

Because it's (only) 2015: Trudeau's childcare still considered his wife's job ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is facing his first mini scandal – he is in hot water for using taxpayer dollars to pay for two nannies helping to care for his three young children. Critics have jumped on his alleged hypocrisy. During the election he was critical of childcare benefits for rich families, said he would give his to charity, and promised to reform the policy. How can he possibly justify charging the taxpayers for his children?

Let's look at some of the things that the taxpayer does support for the Prime Minister.

The Official Residences Act allows the appointment of “a steward or housekeeper and such other employees.. for the management of the Prime Minister’s residence.” Previous PMs have had a chef, a household manager and several housekeepers. According to a Cabinet order in 2011, as reported in Ottawa Citizen, prime minister Harper employed a chef (salary between \$61,000 and \$72,000), a household manager (salary between \$76,000-\$82,000 and two household staff (\$40,000-\$46,000). None of these expenses – past or present – have led to a scandal.

The nannies are making somewhere between \$23,000-\$43,000 a year, before deductions. Less than the chef, less than the household manager, less than the household staff hired under the previous prime minister.

But, child care, people say, is different. After all, Mr. Trudeau campaigned on no tax breaks for rich families.

My question is why is childcare so obviously different? Why is childcare so different from having a chef? Well, we can't have the Prime Minister having to cook for visiting dignitaries. True enough. But the same chef cooks every night for the Prime Minister's family – and always has done so. Most Canadians do not have a chef, and no one supports tax breaks for those wealthy enough to have one. Yet, no one has squawked about the chef, because somehow, cooking for the children is ok, but taking care them somehow crosses a line.

Why is childcare so different? The answer of course lies in the way Canadians still see childcare as the private responsibility of families. As a society, we have not embraced the idea of collective responsibility for caring for the next generation of Canadians. If individuals choose to have children, then they must be prepared to take financial responsibility for them. It is exactly the same set of ideas that makes any kind of national childcare program so elusive. It is the same set of ideas that makes the work/family balance so deeply challenging for the majority of Canadians, because we do not even come close to providing adequate public support for childcare.

What's more, there are some lingering gender roles here too. It is not just a family's private responsibility. The unstated – and sometimes even stated – assumption is that women should be taking care of the children. There has been no end of innuendos and outright expressions that it is Sophie Grégoire-Trudeau that should be taking care of the children. If she can't, well, then, it is surely her responsibility to find and pay someone who can. It's not as if she works, say some. Or it's not as if she works full time. (Apparently, being the wife of the Prime Minister does not count as full or part time or valuable or demanding work.) Or it's not as if the Prime Minister would actually have to take the children to the office. Childcare continues to be seen as a very gendered activity, where mothers are still assumed to be the primary caregivers.

The nanny scandal is not really about subsidizing an “elite” lifestyle of the Prime Minister. We have always done that. Nor is it about a conflict between a Prime Minister's policies and the taxpayer support he receives while in office. It is, at the end of the day, about what we think about childcare – that it is a private not collective responsibility, and that it is women not their husbands, who should be bearing the burden.

Was the Prime Minister unwise in hiring two nannies for his children at the taxpayers expenses? Well, in this case, it turns out he may have been, since when it comes to ideas around childcare, it is only 2015.

Region: Canada ^[2]

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