

Is this as good as it gets? Child care as a test case for assessing the Social Union Framework Agreement

Martha Friendly

This article appeared in the *Canadian Review of Social Policy* (2001) Issue 47, p 77-82.

Released on International Women's Day in 1986, Status of Women Canada's groundbreaking Report of the Task Force on Child Care, was greeted enthusiastically by feminist groups and non-governmental organizations. The Task Force's key recommendation was a universal system of child care - co-funded by federal and provincial governments with affordable parent fees, designed and managed by the provinces under national standards - to serve all children and families by 2001.ⁱ At the time, such a child care program seemed not only reasonable, intelligent and necessary but also possible.

However, recurrent political commitments and exponential growth in research providing rationales for universal child care and early education have not produced the publicly-funded, high quality system of services the Task Force envisioned. Indeed, the shifts in roles and responsibilities that culminated in the 1999 Social Union Framework Agreement (SUFA) have shaped a political environment in which it seems less possible to achieve a child care system now than it did then. Although the stalemate in public policy extends considerably beyond child care to health, housing and other areas, child care as an essential but not established social program is a good test case for assessing the agreement. As SUFA's three-year trial nears its close, an appraisal of how well child care has fared in the new regime is timely.

An issue of national importance that isn't going to go away

Throughout the past three decades, child care has surfaced again and again within the context of national or pan-Canadian policy activities.ⁱⁱ Until the end of the 1980s, child care was primarily posited as a women's issue at a time when gender equality was front and centre for the federal government. Indeed, many Canadians today would

likely still agree with the statement of the 1985 Royal Commission on Equality in Employment that "child care is the ramp that provides equal access to the workforce for mothers."ⁱⁱⁱ But although research that supports this has continued to accumulate, child care as a women's issue has all but vanished from the public agenda^{iv} to be replaced by children's issues - child poverty, "early childhood development", "readiness to learn", and "understanding the early years".

This is not to suggest that the change in focus has generated much improvement in child care. Neither has the blizzard of research led to change despite the reports that persistently document why high quality child care and early education are essential not only for women but for combating child and family poverty, for child development, for human capital and life-long learning, and for cohesive communities and social inclusion. A high profile committee convened by the prestigious (American) National Academies of Science to integrate and evaluate the current knowledge about the science of early childhood development observed:

As both the science of early childhood development and the prevalence of non-parental care have expanded dramatically over the past few decades, the failure to use available knowledge to influence the quality of the nation's child care is increasingly difficult to understand or justify... the positive relation between child care quality and virtually every facet of children's development that has been studied is one of the most consistent findings in developmental science.^v

In Canada, like the United States, the importance of high quality child care is well understood. But in 1998, only about 10% of Canadian children could access regulated child care or early childhood education before kindergarten, only a marginal improvement over the situation in 1986^{vi} and research shows that the quality of regulated child care in much of Canada is generally not developmental enough to say with assurance that it promotes "readiness to learn" or "early learning."^{vii} At best, over the 1990s, child care has stagnated in much of Canada outside Quebec.

Social policy renewal or dashed hopes?

After 1995, a debate about what was termed “social policy renewal” heated up in a climate of anxiety about Quebec separation and the fiscal deficit. Included in the debate was whether discussion about more flexible (i.e., provincially-lead) federalism, exemplified by the targeted, individualistic and (as many characterize it) “regressive” National Child Benefit,^{viii} had “dashed hopes” for a universal national child care program.^{ix} An alternative view was that formalizing the process of federal/provincial social policy making could “have some potential to play a role in promoting closure in an era of anxiety and frustration, uncertainly about directions and roles, and a behind-closed-doors approach to policy making that has excluded almost all Canadians...to facilitate creation of a national child care program.”^x

The social policy process was formalized in February 1999 as the Social Union Framework Agreement (SUFA) was signed by the federal government and the nine provinces comprising the “rest of Canada” outside Quebec. The National Children’s Agenda (NCA), already underway at that time, has been its primary activity. Consisting of a broad “vision” statement, the NCA was, in turn, signed by the nine provinces and the federal government in May 1999. A third federal/provincial agreement, also nested under SUFA, the Early Childhood Development Agreement (ECD) emerged in September 2000 at the annual First Ministers meeting. This initiative includes “early learning and care” (one of the post-1995 names for child care) as one of four program areas from which provinces may choose (pregnancy, birth and infancy; family support programs, community supports): \$300 million in year one, rising to \$500 million in years three, four and five. Thus, while the SUFA framework does include child care, it is far from the “system[s] of child care...that are as comprehensive, accessible and competent as our systems of health care and education”^{xi} recommended by the Task Force in 1986.

The Social Union Framework Agreement: How does it measure up for child care?

In evaluating the effectiveness of SUFA in the spring of 2000, White noted that, from the perspective of a national child care policy, both pessimistic and optimistic scenarios seem plausible.^{xii} A year later, with the ECD agreement adding some detail about prospects for children’s policy under SUFA, an assessment of SUFA’s efficacy as the organizing mechanism for shaping key Canadian social policy is timely.

Will the new regime facilitate emergence of a national child care policy? Or has it constructed new barriers? The Framework Agreement’s seven clauses include a number of points useful for judging whether the SUFA model works for child care.

Principles

The two main rationales for child care and early learning are, first, enhancing healthy child development and, second, supporting parents’ and mothers’ workforce participation. Based on these two rationales, high quality child care is integral to SUFA’s general fairness and equity principles including “equality, our responsibilities for each other, equality of opportunity for Canadians, rights and dignity of all Canadian women and men, appropriate assistance to those in need and participation of all Canadians in Canada’s social and economic life”. Even more important, though, is SUFA’s specific commitment to “ensure access for all Canadians, wherever they live or move in Canada, to essential social programs and services of reasonably comparable quality”. The introduction of Quebec’s universal child care program in 1997 strengthens this case considerably.

The provincial choice mechanism upon which the ECD agreement is based seems designed to mitigate against “ensur(ing) access for all Canadians, wherever they live or move in Canada, to essential social programs and services of reasonably comparable quality”. Indeed, although there has been preliminary movement on child care in some provinces, it is hard to imagine that the ECD agreement’s mechanism of provincial choice among a mix of children’s services (together with the fact that the federal funds are quite limited) will contribute to fulfilling SUFA’s principles.

Mechanisms for use of the federal spending power

Shortly after the agreement on SUFA, the federal Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs described the federal spending power as:

instrumental in building with the provincial and territorial governments the Canada-wide social programs which all Canadians value, such as Medicare. It has been essential in promoting equality of opportunity for all Canadians, helping to ensure access to basic social programs of reasonably comparable quality to Canadians wherever they live or move in Canada. The Government of Canada believes that this new formula for intergovernmental co-operation, called “the race to the top” model will enhance the

quality of social and health programs throughout Canada.”^{xiii}

The federal spending power has two routes, social transfers (which historically allowed the federal government to fund social programs in areas of provincial jurisdiction like health and post-secondary education) and direct federal transfers to individuals and organizations. With regard to social transfers: SUFA’s shift towards a “collaborative” version of federalism means that what was formerly federal spending power has essentially become national spending power as the federal government has ceded its authority to use social transfers for new initiatives unless a majority of provincial governments give permission.

The ECD agreement confirms a pessimistic view of SUFA’s prospects; it is designed to allow provinces to pursue different children’s policies based on ideology and financial resources, not to “ensure access to basic social programs of reasonably comparable quality”. That the federal dollars are so limited merely exacerbates this by forcing provinces to make hard choices.

This fits with SUFA’s move away from the concept of national standards to the much looser national “objectives”. Child care data from the 1990s already showed a trend toward widening disparity among regions as well as growing fragmentation in policy and service delivery.^{xiv} The SUFA-era “flexibility” embodied in the ECD agreement suggests that this trend is not likely to be reversed.

At the same time, a decade of fiscal downloading means that (in most regions) it is local governments or community groups that are responsible for initiating and maintaining essential services like child care while senior levels of government control taxation and public spending.^{xv} Although they are technically possible under SUFA, direct transfers to the local level (government or community groups) for child care do not appear to have received any serious consideration. (It should be noted that the “homelessness” initiative has taken this approach, without the federal notice to the provinces prior to using a direct transfer that is specified by SUFA.)

Public participation

Perhaps awareness of a pervasive climate of public cynicism and mistrust of governments motivated the inclusion of fairly extensive possibilities for ensuring public accountability and transparency in SUFA. It would be hard to argue that the limited civic engagement that has occurred in the last few years constitutes SUFA’s promised “effective mechanisms for Canadians to participate in developing social priorities and reviewing outcomes”. The collaborative federalism institutionalized in SUFA means

that policy-making for children has been carried out in behind-closed-doors intergovernmental processes that not only exclude ordinary Canadians but also that the traditional more public legislative processes of Parliament have essentially been rendered impotent.

Is this as good as it gets?

SUFA’s commitment to a participatory approach extends to the last clause of the agreement that promises a full review in three years: the explicit commitment is to “significant opportunities for input and feedback from Canadians and all interested parties, including social policy experts, private sector and voluntary organizations”. While the details of this review or even which federal Minister will take leadership have not yet been determined, it is obvious that a key advocacy strategy should be to insist that SUFA’s three-year review should be public and significant. Indeed, it would be an appropriate occasion for Canadians to have the full debate about “the Canada we want” that has, to date, been missing from the national agenda. It should be noted that both the federal government and the nine provinces have committed to SUFA’s clauses officially so the review needs to include not only federal but also provincial activity.

When SUFA was signed, a key question for child care was “Can the Social Union Framework Agreement contribute to “thinking outside the box”?”^{xvi} Three years and two federal/provincial/territorial agreements on children later, Mahon’s comment that “not enough of the right sort of thing is being done to enable the full development of Canada’s children” (2001) is telling. It is a matter of debate whether the primary barrier to “enough of the right sort of thing” for children is the redesigned federalism of the 1990s or an absence of political will. But whether SUFA acts as a barrier or whether it has merely failed to play the praiseworthy, nation building role prophesied by its promoters, assessing it using child care as the lens reveals that the 1999 agreement and its offspring – the NCA and the ECD - are not designed to ensure that promises to families and children will be fulfilled.

For further information about the Social Union Framework Agreement, see CRRU’s online Issue file Social Union Framework Agreement: Issues in Canadian Policy-making at: www.childcarecanada.org.

Note that the form and schedule of the full public collaborative review of SUFA “in three years” committed to in the Agreement’s last clause has not yet been announced.

February 4th 2002

ENDNOTES

ⁱ K. Cooke, J. London, R. Edwards, & R. Rose-Lizée, *Report of the Task Force on Child Care*, Ottawa, Status of Women Canada, 1986.

ⁱⁱ A. M. Timpson, *Driven Apart: Women's Employment Equality And Child Care In Canadian Public Policy*, Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 2001.

ⁱⁱⁱ R. S. Abella, *Equality In Employment: A Royal Commission Report*, Ottawa, Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1984, 178.

^{iv} V. Tyyska, *Women, Citizenship and Canadian Child Care Policy in the 1990s*, Toronto, University of Toronto, Centre for Urban and Community Studies, Childcare Resource and Research Unit, 2001.

^v Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development, J. P. Shonkoff, & D. A. Philips, eds., *From Neurons To Neighborhoods: The Science Of Early Childhood Development*, Washington D.C., National Academy Press, 2000, 313, 391.

^{vi} Childcare Resource and Research Unit, *Early Childhood Care And Education In Canada: Provinces And Territories 1998*, Toronto, University of Toronto, Centre for Urban and Community Studies, 2000.

^{vii} G. Doherty, D. S Lero, H. Goelman, A. LaGrange, & J. Tougas, *You Bet I Care! A Canada-Wide Study On: Wages, Working Conditions, And Practices In Child Care Centres*, Guelph, Ontario, University of Guelph, Centre for Families, Work and Well-being, 2000.

^{viii} R. Mahon, *No Small Matter: Child Policy Research*, Paper presented at the 18th Annual Davidson Dunton Research Lecture, Ottawa, Ontario, March 2001. Available at www.cprn.org/family/files/nsm_e.pdf

^{ix} S. Bach, & S. Phillips, "Constructing A New Social Union: Child Care Beyond Infancy?" in G. Swimmer ed., *How Ottawa Spends, 1997-98*, Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1997, 235-58.

^x Friendly, M. "Child Care And Canadian Federalism In The 1990s: Canary In A Coal Mine," in G. Cleveland & M. Krashinsky, eds., *Our Children's Future: Child Care Policy In Canada*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001, 41.

^{xi} Cooke et al, 1986, 373.

^{xii} L. A. White, "The Child Care Agenda and The Social Union," in G. Skogstad & H. Bakvis eds., *Federalism In The New Millennium*, Toronto, Oxford University Press, forthcoming.

^{xiii} S. Dion, "Collaborative Use of the Spending Power for Intergovernmental Transfers: the Race to the Top Model," February 5, 1999, 1. Available at: <http://www.pco-bcp.gc.ca/aia/default.asp?language+E&page=pressroom&sub=pressrelease>

^{xiv} Childcare Resource and Research Unit, 2000.

^{xv} Mahon, 2001.

^{xvi} Friendly, 61.