

Dear Hillary, dear Bernie: Can Canada hitch a ride on your childcare coat-tails? ^[1]

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As a dual citizen who dutifully votes in US presidential elections, I'm bowled over by the profusion of childcare commitments, comments and analyses emanating from south of the border. Childcare is quite the election issue in the US, taking up much more space in this election campaign than in any other I remember. Canadian women and families—faced with our own unrelenting struggle for quality, affordable childcare here in the True North Strong and Free—should take note.

Childcare has hit the US election circuit after months of news articles about out-of-reach parent fees based on a state-by-state analysis by national group Child Care Aware. This provides a good jumping-off place for election commitments about changing what economist Paul Krugman has called America's "neglect of children".

Bernie Sanders has made childcare part of his agenda since day one, terming it an "embarrassment" and a "disaster". It's not surprising that The Bern is calling for a childcare revolution, as he is not only a pragmatic socialist and a grandfather but was a Head Start teacher back in the day. Sanders also has a Senate track record on childcare as author of the *Foundations for Success Act* in 2011.

It's not just the lefties who are embracing childcare. Hillary Clinton has seized media attention with visits to childcare centres and undertakings to make "quality childcare affordable for all working families", defining "affordable" as no more than 10% of family income. She also promises to raise the wages of the shockingly underpaid women who make up the childcare workforce. And—reminiscent of the Trudeau Liberals' first budget (it termed "high-quality, affordable childcare more than a convenience—it's a necessity" for Canadian families)—she has declared that "quality, affordable childcare isn't a luxury for the few. It's a necessity that too many Americans are struggling to achieve".

And it's not just the women and the lefties. Even **Donald Trump** has a childcare plan! Well, when asked, he volunteered that he thought companies should offer on-site childcare, as do two Trump-empire locations. He opined: "You know it's not expensive for a company to do it, you need one person or two people and you need some blocks, you need some swings, you need some toys". This point of view led the Huffington Post to publish an article titled *No, Donald Trump, the free market can't solve the childcare crisis: Parents need a real solution to the lack of affordable day care for kids*. A follow-up HP article called Trump's relationship to childcare "no record" and reminded American women that he had declared "I'll supply funds and she'll take care of the kids" as well as making the startling statement that "men who change diapers are acting like the wife".

Despite these Trumpisms, mainstream language about childcare in the US does seem to have shifted somewhat [1]. Consider the Huff Post's dismissal of the free market's capacity to solve the childcare crisis—that this is not a "real solution". Or the *Glamour* article based on Judith Warner's study of low income and working class mothers' struggles to access childcare headlined *Why childcare should be a right—not a perk*. Elle too has profiled Hillary's childcare proposals among its fashion and beauty pages. And *Fortune*, a popular multinational business magazine, contributed *Clinton's pledge to cap childcare costs at 10% of income would be a game-changer*.

How is this likely to translate into meeting American families' needs? As is usual, the election platforms offer few details. However, those provided—though far from complete—are intriguing. Hillary Clinton promises to make childcare both better quality and affordable. Clinton is probably the first major US presidential candidate with a significant (though not concrete) proposal to boost the wages of the childcare workforce and to link this to quality issues such as education and retention—an idea well documented in the research literature. It's also noteworthy that her promise to tackle affordability with no family paying more than 10% of income for childcare would affect all working families, not only low income families.

In Bernie Sanders' campaign, his language provides clues but few details about mechanisms. In his election campaign announcement, Bernie declared that "We can live in a country ...where every parent can have quality and affordable childcare". He too explicitly identifies the importance of higher wages for childcare staff with better qualifications and recognizes that good childcare can support working parents and have a positive effect on children's development at one and the same time.

Sanders' *Foundation for Success Act* [2], introduced in 2011, offers a more detailed view of his possible approach. The Act's mechanisms provide food for thought about how to craft a national social program for which states/provinces (rather than the federal government) bear the main responsibility, as they do in both the US and Canadian federations. The *Foundation for Success Act* addressed this by proposing to make federal childcare funds conditional (in a more detailed way than does the *Canada Health Act*) upon meeting specified criteria, for example, coverage, goals, plans, staff training, facilities, health and minimum standards.

Bernie's 2011 proposals should be noted by Hillary Clinton. If she wins the coming election, delivering high quality, affordable childcare and good wages for the workforce across the country will be practically impossible without a solid national implementation plan based on the best evidence.

All the evidence about programs like child care makes it abundantly clear that policy matters. As Paul Krugman's childcare article in *The New York Times* headlined, "it takes a policy" to make childcare work well for families. And, as he explains, it takes considerable public funding as well.

All this should be of interest to Canadians. For one thing, Canadians tend to be quite conscious of developments in the US. A victory by the Democrats (as seems probable) may bring with it enviable changes in childcare. And — lest we forget— UNICEF's research ranks Canada as even more of an international childcare laggard than the US. In addition, after the election, US childcare developments may very well highlight details of interest for Canada such as how federal leadership balances with state jurisdiction and how identified "best practices" in childcare policy can shape implementation.

Having been elected last October, the federal government in Canada is several steps ahead of a soon-to-be US government in tackling our own "shameful" and "embarrassing" childcare situation. The Trudeau government's current engagement with provincial/territorial governments—aimed at scoping out a national childcare framework—will hopefully address the very same issues as those identified in the US. This include high fees, low staff wages, insufficient supply, widespread unregulated care, too-often weak quality, unsatisfactory integration of care and education and—overall—reliance on a market model and consequent inequity.

These issues are such that—as the accrued knowledge about early childhood education and care policy makes plain—the current situation cannot be "tweaked" in either the US or Canada. Real solutions for women and their families require bold, transformative, well-informed, well-lead policy and adequate public funding. Otherwise, families in both Canada and the US will continue to struggle to find a quality childcare space and will continue to pay through the nose in parent fees rather than becoming able—for the first time—to choose among real options in a universal childcare system.

Footnotes

[1] Not everyone is on board of course. Not surprisingly, there were reactions such as the opinion piece in the *Wall Street Journal* deriding Clinton's childcare proposals: "If families think day care and health care are "really expensive" now, wait until they have to pay for Mrs. Clinton's government".

[2] <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/112/s294/text> [3]

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