

Nannygate: Time for a grown up conversation^[1]

Blog

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Source: CCPA Behind the Numbers

Format: Article

Publication Date: 7 Dec 2015

AVAILABILITY

Read online^[2]

EXCERPTS

News that two nannies have been hired out of the prime minister's household budget produced the first real controversy of the new Liberal government... for all the wrong reasons.

Media and online discussion has ranged from the fundamental question of whether tax dollars should pay for the PM's child care, to accusations of hypocrisy, to calls for a broader conversation about accessible and affordable child care options for all Canadians.

Should the taxpayers pay? (Yes)

The question of whether the cost of the nannies should come out of the public purse is central to this discussion. In fact, it's the only important discussion we should be having.

The two women have been hired as "special assistants" under the Official Residences Act, which authorizes the employment of a steward or housekeeper to aid in the management of the prime minister's residence. The act allows for the employment of a chef, maids, a gardener, and a chauffeur.

Other household expenses that fall under the act include "the purchase of food and other supplies required for the serving of food, for cleaning, laundering, and the ordinary maintenance of a residence, and for defraying other costs of official hospitality provided by the Prime Minister."

It is worth noting that the residence of the leader of the Opposition is included under the act as well (although they are limited to three staff members).

Should child care be covered under these expenses? Yes. Child care is part of the cost of running a household and is a daily reality for any Canadian parent. Being prime minister (or the PM's wife) is not a nine-to-five job. Taxpayers fund the salaries of the household staff in order to aid in the realities of the position. We pay for gardeners, chefs, and maids – even the \$10-million repair costs for 24 Sussex.

To draw the line at child care is incredibly problematic, reflecting a broader lack of respect for the importance and work involved in child care.

Is it hypocritical? (No)

The hypocrisy argument is grounded in Trudeau's vocal opposition of the Conservative's Universal Child Care Benefit plan. During the election, Trudeau told *Chatalaine* magazine, "My family qualified for about \$3,000, even though we're doing very well and didn't need it." Trudeau has pledged to donate his family's cheque to charity.

In an interview with CBC, Conservative minister Lisa Raitt called for Trudeau to pay for the nannies out of his own salary: "My kids were 7 and 4 when I started ... I never used taxpayer dollars in order to look after the needs of my children, that was something that I have to do in order to have a household. We still made it work without taxpayer dollars."

With a salary of \$325,000 per year, the Trudeaus can certainly afford to pay out of pocket for child care. But why should they? The cost of the nannies comes from the household budget—it is part and parcel of being a prime minister with a young family.

Raitt shouldn't have had "to make it work" — she should have been able to access affordable child care that was publicly funded. All should have access to publicly funded child care. None of us should be forced to make the decision become a stay-at-home mom because we can't afford child care.

What is this really all about?

Our last prime minister's household budget included a chef whose salary ranged from \$61,000 to \$72,000. Trudeau's nannies will make between \$23,000 and \$43,000. Why are Canadians not outraged that the PM doesn't cook for himself? Or doesn't do his own gardening?

Or drive himself around? Or pay for his own airfare to Paris?

The answer is that child care is seen as a private responsibility of families—specifically, women. There is an underlying criticism of Sophie Grégoire-Trudeau in the national discussion around this issue. After all, Grégoire-Trudeau doesn't have a full-time job—shouldn't it be her responsibility?

No, it shouldn't be. Setting aside for a moment the fact that the role of a prime minister's wife is extremely demanding, the assumption that she should take the lead on child care is steeped in outdated and paternalistic ideas of what constitutes "women's work."

The fact that we are having this conversation shows just how poorly child care is valued in this country.

Child care is undervalued, underfunded, and expensive

The average child care worker in Canada earns a mere \$12.28 per hour. These are the individuals responsible for the health, safety, and education of our children—and they cannot afford to send their own children to day care.

Meanwhile, the cost of child care continues to rise, putting it out of reach for many people. This week, the CCPA will release a report on the cost of child care in Canada. The Greater Toronto Area (Canada's most populous region) tops the list with the highest child care fees in the country. Cities in Quebec, which has a provincially funded child care program, are at the very bottom.

Canadians are forced to make hard choices. I know people who have decided not to have children because the costs are prohibitive. All too often, women are forced to quit their jobs or take many years out of the office because child care was too expensive.

This is the real scandal. These choices are nothing short of tragic and they should fill all Canadians with rage. We need a national strategy on child care — and we need it now. It's not enough to simply give Canadians a cheque every month. We need more centres, more workers, and better paid workers.

As a society, we need to take collective responsibility for child care.

-reprinted from Behind the Numbers

Region: Canada ^[3]

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