



It was twenty years ago today...March 8, 1986

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The Task Force on Child Care: A landmark Report on International Women's Day

International Women's Day 2006 is the twentieth anniversary of the Report of the federal government's first and only Task Force on Child Care. The key recommendation of the "Katie Cooke Task Force" was a universal system of child care – co-funded by federal and provincial governments. It would have affordable parent fees, would be designed and managed by the provinces under national standards and would be built through a gradual increase in the supply of regulated child care until the year 2001 when it would serve all children and families. The cost at that time, the Task Force calculated, would be \$11.3 billion.

On March 8, 1986, Walter McLean, Brian Mulroney's Minister Responsible for the Status of Women (to whom the Task Force reported) marked IWD by holding a press conference to release the Task Force's findings. Mr. McLean said, "As we look at this Report, we have our eye on the year 2000. I'm personally committed to finding a workable solution to Canada's child care challenge" (Globe and Mail, 1986a).

Mandate, composition and methods

The mandate of the Task Force was to "examine and assess the need for child care and parental leave in Canada, as well as the adequacy of current systems, and make recommendations on the federal government's role in the development of a national system of quality child care" (Cooke, London, Edwards and Rose-Lizée, 1986: iii). The intention was to focus on "non-parental care which supplements that which is provided by parents", not care by parents themselves.

The Task Force on Child Care was set up by Pierre Trudeau's government in 1984 to report to then-Minister Responsible for the Status of Women Judy Erola. Four members – all experts in their fields - made up the Task Force: the chair, Katie Cooke¹, was a B.C.-based sociologist with a background in women's issues; Jack London, from the University of Manitoba, was a well-known expert on constitutional law; Toronto's Renée Edwards was from the child care field with a

long history in direct service; and Ruth Rose-Lizée was an economics professor at the Université du Québec à Montréal.

Developing the 400 page report, the Task Force and their research staff initiated twenty-five background research projects (most of which were subsequently made available to the public)², collected information about family policy in 20 countries through Canadian foreign missions and solicited responses from parents through a flyer in the October 1984 Family Allowance cheque. Although the cross-Canada public hearings that were initially planned were cancelled when a Progressive Conservative government replaced the Trudeau Liberals in the 1984 election, 7000 parents and more than 200 organizations made submissions to the group and visits and hearings were held in five cities. The cost of the Task Force on Child Care was almost \$879,000.

What the Task Force recommended

The Task Force's recommendations were based on the view that public responsibility for helping families with child care services and family policy should be enlarged dramatically. They said

We have become convinced that sound child care and parental leave programs can no longer be considered a frill but are, rather, fundamental support services needed by all families in Canada today (xxiv).

There were 53 recommendations covering child care programs and parental leave policy. The recommendations regarding financing proposed that "since all Canadians will benefit from a quality system of child care and parental leave, all Canadians should share in the costs through a system of public financing" (340) and were divided into short, medium and long-term measures.

A summary of the major recommendations:

> Development of "complementary systems of child care and parental leave as comprehensive, accessible and competent as the health care and education systems";

¹ Katie Cooke, a recipient of the Governor General's Persons' Award, died in 2003. See http://cccf-fcsge.ca/pdf/2002winter_en.pdf for further information about her.

² Six series of research reports were published separately from the 400 page report.

- > The goal of the child care system would be to provide services that are accessible to all children needing them, without regard to parental income or work status;
- > The federal government should take the lead role by implementing short and medium term fiscal measures which would stabilize the current licensed system, increase the availability of spaces and improve the affordability of licensed child care;
- > In the long term, the Task Force perceived a system of licensed child care which would be fully funded out of public revenues. This should be done following a study of the impact of short and medium term measures;
- > Federal funds should be conditional – grants should be directed to public and non-profit licensed centres and family child care homes;
- > The system should be multi-faceted - offering a range of services and catering to a variety of needs of children and families;
- > The system should be developed following collaboration of both levels of government (federal and provincial/territorial), child care providers and users of the service.

Response to the Task Force Report

By the time the Task Force Report was released in 1986, a federal election had not only brought a new government to power - as the Progressive Conservative government of Brian Mulroney replaced the Trudeau Liberals - but another federal group had been set up by the new government to study child care. The members of the Special Committee on Child Care were not appointed for their expertise but were elected members of the House of Commons who reported to Parliament, not a Minister. Their mandate was different from that of the Task Force:

The Cooke Task Force has provided us with the comprehensive analysis and research....What is now in front of us is a workable solution. The question, therefore, is as politicians to go out and talk first of all to the people in order to...find out what models are working and what types of solutions there are (House of Commons, 1986: 2:10) ³.

Even before the Cooke Task Force Report was released on International Women's Day, the vice-Chair of the Special Committee stated that "A universal day-care system is not the solution to the problem" (Times-Colonist, 1986).

The media coverage of the Task Force Report on and after March 8, 1986 was extensive. An editorial in the

Star-Phoenix (Saskatchewan) observed that the study was "no doubt the most thorough analysis ever given this oft-studied subject" (1986). The Ontario Premier, David Peterson, said that "Ontario is willing to pay its share of a national day care system if Ottawa will get the ball rolling" (Globe and Mail, 1986b). The federal Health and Welfare Minister Jake Epp was quoted as saying that "parents, not day care workers, are the best people to raise their own children", rejecting the main conclusions of the study and indicating that "more consideration should be given to providing some form of credit to women who stay home with their own youngsters" (Globe and Mail, 1987). Citing Dr. Elliot Barker, a psychiatrist at the Penetanguishene, ON psychiatric facility, The Catholic Register alluded to "a clear link between daycare and the prevalence of adult partial-psychopaths in today's world" (1986:13). A Globe and Mail headline commented that "Day care goes from marginal to big social issue for Ottawa" (1986c). And in the federal Throne Speech October 1, 1986, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney "once again pledged to provide better child care programs, a promise Mulroney had made during the last election campaign" (Winnipeg Free Press, 1986).

Twenty years after

There were 53 recommendations on child care and parental leave in the Task Force's Report. Twenty years after its release on International Women's Day in 1986, few of them – and none of the major proposals – had been acted upon.

March 3, 2006

References

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³ The Report of the Special Committee on Child Care, *Sharing the Responsibility*, was released in 1987.