

What's happening with child care? [Transcript of CBC broadcast]

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Author: CBC Radio, Ottawa Morning

Source: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation [2]

Format: Speech

Publication Date: 8 Jun 2001

AVAILABILITY

Text of transcript below.

RITA CELLI (CBC): Well, it seemed like a good idea at the time. Fifteen years ago this spring the federal government released a ground-breaking report on day-care in Canada. It recommended a national system of child care that would serve all Canadian children and families by, guess, 2001. Today many say quality child care is as out of reach for most Canadian families as it was in the 1980s. Reporter Donna Leon looks at what happened to the promise.

ANNE LAIDLAW (Child Care Advocate): And my heart goes out to you when you can't afford it, how powerless you must feel, because I feel powerless and we have the money. And I'm angry, and if anybody can find me another spot to speak about this please tell me where it is, I'll be there. And we'll bring our friends.

(APPLAUSE)

DONNA LEON (Reporter): Anne Laidlaw says child care is in crisis. At this Ottawa workshop she talks about rising costs.

LAIDLAW: Eighteen hundred dollars per month to have these two children in child care, and we're not wealthy, so we have made a lot of sacrifices in order to make that happen. But that's your middle income family struggling, saying this is our priority and there's a lot of other things that we're going to do without in order to make this happen. We only have two. This system is shocking.

LEON: Governments have been promising day-care for years.

UNIDENTIFIED: The need for accessible and affordable child care has in recent years come to the forefront of the social agenda facing Canada. You will be asked to establish a parliamentary task force on the future of child care in Canada.

LEON: The federal Speech from the Throne back in 1984. The Liberal government announced it was prioritizing day-care.

UNIDENTIFIED: That would lead finally to a universal child care system.

LEON: Two years later that task force made its recommendations. Media reports outlined the plan.

UNIDENTIFIED: Fully funded by public money. And by the year 2000, combined federal-provincial spending would be more than \$11 billion.

LEON: Fast-forward to 1993. The Liberal Red Book promised a national day-care program if the provinces came onside. But they didn't. Former cabinet minister Lloyd Axworthy still laments that failure.

LLOYD AXWORTHY (Former MP): My biggest regret, Jason, was that we weren't able to get agreement on a child care program. I think still that is one of the gaps or the vacuums in our social structure.

JASON MOSCOVITZ (Reporter): A Red Book promise in '93 not realized.

AXWORTHY: Well, that's right. We came close. It had to be done with the provinces. I think we had four or five onside, but the others weren't, and so the money was, in fact, transferred into a child tax credit program. I still think that we should revisit the child care issue.

LEON: In 1995 the federal government stopped directly funding child care. It started giving the money to the provinces. Four years after that the feds allowed the provinces to choose how they spend that money. The federal Human Resources Development Minister Jane Stewart says jurisdictionally her hands are now tied. She can give out the money, but can't force the provinces to spend it specifically on child care.

JANE STEWART (Human Resources Development Minister): When we're talking about services like this fundamentally they are the responsibility of the provinces. For us finding the effective way of partnering with the provinces to add new monies so that we can expand the opportunities has been our focus. You'll remember in 1996 we might have a strategy in place. I identified \$600 million that would be available to increase the opportunities for child care spaces across the country and didn't get any takers from the provinces. So that system didn't work. But with the National Child Benefit, in recognizing, I think, an effective partnership where the Government of Canada brings money for income support, the provinces then take their savings and put it into services, we found a model.

LEON: Child care advocates like Martha Friendly say that transfer of power to the provinces isn't working. Friendly runs the Child Care Resource Centre in Toronto. It's a policy and research group.

MARTHA FRIENDLY (Child Advocate): I can only put it down to political will. And I guess if governments want to talk about caring about children, caring about their populations, life-long learning, child poverty, social inclusion, there's another thing that was in the Throne Speech, this is part of it. It's gotta be addressed as part of all of those things.

LEON: Jane Stewart defends that political will.

STEWART: If \$2.2 billion in new money isn't will, I'm not sure what is. The issues of families and their children that were so front and centre in our Speech from the Throne most recently and indeed in the last Speech from the Throne is not political will I don't know what is. If doubling the parental leave to give parents the choice to stay home for up to a year with their new-born or newly-adopted child isn't political will I don't know what is. I feel very privileged to be part of a government that has indeed found the methodologies to actually make good on some of the things that we as mothers have been asking for for a considerable period of time.

LEON: Jane Stewart likes to cite examples of provinces like Saskatchewan, which is using the federal money to increase day-care spaces or Quebec, which charges parents only \$5 a day for child care. She neglects to mention Ontario, which has been given the largest chunk of federal money. A whopping \$114 million in the last year alone. That province has been under fire for cuts to kindergarten programs, day-care spaces and the like. Ontario's Community and Social Services Minister John Baird likes to play the blame game.

JOHN BAIRD (Ontario Community and Social Service's Minister): Well, Jane Stewart doesn't spend any money on day-care in her ministry. So we're certainly well ahead of Jane Stewart. Take a look at the spending, you know, by province, we're in the top two or three. Jane Stewart ran on a commitment and Jean Chrétien and the Liberal Party to bring in a universal day-care program and they never implemented the policy. So you might want to ask them about that.

LEON: Clearly child care is still a political football that's been tossed back and forth for years. And that's a troubling notion to people like Monique Bégin. The former cabinet minister worked for the Royal Commission on the Status of Women.

MONIQUE BÉGIN (Former Cabinet Minister): I still have difficulty understanding the extraordinary mental block on anything resembling day-care in Canada. We had a fabulous chapter written on children and the family. That chapter was considered as total utopia and was simply, nicely, put aside.

SUSAN TROTT (Child Advocate): I've heard many horror stories from many parents in my community about how they can't go to work certain days because there is nowhere for their kids to go.

LEON: At meetings like this one in Ottawa parents gather to talk about what they consider to be a deepening crisis in child care. Susan Trott is frustrated with a system that she says doesn't work.

TROTT: So I ask all politicians, please, why can't we take care of our children?

LEON: In Ottawa I'm Donna Leon.

Region: Canada ^[3]

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