

6

Québec's Subsidized Childcare Network

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Introduction

Children are our first wealth; they are the future of Québec society. Our responsibility is to do everything we can to provide them with the best possible starting conditions and to ensure that they benefit, as much as possible, from the same chances of success and achievement in life.

(Gouvernement du Québec 1997).¹

It was on this strong stand in defence of children's development that, on 23 January 1997, the then Québec premier Lucien Bouchard revealed the family policy White paper '*Les enfants au coeur de nos choix*,'² under which the Centres de la petite enfance (CPEs)³ would be created. Nine months later, in the autumn of 1997, Québec's CPE network, a cornerstone of its family policy, was implemented. This chapter provides insight into the policy success that the development and implementation of subsidized childcare in Québec represents. Described as *Québec exceptionalism* (Arsenault et al., 2018), the provincial system, still in place, is unique in Canada. For more than twenty years, it has outlived changes in governing political parties, withstood policy changes, survived budgetary crises, and adapted to harsh criticisms.

A number of factors have influenced the evolution of family trends in Canada and Québec (Baker, 1994), leading to different family policy decisions. Arguably, a chief factor is the decline in Québec's fertility rate. Although Canada experienced a baby boom between 1945 and the early 1960s, the province's fertility rate has since fallen sharply to 1.5 children per woman, below the population replacement rate set by demographers at 2.1 children per woman. Other changes, such as rising divorce and common-law union rates, sharp increases in the number of

¹ Author's translation

² 'Children at the heart of our choices' (Author translation)

³ 'Early Childhood Centres' (Author translation)

single-parent families (from 289,000 in 1976 to 698,000 in 2014)⁴ and family debt (176.9 per cent of disposable income in 2020) have contributed to the changing face of Canadian families over the years and brought the problems facing families and governments into sharper focus. For instance, while declining fertility rates are not necessarily a problem per se, they have direct consequences for how society is organized, and they impact the provision and diversity of public services. They also raise important public policy challenges (permanent closure of some schools, for example). Changes in the labour market, such as the increased participation of mothers with young children in the workforce and the rise of single-parent families, challenge governments to develop concrete measures to ensure a work-family balance. The level of family debt highlights important concerns about individuals' purchasing power, and its effects on intergenerational transfers and the erosion of the middle class. The increased participation of women in the labour market brings attention to the heavy burden of women's dual responsibilities and questions the role of governments in this regard (Mathieu, 2016; Bergeron, 2005; Jensen and Sineau, 2001; Porter, 2003; O'Connor et al., 1999). These transformations shape government conceptualizations regarding families and parental roles, while raising questions around how to best integrate the market, the family, and the state into policy (Burlone and Couture, 2011) through pertinent instruments (Burlone, 2009).

The 1997 Québec family policy acknowledges these transformations. The proposed measures were grounded in the then budgetary constraints (objective of zero deficit) and social, economic, and labour market changes. With an initial announcement of the soon-to-be enacted policy at the 1996 *Sommet sur l'emploi et l'économie*,⁵ the provincial government took a clear stand on recognizing the primary responsibility of parents to provide for their children and suggested that any such policy should be integrated into the family life course (Burlone, 2013). The government's duty was to support this responsibility with programs that would better address poverty, bring mothers and welfare recipients into the workforce, and promote equality of opportunity for both parents and children. Consistent with education and income security reforms under way at the time, the policy, implemented a year after the Summit, contained several provisions. One was the long-term creation of 200,000 childcare places available to all Québec children under the age of five at a flat daily rate of \$5 through a single-window system. These services, certainly the most important provision of the policy, are still delivered today in CPEs facilities (as non-profit organizations) or in family settings (under the supervision of CPEs), where parents play an important role on boards of directors.

The creation and implementation of childcare services in 1997 have since been the subject of criticisms that pertain to rising expenses, the gradual move away

⁴ <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2015001/article/14202/parent-eng.htm>

⁵ Summit on the Economy and Employment

from an initial universality principle⁶ due to problems of accessibility (ameliorated partly by the Liberal government with the decision to include subsidized and non-subsidized commercial childcare centres in 2003), and consecutive increases in the daily parental contribution (to \$7 in 2003 and the addition of an annual contribution based on family income between 2015 and 2019). Nevertheless, the fact remains that the creation of CPEs largely meet the criteria for policy success proposed for this volume (see also [McConnell, 2010, 2017](#)), which shall be discussed further below. To better situate its programmatic, process, political, and endurance successes, the story of the program's creation, substance, and evolution will be presented first.

The Journey towards Childcare Services

Developing family policy in Québec

Family policies consist of many types. Baker's typology (1994) embraces policies related to issues of marriage/divorce, adoption, reproduction, income support (such as family allowances, maternity and paternity benefits), and direct service provisions including, but not exclusively, childcare. The policy success that the creation of CPEs represent must be appreciated in light of the broader transformations brought on by the development of the 1997 family policy package. By substantially transforming the range of services and benefits available to Québec families, the policy introduced a somewhat revolutionary approach to childcare, which was unprecedented within Canada. CPEs were able to break with several decades of programs exclusively focused on financial benefits.

This new policy package did not materialize in a vacuum. In fact, as early as the 1960s, Québec had improved the universal family allowance granted by the Canadian federal government after World War II by offering school allowances for 16- and 17-year-olds. This measure was proposed to ensure the extended education of children and to provide access to education for all, at all levels of instruction (at the time, under-education of French-Canadian students was striking compared to English-speaking ones). The province later adopted additional measures, such as childcare allowances for children under 16 years of age (1967) and the first tax credits for childcare expenses (1972). Moreover, the first childcare policy, introduced in 1974, was limited to start-up grants and funded a portion of childcare costs for disadvantaged parents in order to increase accessibility ([Bailargeon, 1996](#)). The 1979 Child Care Act recognized the importance of developing daycares without, however, providing the means to address the underfunding of such services.

⁶ Some authors have, however, criticized the claim that subsidized childcare is universal, arguing that no government since the program's inception has been able to meet the demand for spaces.

With two organizational structures specifically devoted to families, the *Secrétariat à la famille* and the *Conseil de la famille*, 1987 marked a turning point for recognizing the need for innovative government action for families (Le Bourdais, 1989). Both structures had been given joint responsibility for managing the measures included in this revision of Québec's family policy. The family support programs offered in 1987 were mainly developed to address the low fertility rate of Québec families. At that time, the province was experiencing a serious birth crisis, going from being the most fertile province to one with the fewest children in under 30 years (Baker, 1990). Duly characterized as pro-natalist, the 1987 programs consisted of financial allowances in the form of birth benefits (relatively generous from the third child on) and tax credits, the amount of which varied according to income. While the 1987 programs compensated for the expense of bringing additional children into the family, the sole pursuit of a generational renewal objective provided only partial and targeted assistance over time. Measures of this type do not increase birth rates or necessarily encourage families to have *more* children than initially planned. This was also the case for Québec. Between 1988 and 1990, the number of births increased by 13 per cent but then fell back to the 1988 level (Dandurand, 2020). The 1987 provisions were also rather inefficient in addressing the new realities of parents. The long-term issues of reducing family income inequalities, integrating and reintegrating parents into the workforce, and ensuring the physical and psychological development of children, which were specific problems arising from transformations within Québec society, were left unaddressed. Moreover, the challenge of reconciling family and work responsibilities remained a strong theme for social advocates.

Ultimately, the 1997 family policy reform turned its back on natalist goals and, instead, it was guided by a logic of financial stability for families (especially for women), which was expected to improve the well-being of children. As Pauline Marois, the then minister of education and head of the *Office des services de garde à l'enfance*⁷ in 1997, recalls on the twentieth anniversary of the policy:

For us, it was a huge equality of opportunity policy, a fight against poverty. By offering childcare services at a reduced price, we allowed many families and many single mothers to enter the job market because the income they earned was still enough to cover the costs, since childcare costs were very low.

(Bertrand, 2017. Author's translation)

The new family policy recognized the transformation of Québec society. By 1997, the composition of households had changed considerably, and the traditional family structure had lost its dominance. The number of single-parent families (with women as the responsible parent in most cases) and reconstituted families had

⁷ Childcare Services Office

increased, representing respectively 20 per cent and 10 per cent of all families in the province. This transformation created significant economic pressure for some families who, forced into a situation of poverty, struggled to find assistance to cover their basic needs within existing government responses. In addition, there was also little incentive for families on welfare to work, leading to situations of inequity and unequal opportunities for children. Finally, the extended years of schooling and the consequential postponement of socio-professional integration also had a significant impact on social programs. The 1997 family policy sought to respond to these new realities by proposing a substantial reconfiguration of the programs offered to families based on innovative principles.⁸ The policy also had the goal of reaching a significant number of individuals and inducing a positive long-term impact on diverse social groups.

In addition to the historical developments outlined above, the 1997 Québec family policy must be understood within the governmental budgetary context, the evolution of the labour market, and social and economic transformations. Surprisingly, the development of Québec's family policy was carried out in a context of significant budgetary restrictions (Dandurand, 2020). In the spring of 1997, Lucien Bouchard's PQ (Parti Québécois) government was committed to returning to a balanced budget to avoid the province's credit rating being reduced further. The government announced its intention to eliminate the deficit through a series of program cuts and rationalization of resources. Among other things, achieving the zero-deficit objective required curbing the fragmented and inefficient expenditure of \$2.2 billion on existing social programs. Work incentive programs for income security recipients were not working (Bouchard et al., 1996), and early childhood services were insufficient and scattered. This required the new family policy to be coordinated with ongoing reforms in education and income security (the new policy would eventually replace some of these programs), as well as with other existing policies. In 1996, two thirds of Québec mothers were working outside the home with insufficient childcare options and the *Office des services de garde à l'enfance* had not created enough places to solve the problem (Dandurand, 2020). While the PQ government sought to ensure greater coherence between existing measures in childcare and parenthood support, it also wanted to provide Québec with a flagship family policy.

The *Secrétariat du Comité des priorités*,⁹ which was reporting to the Cabinet, was responsible for drafting a three-part policy as early as the spring of 1996, and

⁸ Some authors argue, however, that the 1997 provisions, although important, don't represent a complete turnaround but a foreseeable evolution due to the national and international trends prevailing in the 1990s. See, for example, Dandurand and Saint-Pierre (2000).

⁹ Priority Committee Secretariat (now named the *Secrétariat aux priorités et aux projets stratégiques/ Strategic Priorities and Projects Secretariat*). In 1997, the Secretariat was the body that supported the Priority committee composed of the premier and key ministers including the Finance and Education ministers.

was also tasked with validating its content with an interdepartmental ministerial committee created specifically for this purpose (Burlone, 2001). This committee, responsible for harmonizing policy proposals with the expertise provided by the departments of Education, Social Solidarity, Pensions, and Finance, worked to prepare the new policy announcement to be made at the *Sommet sur l'emploi et l'économie* in the autumn of 1996. The mandate of this working group was to examine all programs directly or indirectly related to families, and administered by different sectors, in order to gain a comprehensive overview of their scope, objectives, costs, actual outcomes, and problems encountered. This analysis revealed a serious lack of harmonization across programs. The committee quickly came to the conclusion that the patchwork of disparate measures and programs only reached the surface of existing problems and were not integrated into a coherent vision. More importantly, these programs and measures no longer responded to the needs of Québec families.

It would be misleading to believe that the desire to provide the province with an innovative family policy only came from governmental reflection and political will. When it comes to family matters, Québec can count on a history of organized groups, such as family associations, social workers, and experts, (Lemieux, 2011) as well as on the 'dual action of the family movement and the women's movement' (Dandurand and Kempeneers, 2002, 68). Indeed, as far back as the 1930s, under the impetus of the Catholic youth movement, several issues affecting families were brought forward by the clergy as well as medical and educational experts. The period between the early 1960s and the end of the 1970s was marked by the strong contribution of social movements for more appropriate childcare in Québec. Although emancipation of married women in the workforce had been growing, some issues remained unaddressed by the government. For instance, the absence of paid maternity leave and the lack of access to childcare services continued to marginalize women in Québec (Baillargeon, 1996). It is in this context that groups such as the *Fédération des unions des familles*,¹⁰ women's groups, feminist activists, and single-parent family associations joined forces to promote changes in family policy—namely the creation of a few non-profit daycares. Their actions also led to numerous public consultations resulting in the creation of a *Conseil supérieur de la famille*¹¹ in 1964 (Lemieux, 2011). The 1970s were marked by the rise of the unionization of women's movements, which put forth ideas around the universalization of childcare services through different courses of action, such as protests and advertisements (Bellemare and Briand, 2012). Present and powerful since the 1960s, such movements have been more influential in bringing about change in family services in Québec than in the rest of Canada:

¹⁰ Federation of Family Unions (Author translation)

¹¹ Higher Council of the Family

During the 1980s, family associations, especially through the creation of the Regroupement interorganismes pour une politique familiale au Québec (RIOPFQ), were undoubtedly the strongest lobby in the establishment of the 1987 family policy. In the process of implementing or transforming family policies, however, the family movement was not the only civil society player to be involved. This movement is, as with family associations, represented within a (consultative) Council on the Status of Women, which has repeatedly expressed its views on family issues, from alimony, poverty in single-parent families, parental leave, to balancing family and work responsibilities.

(Dandurand and Kempeneers, 2002, 68. Author's translation).

The Provisions of the 1997 Family Policy

Aligned with the recommendations and proposals made at the Taxation Review Committee (2015) and at the *États généraux sur l'Éducation*¹² (2016), Québec's family policy was officially announced at the November 1996 Summit. Two months later, on 23 January 1997, the white paper containing the new family policy provisions was officially released (*Secrétariat du Comité des priorités du ministère du Conseil exécutif, 1997*), and the policy was implemented the following autumn. The new family policy consisted of three major components: the introduction of the *Unified Child Allowance*, the development of a new *Parental Insurance Plan*, and the development of *Early Learning and Childcare Services*.

The *Unified Child Allowance* (UCA) proposed to consolidate a dozen existing measures that were to be redistributed. This non-taxable benefit, based on income and number of children, was included in a new income security policy. It intended to bring the benefits received by welfare recipients in line with those received by low-income families as a means to create a new incentive for welfare recipients to join the workforce. The UCA replaced the package introduced in 1987—the Family Allowance, the Youth Allowance, and the Birth Allowance (the Child Tax Credit was maintained)—and came into effect in July 1997.

The purpose of the *Parental Insurance Plan* was to respond more adequately to the new demands of the workplace. Parental insurance was to increase leave benefits by guaranteeing 75 per cent of net income. The Parental Insurance Plan was also designed to restore equity between salaried and self-employed workers, the latter being excluded from maternity or compensated parental leaves. This provision did not come into effect until 2006 due to lagging negotiations with the federal government over the amounts that would be transferred to Québec.

The *Early Learning* provisions included the creation of preschool classes for children aged 4 and 5 (full time and mandatory for 5-year-olds). Already called

¹² National Education Forum

for in the Parent Report in the 1960s,¹³ the establishment of preschool classes was based on the direct and documented relationship between the duration of preschool attendance and the decrease in the repetition rate in elementary school. While available to all children, this provision was intended to target children from disadvantaged regions or neighbourhoods. Compulsory full-time preschools for 5-year-olds were implemented in 1998,¹⁴ while the first preschools (not compulsory) for 4-year-olds were introduced in low-income areas in 2013. Access to preschools for all 4-year-old Québec children is projected for 2023.

If the creation of preschools for 4- and 5-year-olds was an important proposal of the 1997 family policy—and indeed these contributed to the development of children, better prepared them for elementary school, and generated positive social and economic outcomes (White et al., 2015)—the development of a network of subsidized childcare services through *Centres de la petite enfance* (CPEs) is without a doubt the policy's signature measure (Dandurand and Kempeneers, 2002).

The CPEs Then and Now

The benefits of subsidized CPE-like programs on children have been widely documented (Vandenbroeck, 2020; White et al., 2015):

An expanding research corpus demonstrates that high quality ECEC programmes can improve children's well-being, which we conceptualize broadly to include cognitive, social/emotional and physical development. These effects appear to be strongest for children who come from disadvantaged backgrounds including low family incomes, or having very young, single and poorly educated parents.

(White et al., 2015).

However, the payoffs do not stop with the children. Subsidized childcare generally improves the well-being of parents, and especially mothers (Schmitz, 2020). What the Bouchard government proposed in 1997 amounted to a complete revamping of the childcare system aimed specifically at these outcomes. On the one hand, the government designed the creation of free childcare services for children from disadvantaged backgrounds in existing preschools. On the other hand, for non-disadvantaged neighbourhoods, it promised the long-term creation of 200,000 affordable single daily rate childcare places available to all Québec children under the age of five, regardless of family income. These services would be offered in public facilities and family settings through CPEs, bringing Québec's service levels up to that of world-leading countries: 'While low-cost (or even free) child care is a

¹³ The Parent Report was the result of the Royal Commission on Education set up in 1961 by the Québec Liberal government to examine the province's education system.

¹⁴ Non-mandatory 5-year-old preschools have been established in Québec since the 1960s.

common reality in countries such as France and Sweden, in North America this is unique and an enviable measure for many Canadian provinces and some US states' (Dandurand and Kempeneers, 2002. Author's translation).

The family policy needed an organizational structure responsible for its implementation and sustainability, and the simultaneous creation of the *Ministère de la Famille et de l'Enfance*¹⁵ met that need and ensured a rapid deployment of the new provisions. The Department oversaw the implementation of the policy, including childcare services, and replaced the less powerful *Office des services de garde à l'enfance*, which was abolished. CPEs were created as non-profit organizations responsible for delivering childcare services. Meeting the promise of creating 200,000 places proved challenging. According to data from the Québec Department of the Family,¹⁶ between 1998 and 2006, the number of places in CPEs increased by around 9 per cent every year but growth rates decreased considerably thereafter. In 2006, the target of 200,000 childcare places was nonetheless reached. Most of these places were subsidized and offered through CPEs (37 per cent in a facility and 45 per cent in home-based childcare settings) and private subsidized childcare centres (17 per cent). The difference was made up by places in non-subsidized but government-recognized childcare facilities. By 2020, Québec had a total of 306,152 childcare places, of which 235,731 were subsidized (41 per cent offered in CPEs, 39 per cent in home settings and 20 per cent in private subsidized facilities). The single daily rate of \$5 was maintained until 2004, one year after the election of Jean Charest's Liberal Party. From that year until 2015, the rate increased to \$7 per day. Between 2015 and 2019, a means-tested and family-size dependent annual contribution (a user fee) was applied.

Although the 1997–2003 period under the Parti Québécois government was one of expansion with the initial weekly rate maintained, Mathieu (2019) refers to the gradual transformation of childcare as a 'breach in the collectivization of social reproduction care' brought on by neoliberal ideology. The 2003–2012 Liberal government under Jean Charest showed a clear preference towards for-profit childcare. In 2008, the government substantially increased the tax credit for childcare expenses, which allowed families to pay for non-subsidized childcare places at a rate almost equivalent to that of CPEs. This decision is partly explained by the insufficiency of places in CPEs to meet public demand and the pressure to develop places that would ensure adequate coverage of family needs to accommodate a work-family balance. Starting in 2015 (under the liberal government of Philippe Couillard), the childcare program was significantly modified by the modulation of daily rates. The attractiveness of a CPE place over one in a non-subsidized private childcare facility began to diminish for some families:

¹⁵ Department of the Family and Childhood

¹⁶ <https://www.mfa.gouv.qc.ca/fr/services-de-garde/portrait/places/Pages/index.aspx>

In 2018, the cost of a subsidized GDS place is \$8.05 for families with an income of less than \$51,340, while families with an income of more than \$165,005 must pay \$21.95 for a place for the first child (basic contribution of \$8.05 per day + additional contribution of \$13.90).

(Mathieu, 2019, 217. Author's translation).

In 2019, after a change of government, the newly elected Legault government (Coalition Avenir Québec) abolished the annual contribution and announced a plan to improve access to early learning and childcare services that included catching up on the number of places created.

Despite these policy shifts and the gradual adaptations to the CPE program, the fact remains that the public popularity of subsidized childcare has not waned. To date, Québec is the only province to have adopted such work-family balance measures. The province also invests more in childcare services than other Canadian provinces, resulting in the higher affordability of such services in Québec when compared to the rest of the country. In a recent study, [Arsenault et al. \(2018\)](#) show the unique nature of Québec's subsidized childcare system in Canada.¹⁷ Indeed, despite the attractiveness and success of the program, no other Canadian province has followed in Québec's footsteps to *massively* invest in childcare services:

When comparing the social policies of the different Canadian provinces, one of them stands out for its audacity: Québec's childcare policy. No other social policy so clearly distinguishes one province from the others. Indeed, while there are notable differences between childcare services in other Canadian provinces, they all have in common low public funding, high fees and lower utilization rates than in other Western countries.

(Arsenault et al., 2018, 2. Author translation)

A Policy Success: Assessing the CPE System

From a *programmatic* point of view, the childcare services network put in place in 1997 is a policy innovation and a huge success. The PQ government identified a need and decided to devote important funds to support families. The CPEs replaced what was considered a scattered and fragmented set of governmental measures and programs targeting families with limited impact. Prioritizing social investment and collectivization of care work ([Mathieu, 2019](#)), the development of CPE offerings has attracted a significant number of children to services that allow

¹⁷ The author points, however, to the fact that Québec's uniqueness fades away when compared to other Welfare states or OECD countries.

them to be better prepared for elementary school. The creation of a network of subsidized childcare services has yielded various positive results. The most obvious is the important diminution in the parental contribution to the cost of childcare services. Baker et al. (2008) valued this decrease at more than 60 per cent for two-parent families and 40 per cent for single-parent families, who are also able to benefit from other subsidies. To put it another way, while families were subsidized at a rate between 47 per cent and 80 per cent for the cost of a childcare place, the average rate was 32 per cent in the rest of Canada (Fortin et al., 2013). The number of subsidized places has also tripled between 1997 and 2012, from 79,000 in 1997 to 245,000 in 2012 (Fortin et al., 2013).

The rapid implementation of CPEs provided incentives for young parents to seek or stay in work, bolstered assistance to low-income families, and afforded labour integration or reintegration opportunities for mothers. Fortin et al. (2013) note that the employment rate of Québec women aged 20–44 increased substantially in the province between 1996 and 2011, reaching levels twice as much as the rest of Canada (whereas it was lower than the Canadian average in 1996). CPEs have facilitated a family-work balance. Moreover, single-parent families are known to be the poorest Canadian households. In 2016, 39 per cent of female lone-parent families in Canada were considered low-income (Harding, 2018). Therefore, enabling single female parents to have access to quality services at a reduced cost helped lower the poverty rate. For instance, between 1996 and 2017, the number of single-parent families on welfare dropped by 64 per cent. Poverty rates decreased from 38 per cent in 1998 to 23 per cent in 2014 (Bertrand, 2017). Compared to the rest of Canada, the implementation of the Québec family policy and particularly, the CPEs provision, also helped reduce the revenue gap between mothers and women with no children:

Indeed, Québec mothers who gave birth to their first child in 2001 or later saw their incomes increase more rapidly in subsequent years compared with mothers in the rest of Canada and to mothers in Québec whose first child was born before 2001. This effect of Québec family policies is significant: the long-term wage gap, 10 years after the birth of the first child, is reduced by 39 percentage points for Québec mothers, going from 49 per cent to 10 per cent. In comparison, the gaps for women in the rest of Canada have narrowed from 48 per cent to 41 per cent; this is an improvement, but not of the same order of magnitude as the change in Québec. The net effect of Québec's family policies is therefore 32 percentage points.

(Conolly et al., 2020. Author's translation)

Finally, extended public provision of childcare services has improved the quality of services, with CPEs meeting higher requirements than for-profit or unregulated home care settings (Japel et al., 2005) and receiving far fewer complaints than public daycares (Couturier and Hurteau, 2016). Related to quality, in 2018, more than

90 per cent of CPEs complied with the required qualification ratio of educators (two-thirds of qualified staff)—which represents more than 80 per cent of qualified staff—compared to around 33 per cent of non-subsidized private childcare providers (*Vérificateur général du Québec*, 2020). The number of qualifications doubled with the mobilization of childcare representatives, and such mobilization efforts also resulted in considerable improvements in working conditions since 1999, including wage increases (*Couturier*, 2017). For example, in 2011, the unions won a ‘44 per cent increase in the base stipend that family childcare providers receive, retroactively’ (*Bellemare and Briand*, 2012, 129. Author’s translation) as well as improved pensions. This outcome is significant considering that a majority of CPEs workers are women. The improvement of living conditions remains at the heart of union priorities, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic. Indeed, the *Centrale des syndicats du Québec*¹⁸ fought for salary increases and consistent measures for at-risk educators to ensure their return to work (*Colpron et al.*, 2020).

The policy *process* leading to the development and implementation of the CPEs should be appraised in conjunction with the development of the family policy as a whole. Once the White Paper was made public, an interdepartmental committee was formed, bringing together several important departments and agencies (Revenue, Treasury, Finance, Education, Intergovernmental Affairs, Office des services de garde à l’enfance) with the task of translating the government’s orientations into operational mandates (*Burlone*, 2001). This committee, divided into three sub-committees (one for each of the components of the new policy), was still almost exclusively overseen by the executive branch, namely the *Secrétariat du Comité des priorités* and the Premier’s Office. While this approach may seem authoritarian and imposed, it had the merit of speeding up the decision-making process, leading to a swift implementation of the policy.

The involvement of the Department of Finance and the Treasury Board is important to note because of the substantial funding involved. Their role was to ensure that the measures to be implemented complied with the agreed tax relief, the overall budget available, and the rationalization of existing programs, while also being consistent with the objective of achieving a zero deficit. This financial logic, although compatible with the objectives of coherence and simplification central to the policy, was an extremely important consideration that put the finance minister, Bernard Landry, and Premier Bouchard at odds at different points. The education minister, Pauline Marois, was also a key player in the development of the policy (*Burlone*, 2001). An experienced politician, respected by her colleagues and the premier, she had the necessary perspective to evaluate the proposed reforms in light of past struggles that challenged families and

¹⁸ Québec Labour Congress

women.¹⁹ Other ministerial actors involved, who for the most part were recruited by the *Secrétariat du Comité des priorités*, had a secondary role in the deliberations, and mainly focused on providing the interministerial committee with information from their respective sectors of activity (Burlone, 2001).

The time between the drafting of measures, and their implementation, took only a year. This narrow timeframe, unusual for a policy with such a broad scope, posed a major challenge for the actors involved, but was made possible by the underlying collaborative work involved in preparing for the implementation. The interdepartmental committees responsible for developing the policy framework in time for its announcement at the autumn 1996 *Sommet sur l'emploi et l'économie* and for formulating the various instruments played a crucial role, together with a coordinating body directly connected to the premier (Secrétariat du Comité des priorités). These structures, which were activated within a short period of time, facilitated information sharing, informal exchanges, broader consultation of experienced actors, and an ongoing drafting of bills. Québec's organizational structure was transformed with the creation of the *Ministère de la Famille*, the body responsible for implementing the policy. The province had not seen a department dedicated solely to the family unit since the 1960s.

From a *political* perspective, given the scope of the proposed reform and the budgetary context, one might have expected the government to engage in extensive public consultations before or after its announcement, but that was not the case for the 1997 family policy. The impetus behind the work that led to the new family policy came straight from the government, and was rooted in a political commitment towards families in the province (Burlone, 2001). The sector was not in crisis; families were not otherwise being overlooked by the government. Premier Lucien Bouchard, however, insisted on developing an integrated family policy out of personal conviction that a government like Québec's had a duty to have one. The premier was convinced that support for families should be substantial and that the sector as a whole had to be re-examined in order to present a clear direction to Québec families. The matter quickly became a priority and he continued to monitor its progress closely.

Another political element for assessing the success of the implementation of subsidized childcare is the key role played by central agencies in the development of the policy. The fact that the *Secrétariat du Comité des priorités* led the development was an unusual practice. Typically, sector departments develop first drafts, submit them for consultation with stakeholders, and make amendments based on the feedback received. However, not only was the family policy development initiated by the highest political level (the premier), but the draft was prepared by

¹⁹ Twenty years earlier, Pauline Marois was the chief of staff to Lise Payette, then minister of state for Social Development and the Status of Women.

professionals from a body that does not engage in policy-making. The Secrétariat du Comité des priorités played an instrumental role in initiating and driving policy development, and in acting as an intermediary between departments and the Privy Council. It was also responsible for drafting the White Paper and integrating the interdepartmental committee's discussions into a comprehensive family policy framework.

As mentioned earlier, the role of the central agencies and the premier in initiating the development of the new family policy came to fruition at an announcement during the *Sommet sur l'emploi et l'économie* in the autumn of 1996. This announcement affirmed the premier's commitment to provide Québec with new measures to help families. Not only did Lucien Bouchard announce new provisions, he also promised to implement them in less than a year. Validated by the entire Executive and Council of Ministers, the principles set out in the policy were made public. Turning back was no longer an option. The strong leadership of the executive in developing the family policy, which was necessary for its rapid implementation (in all, only eight months separated the publication of the White Paper and the implementation of the policy), generated some tension and resistance. The departments involved were all important and, in theory, were of equal status. In practice, however, some, such as the Department of Finance, dictated the rules of the game. Prime-ministerial leadership, backed by strong public support for the proposed policy, transformed the policy development processes and, in this instance, helped secure cabinet and parliament backing.

In terms of an *endurance* assessment, the system has flourished across the province. There were 993 CPEs in Québec in 2020, spearheading a set of complementary measures that have proven to be appropriate instruments for achieving initial policy objectives. Over the years, the number of CPE places increased (either in facilities or in home care settings) up until the change in government in 2003, where the proportion of CPEs developed in relation to the entire range of childcare services diminished to the advantage of for-profit facilities. CPEs still benefit from very strong public support and have been maintained (albeit transformed) under the three successive governments since the defeat of the Parti Québécois in 2003. Their popularity has also not vanished since the early 2000s, as they continue to be victims of their own success: supply cannot meet the demand, extending wait times for families to obtain a subsidized place.

Under the Charest Government, CPEs were subjected to budget cuts of approximately \$260 million between 2006 and 2014, and tax credits were offered to users of commercial childcare centres. And as discussed earlier, in 2015, the Couillard Government imposed means-tested user contribution fees while delaying the creation of new childcare places until 2021. At that point, the future of the policy looked uncertain. Yet, the political pendulum swung again, and the newly elected Legault government abolished the users' annual contribution in 2019 and announced a plan in 2021 to improve access to early learning and childcare services,

which included streamlining the construction CPEs to address the shortage of subsidized spaces.

Conclusion: The Driving Forces of Success

With the development of its 1997 family policy, and particularly the establishment of a network of subsidized childcare services, Québec reaffirmed its characteristic support for the social economy. It is this commitment to social innovation that makes Québec a leading province in several areas and sets it apart from other Canadian provinces (Vaillancourt, 2002). Arsenault et al. (2018) propose three explanations as to why Québec's childcare measures have not extended beyond the province's borders. The first one has to do with the party in power at the time the family policy was developed. Indeed, the PQ, a leftist party, put forward social measures that couldn't be implemented by a Liberal government. The second explanation relates to the fact that, in Québec, interest groups are more focused on the provincial level than groups in other provinces, who prefer targeting the federal government. As seen in this chapter, groups have been, and still continue to be, very active in the development of affordable childcare services. Finally, the fact that the province of Québec's political party system is less polarized contributed to the endurance of the policy, as both the Liberal government and the current CAQ (Coalition Avenir Québec) government have maintained and invested in the program.

The prevailing context also had a role to play in the success of CPEs. The pro-natalist provisions established under the 1987 policy had not yielded the expected results. Active women in the labour market were demanding work-life balance measures, existing childcare services were no longer meeting demand, and women's and family movements were pressuring the government to implement programs that would facilitate labour market integration or reintegration (Dandurand, 2020). The context was therefore conducive to change. As premier, Lucien Bouchard was able to take advantage of a window of opportunity. The political momentum, the socio-economic context, and the specific actors called upon to participate in the policy development were all favourable to the introduction of a major reform for Québec's families. Childcare services were specifically what parents wanted. The system in place was ripe to be transformed. The abolition and rationalization of some existing programs from the previous policy also allowed the government to immediately allocate large budgets to an ambitious program (around 40 per cent of the budget for families was allocated in direct subsidies).

While political leadership in the shape of direct involvement by the premier was certainly a factor propelling the policy forward, the minister leading the project, Pauline Marois, also had an important role to play. Her presence, status, and authority within the PQ government and her strong commitment to seeing family

policy become a reality must be factored into the success of the policy. Mrs. Marois was given responsibility over the new *Ministère de l'Enfance et de la Famille* created with the policy, and she used this responsibility to allow the implementation of the new system to proceed apace.

Another driving force, both of a political and process nature, was the interorganizational structure that was set up to craft the policy and administer the system. The *Secrétariat du Comité des priorités*, by bringing together strategic actors from relevant departments, made it possible to swiftly materialize the premier's wishes. This political will translated into clear objectives: equal opportunities for young Québécois and access to the labour market for women. CPEs provided the structure for a better work-family balance. Sometimes, very clear, definite, and somewhat imperative political will can help push forward issues that, at other times, would take too long to succeed (Anderson, 1997). This case shows that when governments have a firm intention to accomplish something, no matter how many departments and agencies are involved, and no matter how compressed the time frame is, policy objectives can be realized.

The 1997 policy and its childcare services offered in CPEs were transformed by successive governments that followed the Parti Québécois. Today, private childcare centres are more present, parents' daily contribution has increased, and the number of CPEs and available places still does not meet the demand. Nevertheless, Québec's CPE remains an exceptional service in Canada, providing affordable and quality childcare. While it has not been adopted by other Canadian provinces, the federal government intends to draw inspiration from this policy to create a national network of affordable childcare services (Lafontaine-Émond, 2021). Indeed, the 2021 federal budget includes \$4 billion in funding to help Canadian provinces build similar services. This important decision reinforces the idea that quality, affordable, and accessible childcare is a cornerstone of effective family policy. Programs such as CPEs are key instruments that have multiple effects, including fostering equal opportunity and educational success, reducing obstacles to women's integration into the workforce, addressing poverty issues, and supporting economic growth.

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