

@petermansbridge to @JustinTrudeau: "It's 2016. Isn't it time for a national day care program?"^[1]

Posted on 4 Feb 2016

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It wasn't surprising that child care was one of the topics Prime Minister Justin Trudeau was pressed about last Sunday on CBC's *Face to Face with the Prime Minister*. There are millions of families in all regions—families like that of the CBC's representative young middle class mom Jenna Fray— who are struggling with child care. Parents cannot find and afford good quality child care for love or money. What is striking is that the issues they face from province to province are much more similar than they are different; while the specifics may differ, the same issues arise over and over again. Child care is in short supply. Quality is all too often weak. And with the possible exception of Quebec, fees are much too high for most low and middle income families.

Jenna, an Ajax, Ontario social worker with a three year old asked the PM: "Why wasn't there a plan that made child care affordable for everybody?" In a follow up interview with Mr. Trudeau, Peter Mansbridge cut right to the chase with the observation that we have been debating child care for 25 years with little progress. "It's 2016. Isn't it time for a national day care program?" he asked.

That question and Jenna's were lost throughout the ensuing conversation in which the Prime Minister discussed the provinces' differences and the variety of infrastructure choices for them including transit, green infrastructure, seniors, housing—and child care. Rather than considering women's/families'/ children's needs and how to deliver on the Liberal platform commitment, much of the segment revolved around the idea of a "national child care program", what that means in the Canadian context and whether it will take a national program to change families' limited access to quality child care.

To recap some of the history and context to these debates: it was the 1970 report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women that first called for a "national day-care Act". Since then, feminists, experts, policymakers and advocates have proposed a national child care program again and again. But in 2016, Canada has had no program, policy or framework, no funding or approach for early childhood education and child care.

For some, the idea of a national child care program stirs angst about the imposition of "one-size-fits-all" child care. This anxiety is not only misplaced but fails to recognize the extent to which the unsatisfactory child care situation is more similar across provinces and territories than it is different.

A national child care program that could address this situation across Canada would presumably have similar characteristics to other Canadian social programs—those established by governments to meet important social and economic goals. Historically, national social programs have played a unifying role in the Canadian federation. Although it is often argued that Canada's federalism has hampered development of a robust social safety net comparable to that enjoyed in some other countries, Canada has successfully forged a national health care program.

Medicare, generally recognized as Canadian's most prized national program, was shaped both by the overarching Canada Health Act's five principles and the programs design and delivery by provinces/territories. And as Tom Kent, an architect of Canada's national social programs once observed, the national health care program is actually "thirteen provincial/territorial programs", recognizing that underneath the overarching policy framework, principles and basic assurances, each program is its own entity.

Some other national social programs such as pensions and parental leave benefits have followed a "one-size-fits-all" model, with Quebec sometimes delivering its own programs. From a geographic perspective, the new geared-to-income Canada Child Benefit to which the Trudeau government has committed will also be one-size-fits-all, as was the Harper government's Universal Child Care Benefit.

Proponents of a national child care program have long envisioned provincially/territorially designed and delivered systems growing over time to include all children in all regions of Canada regardless of families' work status or income. A range of high quality services including parenting programs for parents staying at home with young children, part-day nursery schools, full-day centres and regulated home child care would be offered. High quality services would be affordable, publicly-funded, publicly-managed, public and not-for-profit, participatory and inclusive. Early childhood education and care would be part of broader family policy including improved parental leave benefits and other family supports such as a national child benefit.

Nevertheless, while these provincial/territorial service systems would differ, perhaps certain aspects of "one-size-fits all" should be considered. Are there basic assurances about early childhood education and child care upon which Canadian families should be able to rely, as they can rely on access to basic health care or on parental leave benefits? Should not all children be able to access an early childhood education and child care program more-or-less in their neighbourhood? Should sky-high fees exclude parents from regulated child care in some provinces but not others? Shouldn't "high quality" mean early childhood training and decent wages for child care educators in every province?

Without a doubt, a shared overarching vision and principles for child care are appropriate for all children and families whether they live in

Quebec City, a remote First Nations community, rural Newfoundland, Saskatoon or Inuvik. This would be consistent with the 1999 Social Union Framework Agreement's (SUFA) recognition of the importance of "services of reasonably comparable quality for Canadians wherever they live or move".

The best way to ensure child care choices for families would be for federal government and provincial/territorial governments, together with Indigenous community representatives, to work together to develop and sustain a national child care program guided by a shared framework—made up, as Medicare is, of “thirteen provincial/territorial programs” and Indigenous community-designed early childhood programs. Based on our own long experience of early childhood education and care in the absence of federal leadership and no overarching national policy framework, it is easy to see why this is required.

What would make it a national program would be the shared policy framework entrenching common principles and assurances that would eventually ensure that every family has access to a high quality space they can afford, a plan for sustained public funding to support it, public management and a voice for parents.

We have learned that it will be virtually impossible to achieve equity and fairness in child care—as SUFA framed it—“services of reasonably comparable quality for Canadians wherever they live or move”—without Canada-wide collaboration on solid overarching public policy. We know, from Canadian experience and the best evidence from elsewhere, that the early childhood education and child care needs of families like Jenna’s will remain largely unmet unless a well-designed national child care policy framework—a national child care program in the Canadian sense—becomes a reality.

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