

It Took a Crisis to Solve a Crisis:

The How and Why Behind Canada's Universal Childcare Plan¹

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¹ A special thank you to Martha Friendly, Canada's leading childcare advocate

INTRODUCTION

In alignment with tradition, Canada's Minister of Finance presented the 2021 Federal Budget in a pair of new shoes, and for the first time, they were high heels. On April 19, Canada's first female Finance Minister, Chrystia Freeland, unveiled a bold plan to bring universal, affordable childcare to all Canadians as part of her maiden budget. The decision represents a marked departure for the current Liberal government, which, since elected in 2015, has prioritized other family policies like child benefits. The shift in policy is so dramatic that it warrants this case study, in which I explain how and why childcare is now at the forefront of the federal institutional agenda after decades of inaction and outright failure.

First, it is crucial to explain the institutions, ideas, and interests behind why, for five years, the current Liberal government avoided taking meaningful action on childcare. Institutional restraints and ideological opposition impose significant barriers to the implementation of a national program. Furthermore, it is associated with a hefty price tag, and the federal government may have believed that the cost commitment did not justify the potential risks. In contrast, the institutional challenges associated with child benefits are substantially less. Their political return and short-term impact are more pronounced, with the related costs much lower. Consequently, the federal government opted for the path of least resistance by championing child benefits, a more politically-expedient and low-risk alternative to universal childcare.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic and recession have changed everything. In effect, it has been a focusing event that has produced new social and economic problems and exacerbated existing ones. Publicly-funded ELCC has emerged as a potential policy response to address the pandemic-incited crisis in childcare and the decline in labour force participation. Childcare is

now recognized not only as a social issue but an economic one as well, in no small part thanks to the work of advocates, researchers, and decision-makers. Additionally, childcare was a winning idea in the context of a pandemic election called shortly after the plan was announced. In the last section of this paper, I apply the Multiple Streams Analysis framework to summarize the arguments and frame the policy puzzle in the language of policy studies.

POLICY BACKGROUND

In Canada, childcare has been a salient issue on the public agenda for decades. A publicly-funded system was first proposed by the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in 1970 (CRRU, 2012). Since then, consecutive federal governments have explored childcare to varying degrees on several occasions. In 1986, the federal government-initiated Task Force on Childcare published a report urging national, publicly-funded daycare (CRRU, 2012). During the 1993 Federal Election, the Chretien Liberals pledged to implement a national childcare system but did not follow through on this promise when elected (CRRU, 2012). In summary, for over three decades, there was a considerable amount of discussion at the institutional level, but next to no action.

The lack of federal leadership in childcare has meant that provinces have had to take it upon themselves to address the issue. According to White, Friendly & Prentice (2016), "no province or territory [currently] has a comprehensive plan based on the best evidence". While some steps have been made in the right direction, in all provinces but Quebec, there still exists a fee-reliant system with inadequate funding to ensure accessible, affordable, and quality services (White, Friendly & Prentice, 2016).

The first time a federal government took concrete steps towards establishing a national daycare system was in 2004. Spearheaded by Social Development Minister Ken Dryden, the Martin government's Foundations Program proposed creating national standards, creating thousands of new spaces, and providing reliable funding to the provinces to make it happen (Gutstein, 2015). It was based around the four principles of "Quality, Universality, Accessibility and Developmental [Programming]" (CRRU, 2012). Dryden was successful in securing bilateral deals with all ten provinces. However, the Martin Liberals lost the 2006 election to the Harper Conservatives, who immediately cancelled the deals and ruled out further pursuit of a national system (CRRU, 2012). Instead, the Harper government introduced new child tax credits, including the Universal Child Care Benefit, which disbursed a modest, taxable amount to every family regardless of household income (CRRU, 2012). This change in policy course was to the dismay of childcare advocates, who perceive cash benefits as an inappropriate solution to the childcare problem (CCAAC, 2013).

The childcare discourse in Canada has long been characterized by publicly-funded services versus cash benefits, rooted in differing ideological conceptions about the role of government. The Conservative side, rooted in neoliberalism, argues in favour of cash transfers or childcare vouchers because it gives parents a choice (Jacobs, 2006). Advocates and progressives, meanwhile, argue that the sky-high costs of childcare, particularly in urban centers, are prohibitive for many families (Jacobs, 2006). A cash benefit of any size is insufficient to cover the costs of childcare. As argued by Friendly, child benefits are meant to "boost income or eradicate poverty" and that "all countries who have a good family policy have a childcare benefit [and] also have a childcare system" (Boutilier, 2021). In other words, childcare should be treated as a complementary policy to child benefits, not a substitute. The rationale behind the advocates'

viewpoint is that a childcare system reliant on parent fees attempts to strike an impossible balance between quality of service and affordability for parents (Friendly, 2021a). When fees are too low, childcare workers are underpaid, and the quality of the service suffers. When fees are too high, childcare is out of reach for many families. A public system can remove this tradeoff by ensuring reliable, robust funding for providers while substantially reducing fees for parents (Friendly, 2021a). In addition, childcare is associated with other positive outcomes such as increased employment, improved gender equality, and creating equal opportunity through greater accessibility to quality child development services (Sunil & Granofsky, 2015).

When the Trudeau Liberal government was first elected in 2015, it promised to work with the provinces to establish a national framework on childcare. However, it also pledged to strengthen child benefits. In early 2016, they created the Canada Child Benefit, which consolidated existing benefits and retargeted the transfer such that most families received more money, especially low-income ones. Notably, unlike their predecessors, the new Liberal government did not posit that child benefits were a substitute to a national action plan on childcare. In 2017, the federal government released their multilateral framework negotiated with the provinces (Canada, 2017a). In that year's budget, it earmarked a modest-but-significant \$7.5 billion to support the provinces with childcare (Canada, 2017b). The framework failed to establish a basis for universality, instead taking a more targeted approach (Pasolli, 2019). While the Liberal government expressed aspirations that universal childcare could materialize in the future, their focus on childcare was improving access and affordability for low-income families (Radwanski, 2017). Overall, for the first five years of the Liberal government's tenure, childcare was effectively treated as a mid-level priority. Other social policies, like the Canada Child Benefit, were put front and centre while childcare took a backseat.

The new childcare plan outlined in the 2021 Budget allocates a whopping \$30 billion over five years to create hundreds of thousands of new childcare spaces, hire more ECEs, and bring average fees down to \$10 a day by 2026 (Canada, 2021a). The federal government would share costs 50-50 with the provinces. The plan received strong praise from advocates for providing robust funding and committing to simultaneously improving affordability, accessibility, and quality through a universal system (Kupfer, 2021). In making this plan a reality, the Liberal government follows the Martin-Dryden approach of securing bilateral deals with each province. To date, it has successfully secured deals with one territory and all but two provinces, including ideological foes in Alberta. A mountain of work lies ahead in closing in on the remaining jurisdictions, seeing through the program's implementation nationwide, and achieving goals within the established timeframes. Overall, the 2021 childcare plan represents not a reversal of course by the current federal government but rather a reprioritization of the institutional agenda that places national childcare front and centre, with the federal government now willing to absorb the cost to get there.

CHALLENGES OF CHILDCARE

The challenges explaining why the current Liberal Government was reluctant to implement universal childcare can be explained in terms of institutions, interests, and ideas. The primary impediment is institutional: federalism acts as a strong barrier to implementing sweeping national social programs. Another impediment is ideas: the staunch ideological opposition of Conservatives, paired with the fundamental liberal welfarism underpinning the Canadian political system, were hostile to universal childcare. Interests come in the form of voters, whose political response to childcare was perceived as uncertain or lackluster. Overall, these

impediments meant that the associated risks and costs of childcare did not justify expected political returns.

Childcare, like healthcare and education, is a social issue falling under provincial jurisdiction. For the federal government to implement any significant program, it must work with the provincial and territorial governments to administer the program. The federal government's role comes into play through the spending power, which enables them to disburse a virtually unchecked amount of funds to individuals and provincial governments. With its immense revenue collection powers, the federal government provides conditional transfers to provincial governments with required standards. A national childcare system would entail the federal government providing funding to cover a portion of the costs provinces incur, conditional on adherence to a set of national standards. Such a dynamic cannot emerge through unilateral action by the federal government. They must negotiate with the provinces and agree to the funding amount and the nature of the program that will be implemented (Bevan et al., 2021).

When the Martin Liberals embarked upon implementing a national childcare program, it successfully negotiated unilateral agreements with each province (CRRU, 2012). While this experience has been a potential model for the current government to follow, they nonetheless would have a hill to climb when negotiating individual agreements with each of the provinces. The federal government must convince each province to accept federal funding and invest it in a program that satisfies federally-imposed standards. Additionally, they must ensure uniform implementation across the country. However, changes in provincial governments can quickly spoil secured agreements. For example, the election of Doug Ford in Ontario and Jason Kenney in Alberta led to the termination of provincial carbon pricing schemes, abruptly ending a brief period of national, federally-coordinated consensus on that issue (Wells, 2018). Similarly, the

election of ideological opponents to childcare could lead to the scrapping of agreements reached with previous provincial governments.

On a more fundamental level, the era of cooperative federalism, characterized by significant collaboration between federal and provincial governments to implement comprehensive social policy, is long over. The Harper government operated under the pretense of open federalism, essentially leaving provinces to their own devices, and declining to engage in any serious federal-provincial collaboration. Harper's childcare policy, which almost exclusively entailed tax credits, was consistent with his vision of open federalism (Atkinson, 2015). By contrast, establishing a childcare system would require collaborative federalism (Atkinson, 2015). The Trudeau government has indeed embraced a more collaborative conception of federal-provincial relations, as demonstrated through its work in the realm of climate change, healthcare, and even childcare (Dunn, 2017a). However, as Dunn (2017b) argues, it would be challenging to undo Harper's legacy, whose actions reduced the federal government's capacity to engage in effective federal-provincial policymaking. Furthermore, a declining federal presence and the increased prominence of provinces in the realm of policymaking have been a decades-long trend that poses a threat to the federal government's ability to engage in meaningful intergovernmental relations.

The inherent risks built into policymaking-by-federalism, combined with a long-term decline in federal-provincial cooperation, impose significant institutional impediments to creating a national childcare system. When spearheading negotiations on the 2017 childcare framework, Minister Jean-Yves Duclos publicly expressed wariness of pursuing universal childcare due to challenges related to federalism.

The universal message [from the 2005 childcare experience] was that the federal government has to be respectful of the diversity of circumstances and ambitions of provinces, so to want to impose a universal system across Canada would not be welcomed by provinces and territories [...] That's why I want to collaborate, to be a companion, as opposed to being a dictator with them. (Smith, 2016)

In other words, the Liberal government was concerned about the prospect of acting too strongly with the provinces. Consequently, they opted for a more incremental process that involved providing modest funding under the condition that provinces create action plans to provide more support to lower-income families – a more targeted, modest approach (Radwanski, 2017). Duclos expressed a degree of hope that these early actions could eventually lead to a full-fledged universal system (Radwanski, 2017), indicating that it was federalism and not the government's ideology holding them back.

The Liberal government was also unconvinced that investing the effort demanded of federalism would be justified by political benefit. Harper won the 2006 election while promising to scrap the Martin childcare plan. Conservatives' enduring ideological opposition to childcare meant that post-2015, it continued to be a contentious issue that could create an electoral liability for the Liberal government in future elections. Even though Harper's childcare approach was ineffective, and many families continued to be afflicted by skyrocketing service fees, there was a strong reason for the Liberal government to believe childcare was not a political winner. The type of voting demographic that would benefit from universal childcare would not expect to see the program implemented while their children were still of daycare age (Radwanski, 2017). Future parents who would benefit from the program down the road may not be far-sighted enough to care about such policies when they go to vote (Radwanski, 2017). Other voting groups

do not directly benefit from childcare (Radwanski, 2017). To sell childcare to voters would entail convincing a broad sect of the population that it is socially beneficial, even if they do not directly gain from it. The political risks are amplified when one considers the massive price tag associated with universal childcare and the potential failure that could result from a federal arrangement that goes sour.

In a broader sense, the Canadian political landscape tends to not be conducive to sweeping social policies that cover a large sect of the population, healthcare notwithstanding. To borrow from Esping-Anderson's (1991) terminology, Canada is a liberal welfare state, which means that most of its social policies tend to be modest and targeted, stemming from its historical roots as an Anglo-Saxon country. Publicly-funded childcare aligns more with the policies of social democratic nations, where government welfare tends to be more universal and generous (Friendly, 2017). For this reason, childcare policy in Canada has historically been framed in the mold of liberal welfarism, targeted supports towards low-income families (Friendly, 2017). Any policy that does not fit into liberal welfare paradigm, such as universal publicly-funded childcare, will face steeper challenges due to path dependency.

In summary, the pre-pandemic national political landscape was not conducive to the successful implementation and rollout of a national universal childcare program. Federalism imposed substantial institutional constraints and heightened the risk of policy failure. The politics of childcare, informed by hostile Conservative ideology, liberal welfarism, and a lack of public support base, suggests that the Liberal government may have believed that the risks and costs did not justify uncertain political returns.

CHILD BENEFITS AS ‘LOW-HANGING FRUIT’

Due to institutions, ideas, and interests, for five years, the Trudeau government prioritized implementing child benefits and other family and children policies over universal childcare. Because cash transfers fall within federal jurisdiction, and because the mechanisms were already in place to deliver child benefits, institutions were conducive to the implementation of the CCB. Because Canada is a liberal welfare state and child benefits are well-received across the political spectrum, entrenched ideas were compatible with child benefit reform. Because cash transfers are sent directly to parents (i.e. voters) and the impacts of the child benefit were highly pronounced, interests were a motivating factor. In effect, implementing the CCB was akin to reaching for low-hanging fruit: a politically-expedient, low-risk alternative that could quickly achieve its intended objectives.

Harper implemented the UCCB with the belief that it would make childcare more affordable while giving parents more choice. However, the amount provided by the benefit was minuscule compared to childcare costs and therefore was ineffective at making childcare more affordable. Nonetheless, child benefits are appealing for several reasons, and the Trudeau Liberals recognized this when campaigning in 2015. Battle (2015) argues that child benefits serve two primary objectives: poverty reduction and parental recognition. Through the CCB, the Liberals doubled down on the poverty reduction objective by retargeting the UCCB such that low-income families receive the most money. The CCB has been widely successful at reducing childhood poverty, and in fact, has allowed the federal government to exceed their poverty reduction targets (Hillel, 2020). On the other hand, the CCB also serves a politically essential parental recognition purpose for the Liberal government. Under the parental recognition lens, parents should be rewarded for raising children (Battle, 2015). Because parents comprise a large

segment of the voting population, emphasizing parental recognition through child benefits can be very politically beneficial. The political popularity of Harper's UCCB stemmed from the fact that it provided sizeable unconditional cash transfers to parents every month. Moreover, as Friendly (2021a) argues, "once the government gives money to parents, it becomes very hard to take it away". Consequently, the Liberals embraced the fact that child benefits were a politically popular policy that was here to stay. In theory, the Liberal government could have cancelled the benefit and invested the funds towards a national childcare program, but this would have been anathema to Canadian voters.

Instead, the Liberals opted to strengthen the existing benefit by retargeting it, making it non-taxable, indexing it to inflation, and increasing the total amount of funding (Hillel, 2020). A significant consequence of these policy changes is that 90 percent of Canadian families receive more money than before (Hillel, 2020). In this respect, the CCB doubles down on the parental recognition objective and appeals to a broad swath of the electorate. Overall, the CCB has been so successful at accomplishing the twin objectives of poverty reduction and parental recognition that it has become a core policy that the Liberal government touts as one of its biggest accomplishments to date (Hillel, 2020).

It is not difficult to see why the Liberal government opted to prioritize child benefits when it was first elected. As illustrated above, the political returns from the benefit are significant and the risks low. Child benefits are popular across the political spectrum, including with the Conservatives. Consequently, the CCB only serves to benefit the Liberal Party during election campaigns and is unlikely to be dismantled by future governments. Furthermore, since child benefits are simply cash transfers paid out to individuals through the Canada Revenue Agency, it is straightforward to implement, and federalism does not impose a barrier. The policy

change can happen quickly, with parents reaping the benefits almost immediately. The CCB reallocated existing funds, so it did not impose a significant new cost burden on the federal government. Also important, child benefits are compatible with the liberal welfare state paradigm. The UCCB, while universal, was quite modest. The CCB, while more generous, is heavily targeted. In other words, while a policy innovation, the CCB was not uncharacteristic of the existing social policy landscape in Canada. Overall, the CCB entailed low risk and high reward for the governing Liberals, a simple and effective policy that could make good on their promise to be champions for the “middle class and those working hard to join it” (Liberal, 2015).

It is important not to juxtapose child benefits with childcare. They are not necessarily substitutes, and many developed countries have both policies (Friendly, 2021a). Instead, the case of child benefits helps explain why the current federal government made childcare a mid-level priority. It was much more expedient for the government, with its constrained resources and bounded rationality, to first go after the low-hanging fruit in the form of an enhanced child benefit than pursue the monumental task of implementing universal childcare. The institution, idea, and interest factors explaining why the current government chose to pursue child benefits go hand-in-hand with those explaining why they did not prioritize universal childcare.

THE PANDEMIC AS A FOCUSING EVENT

When it comes down to it, the primary explanation for childcare being brought to the forefront of the institutional agenda is the pandemic. The pandemic changed ideas, interests, and institutions in a way that incited the adoption of universal childcare. In terms of ideas, the pandemic highlighted and exacerbated the existing problems of female labour force participation and an

ineffective patchwork childcare system. A national universal childcare program emerged as the answer to these problems. Interests took the form of advocates and interest groups quickly banding together to support such a system and pressuring the federal government to get on board with it. From an institutional perspective, provincial governments saw the childcare crisis unfold under their watch, and under political and financial pressures, became more inclined to follow the lead of the federal government. In effect, the pandemic was a focusing event that mobilized broad public support and created a window of opportunity to get childcare done.

As put so succinctly by Friendly & Ballantyne (2020): “It has taken a pandemic to put the paradox of childcare in 21st century Canada in sharp relief: our provision of childcare is exceedingly fragile yet childcare is an essential service critical to economic activity”. As Canada went into lockdown, provincial governments quickly closed schools and daycare centers (Friendly, 2021a). The problem with this measure quickly became apparent, as essential workers were left without childcare, demonstrating that childcare is, in fact, an essential service (Friendly, 2021a). When childcare centres were permitted to reopen, they had to do so with decreased capacity, which meant reduced revenues from parental fees and increased expenditures due to COVID-19 precautions (Friendly, 2021a). Additionally, prior to the pandemic, many families depended on the assistance of grandparents to help with childcare. However, as households, particularly elderly households, were forced into isolation during the height of the pandemic, such informal childcare arrangements were no viable (Friendly, 2021a). In effect, the pandemic created a childcare crisis, with essential workers struggling to find care for their children, centres struggling to stay afloat, and childcare workers being put in peril (Friendly, 2021a). Friendly & Ballantyne (2020) attribute this crisis to “the fact that childcare in Canada is mostly a patchwork [system] yet must meet an essential societal need”.

Another significant consequence of the pandemic has been its acute economic impact, particularly on women. In what has been called a “she-cession” (Yalnizyan, 2020), the pandemic has set working women back by causing a reduction in labour force participation, now at its lowest in three decades (Skrzypinski, 2021). Women comprised two-third of pandemic job losses (Yalnizyan, 2021). A primary driver of employment loss is the fact that, by and large, women continue to be the primary caregivers for their families (Grekou & Lou, 2021). With schools and childcare centers “episodically and unpredictably” closing, women have had to stay home to take care of their children (Yalnizyan, 2021).

Childcare organizations such as Childcare Research and Resource Unit and Child Care Now jumped on these issues “like a duck on a junebug” (Friendly, 2021a). They posited that the only way to solve the pandemic-exacerbated childcare crisis is to provide publicly-funded and publicly-managed universal childcare (Friendly & Ballantyne, 2020). While female labour force participation and childcare affordability have been issues for decades, the pandemic exacerbated them to the point where governments and the broader public could no longer ignore them. As childcare advocacy groups brought attention to the havoc wreaked by the pandemic on the childcare sector, other interest groups from across the political spectrum jumped on board with publicly-funded childcare. Businesses, unions, chambers of commerce, and other actors not previously engaged in the childcare debate banded together to support childcare and encouraged governments across Canada to act (Child Care Now, 2020). In June 2020, for instance, the Canadian Chamber of Commerce issued a statement expressing support for a national childcare system because “we need to focus on getting Canadians back to work” and “a key to successful work integration and economic recovery for parents is the availability of reliable and affordable childcare” (Nord, 2020).

The federal government quickly became receptive to this pressure, as reflected in the September 2020 Throne Speech and November 2020 Fall Economic Statement. They acknowledged that “COVID-19 has caused a She-cession” that has “rolled back many of the hard-won gains women have worked for over past decades” (Canada, 2020). In the Statement, the federal government vowed that it would “lay the foundation of a Canada-wide early learning and child care system”, recognizing that “Canada cannot be competitive until all Canadian women have access to the affordable child care [they] need to support [their] participation in the workforce” (Canada, 2020). To make this happen, the federal government established and provided funding for a Federal Secretariat on Early Learning and Child Care, support for ECEs, and permanent funding to help sustain previous progress made (Canada, 2020). These preliminary actions by the federal government set the stage for universal childcare. And in these early steps, it is seen that the federal government's change in course was informed by the impacts of the pandemic. When the federal government unveiled their widely-anticipated childcare plan in the 2021 Budget, the pandemic was the government's primary justification for taking such bold action.

COVID has brutally exposed something women have long known: Without childcare, parents – usually mothers – can’t work. The closing of our schools and daycares drove women’s participation in the labour force down to its lowest level in over two decades.

Early learning and childcare has long been a feminist issue; COVID has shown us all that it is an urgent economic issue, too. (Canada, 2021)

Particular attention has been focused on labour force participation, with Freeland stating that increased workforce participation is “the No. 1 long-term growth push”, the pandemic having shown “how important essential workers are” (Flanders, 2021). Freeland emphasized that

"women often choose to take a long career break after maternity leave because the cost of childcare equals or is greater than the amount of money they're taking home from the job". Therefore, childcare "would tremendously increase our prosperity and our economic growth" (Bezovie, 2021). Childcare has traditionally been treated as a social issue by governments and the public. By highlighting the importance of labour force participation, the pandemic effectively showed them that childcare is also "smart economic policy" (Canada, 2021). Economic arguments, supported by pandemic-revealed evidence, form the underlying rationale behind the federal childcare program.

The issues raised by the pandemic clearly created a compelling enough justification for the federal government to put in the effort to overcome the immense institutional challenges of federalism and buck existing policy trends and get childcare done. And they acknowledge it.

I [Chrystia Freeland] am well aware of the political challenges ahead, particularly given our federal political structure. We are building something that, of necessity, must be constructed gradually, collaboratively, and for the long-term. (Canada, 2021)

The pandemic produced a paradigm shift in thinking for childcare across the political spectrum, or at the very least, altered the political calculus for provincial governments. This change could not be more clearly highlighted than Alberta Premier Jason Kenney's decision to buy into the federal plan. Kenney, a member of the Harper government, was a prominent ideological foe to childcare. In 2004, Kenney accused the Martin government of thinking "it knows better than parents" with its "deeply troubling" childcare plan (OpenParliament, 2004). As Premier of Alberta, he cancelled the previous NDP government's childcare plan and was initially resistant to dealing with the federal Liberals. Nonetheless, on November 15, Kenney, a staunch ideological opponent of childcare, reached a deal to bring \$10-a-day childcare to Alberta (Turnbull, 2021).

His about-face is indicative of how the pandemic has altered policy thinking and the perceived political salience of childcare. In the deep-blue province of Alberta, over three-quarters of citizens support universal, public childcare in the wake of the pandemic (Childcare Now, 2020b). Across the country, over 85 percent of Canadians now express support, including almost 80 percent of Conservative voters (NUPGE, 2020). Even the federal Conservatives have now tactically acknowledged the economic value of child care (Friendly, 2021b). In the aftermath of the pandemic, provincial governments now face immense political pressure to accept federal money and implement universal childcare. The federal government hedged its bets that the pandemic had created a political landscape conducive to federal leadership on childcare, and it appears their judgement may have been correct.

Overall, the pandemic has effectively acted as a focusing event that has created a policy window to get childcare done. The pandemic highlighted and exacerbated the problems that inform the need for a policy response in childcare. In the post-COVID political landscape, childcare now has the support it needs to move forward, and actors within and outside the government seized the moment.

EVIDENCE, ADVOCATES, AND ACTORS

While the pandemic was the focusing event that created a window of opportunity to make childcare happen, it ultimately would not have been possible without the role played by evidence, advocates, and actors. Evidence collected from Quebec and other countries' childcare systems informed the arguments and proposals brought forth by advocates and experts, who have, for decades, been pushing for a national system. In formulating their plan, the federal

government relied heavily on evidence and the work of advocates done prior to and during the pandemic. Additionally, senior decision-makers within the Liberal government, namely Chrystia Freeland and other female members of Cabinet, were highly receptive to the ideas brought forward by advocates and pushed to make childcare happen.

Canada currently ranks near the bottom of OECD countries in terms of quality of childcare. Consistently among the top-performers are countries like Sweden, which have long embraced universal, publicly-funded childcare. Substantial evidence has been collected from the childcare systems of other countries and Quebec. This evidence suggests that a universal system with robust, public funding rather than a targeted, patchwork, and market-based approach will produce optimal outcomes that "ensure equitable access for families and to support children's development and well-being with high quality programs" (Friendly, 2017). In formulating their childcare program, the federal government was able to rely on evidence from other jurisdictions that prove universal childcare is the way to go. In particular, they referenced the Quebec system, which the federal government calls "the very best example of the economic power of an affordable, well-run early learning and child care system" (Canada, 2021). They expressly referred to Quebec's high female labour force participation rate and stated that "it is time for the rest of Canada to learn from Quebec's example" (Canada, 2021). The use of Quebec as an argument in favour of a national childcare system illustrates the seemingly contradictory nature of federalism when it comes to childcare. On the one hand, federalism has been a strong impediment to implementing a national system. At the same time, federalism has enabled policy innovation in Quebec, whose example played a significant role in bringing childcare to the federal agenda.

Furthermore, a national, universal childcare system in 2021 would not have been possible without the tireless work of childcare advocates and experts, whose efforts span over five decades. The childcare problem existed long before the pandemic, and advocacy groups have spent decades bringing this to the attention of consecutive federal governments (Pasolli, 2021). Efforts emerged in 1970 with the Royal Commission on the Status of Women calling for a national childcare system, which sparked a robust movement of feminist organizing advocating for better childcare (Pasolli, 2021). Various feminist organizations, labour unions, and anti-poverty groups all pushed childcare as one of their top priorities and gathered evidence to support it (Pasolli, 2021). In the 1980s, the Canadian Day Care Advocacy Coalition was formed and first developed the principles of quality, affordability, public funding, and universality at the heart of the 2021 federal plan (Pasolli, 2021). Advocacy groups have ensured that childcare has consistently remained on the public agenda, despite consecutive failed attempts by federal governments. In 2021, the federal government directly paid homage to their efforts. In the Budget, Freeland spoke about “Canada’s redoubtable second wave of feminists who fought – and outside Quebec, failed – to make [childcare] a reality” (Canada, 2021). As Pasolli (2021) words so eloquently: “that it took tragedy and hardship of this scale to create such a window [of opportunity] is unfortunate. But that we are primed to take advantage of this opportunity is because of this rich history of advocacy”.

Another critical factor that helps explain the federal government's decision to pursue childcare is the key decision-makers behind the push. Minister Duclos, the lead on the childcare file from 2015 to 2019, seemed reluctant to push for universal childcare. As I illustrated earlier, Duclos expressed reluctance because of reasons related to federalism. However, Duclos’ pre-political writing as an economist also suggested lukewarm feelings towards subsidized daycare.

In a 2012 article published by the C.D. Howe Institute, Duclos proposed that Quebec abolish its direct subsidies system and replace it with a tax credit (Duclos, 2012). Having someone like Duclos in such an influential position perhaps meant that universal childcare was without a strong advocate within the federal Cabinet. Contrast Duclos to Minister Freeland, who, according to Friendly (2021a), has been "very smart on childcare". She has emphasized her own experiences as a feminist and working mother in making a case for childcare, suggesting she has an intrinsic motivation and a firm grasp of the arguments. Other women in Cabinet, many of whom are mothers, may have also helped make a case for childcare (Friendly, 2021a). Despite Canada's strong centralization of power in the hands of the Prime Minister and PMO, the role played by actors in key Cabinet roles should not be understated.

A GOLDEN POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY?

Prior to the pandemic, the Liberal government may have believed that the political returns arising from childcare did not justify the risks and costs. However, the pandemic has enabled a golden political opportunity to arise. The Liberal government may now believe the political benefits of childcare justify the requisite effort and costs. As I earlier argued, the pandemic provided compelling justification for the government to overcome the institutional and political challenges of pursuing childcare. The pandemic has been a focusing event that has enabled broader support for childcare to build across the political spectrum, including among voters. With a looming federal election, the Liberal government may have believed that pushing for a bold policy like childcare was a way to appeal to a core support group, urban and suburban families. Furthermore, pushing for universal childcare allowed the Liberals to distinguish themselves from the Conservatives, who were offering more of the same: child tax credits

(Conservative, 2021). During the election campaign, the Liberals painted a strong contrast between themselves and the Conservatives, with universal childcare being one of the main points of distinction.

The 1986 report by the Task Force on Child Care stated: "the government that initiates and perfects these [childcare] systems will be rewarded in the short run by the accolades of the people, and, in the long run, by the favourable judgement of history" (Task Force, 1986, p. 342). It has taken over thirty years for there to be a federal government that agrees with this sentiment. Thanks to the pandemic and the work of evidence, advocates, and decision-makers, childcare has finally met its political moment. In the context of a global crisis, childcare was the bold policy the Liberal government needed to, in the short term, help win an election, and in the long term, build an enduring policy legacy.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To tie everything mentioned thus far together, I frame the narrative outlined in this case study in the language of policy studies. Specifically, I apply the theoretical framework of Multiple Streams Analysis developed by Kingdon (1984) to childcare in Canada. Kingdon (1984) characterized policy decision making as the intersection of three independent streams: the problem stream, the policy stream, and the political stream. The problem stream is the public perception of issues such that they are seen as requiring government intervention. The policy stream is the outputs of experts and analysts to create "a ready made solution to the problem" (Mulhern, 2021). The political stream is the decisionmakers in power who decide that a problem

needs solving and that the solution put forward is the one to address it. In the context of childcare, the problem stream can be seen as the issues of lack of affordability, accessibility, and quality in childcare services, as well as female labour force participation. The policy stream is the evidence-based conclusions made by experts and advocates that universal childcare is the appropriate solution to address the problems aforementioned. The missing link over the past six years since the Trudeau government first took office has been the political stream. The Trudeau Liberals did not embrace universal childcare, not necessarily because they did not see the problem as one worth solving or even that universal childcare was not the right solution, but because the risks and costs did not justify the returns.

Kingdon (1984) talks about how crises can cause the problem, policy, and political streams to intersect and create a window of opportunity that can lead to policy change if seized upon. He calls such instances “focusing events” (Mulhern, 2021). The pandemic was, in effect, a focusing event. It exacerbated the problems related to childcare and labour force participation to the point where they could no longer be ignored. The federal government stepped in to champion the issue and endorse universal childcare as the solution, seeing a pandemic-created window of opportunity to do it.

CONCLUSION

The long, tumultuous path to universal, publicly funded childcare across Canada is not over yet, but it is now in its long-anticipated chapter. The focus of my case study has been to explain the institutions, ideas, and interests behind how and why it has taken so long for the current Liberal government to go all-in on childcare and what prompted the change. Without opening the “black

box of government” (Mulhern, 2021), we cannot know with certainty the precise motivations and causal effects, but I believe I have captured good insight into what they may be. Childcare is challenging to implement due to institutional constraints imposed by federalism, political opposition, and ideological challenges. The Liberal government may have previously believed that the means did not justify the ends and instead focused on more expedient, high-return policies like child benefits. Then, the pandemic came and acted as a focusing event that pushed institutions, interests, and ideas in the right direction through the intersection of problem, policy, and political streams. The federal government seized the moment, believing now that the socially, economically, and politically beneficial outcomes of childcare justified the associated risks and challenges.

The case of universal childcare in Canada has important implications for broader policy studies. The case demonstrates how major focusing events can have public policy consequences that extend in unanticipated directions. Prior to the pandemic, I suspect that very few would have anticipated a global public health crisis would have led to such a consequential social policy innovation.

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