title in Canada, she "obviously has functions beyond a normal wife and mother," says O'Reilly. But that question of how best to raise the kids haunts many overstretched parents, however they outsource child care, and whether they work outside the home or not.

All told, "nannygate" is about far more than political duplicity. The Trudeaus have gained favour in the past for being relatable. This controversy has simultaneously confirmed and recast that public persona: As O'Reilly puts it, "They are a usual family in that they are juggling child care, but in unusual circumstances." Adds Friendly, "They may be a wealthier family, but wealthy families have child care issues too. Money makes it easier, but it doesn't solve all your problems." In this case, it seems to have actually caused them.

-reprinted from Maclean's

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