

So the PM's kids are getting safe, publicly funded care. What's he going to do for the rest of us? ^[1]

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Source: Globe and Mail

Format: Article

Publication Date: 2 Dec 2015

AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

So the Prime Minister puts two nannies on his household staff, and a tizzy ensues. Parenting making for political controversy is hardly new. Barack and Michelle Obama were knocked when the President's mother-in-law moved into the White House to keep an eye on their two daughters. Brian Mulroney got the gears for having taxpayers cover a "mother's helper" – as his wife, Mila, put it – after he said he would pay the bill himself. Justin Trudeau is personally familiar with public-purse child care at 24 Sussex Dr., especially when his father became a single dad – although Pierre Trudeau once told reporters that the female staff were "maids," not nannies.

Child care is a complicated balancing act for the average Canadian family. How much harder must it be for the Prime Minister and his spouse, under the spotlight, trying to keep life as normal and consistent as possible for three young children who will now be escorted to school and play dates by RCMP officers wearing earpieces?

Yes, they signed up for it. Earning more than \$327,000, and arriving in the job with a largesse of his own, Trudeau can afford his own nanny. (He has said so himself.) But from there, it's hop-skip-jump to that old tiresome narrative, soon making the social media rounds: Can't Sophie Grégoire-Trudeau manage her own kids? Her partner may work gruelling hours, but at least she doesn't have to clean the toilet like regular stay-at-home moms. Are those nannies there so that she can get her nails done? Come to think of it: Aside from official dinners, why isn't she in the kitchen? Why stop at the nanny? Fire the cook!

Take a breath, people. While Canadians may disdain the notion of a first lady, we still place certain expectations on our PM's spouse (and we have been decidedly torn between glee and chagrin over all the international gushing the Trudeaus have been getting). Political spouse is a difficult role, undefined and unpaid. No matter what she does, Grégoire will be scrutinized and criticized, and, based on current trends, probably more than any previous prime minister's wife. Why can't she balance motherhood and all those engagements while looking perfectly coiffed and forever smiling? Twitter gleefully weighed in: One churlish tweet, quoted in the media, slagged her as "weak and helpless."

Let's step back: If the PM was a woman, would we expect her husband to pull off that same role or be so free with personal insults? Bah, never mind. Society would find a way to be just as judgmental about a female prime minister's motherhood choices.

This is really about politics, of course, and Trudeau's comments during the election campaign. In connection with income splitting (which is not a specific child-care policy, incidentally) and the universal child-care benefit, he said people such as himself and Stephen Harper didn't need taxpayer help when low-income families needed it more. And he made a big show of donating his UCCB cheques to charity. Then he turns around and puts two "special assistants" on his staff. Opposition politicians were within their rights to cry, "Hypocrisy!" The optics aren't great.

Trudeau's staff should have been better prepared for this reaction, considering his very public campaign position. They should have been ready to explain how the nannies were going to work, and in what situations they would be providing child care. (The women will be paid \$15 to \$20 an hour during the day, and \$11 to \$13 for a night shift, hardly a huge salary, and roughly in line with private nannies.) The Trudeaus might have reduced the fallout by saying they would cover the portion of child care outside official duties. Instead, the Prime Minister's Office has done a poor job of justifying the decision, which suggests it can't.

The PMO now says the two women, who have previously worked for the family and will have undefined "other duties," will not expand the staff at the Prime Minister's residence. In other words, it is suggesting that the staff has been reorganized to accommodate the needs of a young family, one with far more complicated issues than the average Canada clan. There are security concerns and confidentiality issues, to say nothing of consistency for three little kids about to live a unique childhood. Yes, Stephen and Laureen Harper managed without an official nanny. Interim Conservative leader Rona Ambrose said this week that the Harpers relied on "family, friends and neighbours." But their two children were older, and did the staff at 24 Sussex never interact with the kids in the house?

Moving ahead, the Trudeaus should be mindful of the optics of other household costs and pratfalls such as borrowed brooches. Nannies might be one thing, a budget line for hats and coats, elegant though they may be, is quite another.

Running under the surface of this whole discussion is our gendered attitudes toward parenting, who should care for the kids and how much a country should contribute to child care. That debate should not lie fallow. Let the Prime Minister add nanny duties to his official staff description: It will make it difficult for him to ever argue that child care, including fair wages for child-care workers, is not a public issue.

The real problem isn't that the Trudeaus get publicly supported child care. It's that the rest of us don't. Once again, this is a petty distraction from the persistent child-care issues facing regular Canadian families trying to juggle longer work hours, sometimes-sketchy daycare options and rising child-care costs.

With his own kids in safe hands, what's our new Prime Minister going to do about that?

-reprinted from Globe and Mail

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