

'Choice' discourse in BC child care:  
Distancing policy from research

Occasional Paper No. 19

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2004

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The Childcare Resource and Research Unit's Occasional Paper series and website ([www.childcarecanada.org](http://www.childcarecanada.org)) are supported by the Social Development Partnerships Program, Social Development Canada to which sincere thanks are extended. The points of view represented in CRRU's publications are those of the authors and do not represent the opinions of the funder.

## Abstract

The gap between child care research and policy is growing in British Columbia (BC). While policy changes are what one would expect from the right-of-centre Liberal government, the gap runs contrary to its expressed commitment to the design of early childhood development policy on the basis of 'science.' The BC child care domain thus provides a rich context in which to examine how ideology mediates the consumption of research in the political arena. This article argues that the government's 'choice' discourse facilitates the articulation of neoliberal principles in a rhetorically neutral way while casting doubt on scholarship that illuminates gender and class inequalities.

L'écart entre les recherches au sujet de soins d'enfant et la politique s'élargit en Colombie-Britannique. Pendant qu'on prévoit ces changements d'un gouvernement libéral droit-du-centre, l'écart dément son engagement de concevoir la politique de développement de la petite enfance d'après la "science". Ainsi la domaine de soins d'enfant en Colombie-Britannique fournit un contexte riche pour examiner comment l'idéologie s'interpose dans la consommation de recherches dans l'arène politique. Cet article soutient que la soi-disant dialogue de "choix" du gouvernement facilite l'articulation des principes néolibéraux d'une manière neutraliste pendant qu'on soulève du doute à l'érudition qui illumine des inégalités de genre et de classe sociale.

## **'Choice' discourse in BC child care: Distancing policy from research\***

There is a growing gap between child care research and policy in British Columbia (BC). This gap is analytically interesting given the government's expressed commitment to design early childhood development (ECD) policy on the basis of "science" (British Columbia, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, July 26, 2001: 1135-1140, hereinafter referred to as *Debates*). Despite this commitment, BC child care policies diverge significantly from research in favour of a platform that one would expect from a government ideologically aligned with neoliberalism, as is the case with the Campbell Liberals. The current BC child care context therefore offers a unique opportunity to investigate how ideology mediates the use of scholarly research in the policy-making process.

In this article I examine the discursive strategy that the BC government employs to justify its child care policies. Attention to discourse builds on work by Tegtsoonian (1993: 98), who argues that "focussing on a political debate surrounding a specific policy issue provides a perspective on ... ideology which cannot be captured through either survey evidence or broad characterizations of a government's ideological complexion." The concept of discourse emphasizes the role of rhetoric in making "politically contestable positions appear to be non-political and uncontestable — part of the natural order of things" (Brodie, 1995: 27). It thus portrays language "as a site of struggle and a medium for the exercise of power" (Philipps, 1996: 150). By employing a particular discourse, political actors privilege certain perspectives to illuminate some ideas while silencing others.

The article will demonstrate that the BC Liberal government's child care discourse relies heavily on the concept of 'choice.' The language of choice facilitates the articulation of neoliberal principles within a rhetorical framework that conveys a sense of political neutrality and individualizes responsibility for social inequalities. The sense of neutrality distinguishes government discourse from child care research that identifies social barriers which contribute to inequalities endured by women generally, and child care workers specifically. Because of this distinction, scholarship that recommends the use of child care policy levers to mitigate gender and class inequalities can be depicted and ultimately discounted by the government as the undeserved requests of 'special interest' groups.

The analysis in this article offers a counter-example to some feminist literature that critically assesses the use of 'technical' discourses by political actors. For instance, Philipps (1996) and O'Connor (2001) find that the 'scientific' character of technical discourses often obscures normative elements inherent in political debate at the expense of addressing gender, race, class and other inequalities. In contrast, in the child care policy domain in BC, we will see that it is technical discourses, which explicitly illuminate gender and class dynamics, whereas the neoliberal non-scientific rhetorical

strategy distracts attention from these issues by claiming a level of apolitical objectivity in the light of an alleged neutrality between citizenry choices.

This finding will be important because it helps explain the disjuncture between child care research and policy in BC, which contributes to Canada's ranking as an international laggard in terms of child care services, despite the Quebec government's universal child care system. In a comparison of child benefit packages in 22 countries, Bradshaw and Finch (2002: table 5.1) find that Canada ranks last in terms of the share of three- and four-year-olds in licensed child care or education. Just 23 per cent of Canadian children in this age category use such services. By contrast, in France all three- and four-year-olds are in child care or education, as are over 90 per cent in Denmark, the Netherlands, New Zealand and Spain.

The article is organized into five sections. The first locates the analysis within existing research about choice discourse and child care, noting where my arguments advance extant literature. In order to document the divide between policy and research, the second and third sections summarize the child care policy changes enacted by the Campbell government in relation to three bodies of child care scholarship. The fourth, and principal, section documents the choice discourse in child care that is expressed in legislative debates, press releases and newspaper interviews. Particular attention is given to debates indexed by Hansard pertaining to the three readings of the *Child Care BC Act* and the subject headings "child care," "child care subsidy," "Ministry of Community, Aboriginal and Women's Services (MCAWS) - Estimates" and "Lynn Stephens," the minister of state for child care and women's equality during the time period under review. When the analysis uncovers rhetorical flourishes by Liberal MLAs that are contradictory, I refer to policy outcomes to determine which articulation more accurately represents the government's position. The final section concludes by noting the parallel between the BC government's non-technical child care discursive framework and the characteristics of technical discourses that worry some feminists when these discourses are appropriated by policy makers.

### **'Choice' in comparative child care literature**

Child care policy is subject to increasing analysis in literature that examines neoconservatism and neoliberalism cross-nationally (Teghtsoonian, 1996; Jenson and Sineau, 2001; Michel and Mahon, 2002). One prominent theme in the literature is the analysis of a new right discourse about choice. Researchers find that a rhetoric of 'choice' relegates the "goal of equality – whether across classes, sexes or regions of a country" to a lesser status compared to the goal of individual 'liberty of choice' (Jenson and Sineau, 2001: 241). This discursive strategy is used to mute concern about gender and class inequalities that factor in two trends in recent policy debates. One is the growth in political discourse supporting care allowances designed to subsidize choices by parents with young children to withdraw from the labour market. In Canada, this trend is

evident in critiques of the Quebec child care system. Baril, Lefebvre and Merrigan. (2000: 10) argue that its universal model is “for the most part benefiting families where the parents [are] participating in the labour market.” A more ‘neutral’ system, they argue, “would not unduly influence [parent] choices” (editor’s note in Baril et al. 2000: 3), but would instead issue grants to allow parents to decide whether to seek employment or remain home to provide care. Similar discursive frameworks are observed in the US (Teghtsoonian, 1996), the Netherlands (Kremer, 2002), Belgium (Marques-Pereira and Paye, 2001) and France (Jenson and Sineau, 2001; Morgan, 2002), where policy makers invoke ‘free choice’ to promote tax deductions or care allowances for mothers who reduce their paid workload rather than expand the budget for licensed, non-parental child care.

The second trend in choice discourse sees policy makers defend initiatives that prioritize consumer sovereignty by promoting a broader range of non-familial care options from which parents can choose. This trend is notable primarily in countries like France and Sweden, which previously institutionalized an extensive role for public provisioning of non-parental child care. In Sweden, Daune-Richard and Mahon (2001: 161) observe that ‘choice’ was defended “in the name of respect for ‘difference’ and ‘variety’ (with the market seen as being best able to provide it) in contrast to the standardized solutions of the paternalistic welfare state.” The result was an increase in rhetorical support for for-profit and church-run day care. Alternatively, in France, Jenson and Sineau (2001: 97) document how choice discourse defends policies that assist families to hire domestic workers, which grant some parents additional flexibility to organize individualized care arrangements.

Extant child care literature finds that the language of choice contributes to problematic gender and class consequences when it is used to defend the above two policy trajectories. Despite the gender neutral language that often characterizes debates, care allowances intersect with the patriarchal division of labour and result in women predominantly withdrawing from the paid labour force and incurring the associated opportunity costs. The issue of men doing their fair share of domestic work remains absent. In addition, care allowances and tax deductions exacerbate class distinctions between women because the ‘choices’ they encourage vary depending on one’s social location. The modest value of care allowances means that they target primarily working class mothers for whom the alternative is often employment in tedious jobs with limited remuneration. Care allowances thus risk exacerbating the already weaker earnings incentives that promote labour force attachment among this group of women. Among single mothers on income assistance, the choice to stay home that care allowances ostensibly promote is increasingly restricted cross-nationally as countries revise their social assistance measures to institutionalize active labour market practices. At the opposite end of the income spectrum, tax deductions for the costs of employing nannies disproportionately benefit economically privileged women, while they foster demand for

services performed by women at the periphery of the market for limited pay and often at the expense of time to care personally for their own children.

This article advances research about choice discourse in child care in several ways. I will demonstrate that the discursive strategy remains a powerful tool in BC, particularly in terms of the concern to promote consumer sovereignty. My argument makes it clear that the government aims to enhance parental choice in the child care market by capitalizing on class and gender inequalities around remuneration, training and skill recognition among licensed caregivers, almost all of whom are women. Skill recognition and training are underdeveloped themes in the literature, particularly in regards to assessments of neoliberalism and child care in Canada. Although care allowances are not openly proposed by the BC government, we will see that funding cuts since 2001 systematically reinforce a socio-economic context that inclines many women to limit participation in the paid labour force in order to care for children. The government sanctions this outcome when it urges parents, particularly low-income mothers, to rely on relatives or friends for inexpensive or unpaid care. Finally, the analysis will also examine an element of choice discourse in BC that is not reported in other jurisdictions. The logic of this discourse shifts depending on whether children or adults are under discussion. Whereas the government expresses a concern to minimize socio-economic barriers that limit future choices for children, adults are subject to a more punitive line of rhetoric. Inequalities are attributed primarily to adult choices without giving sufficient attention to the social context that constrains people's decisions differently due to class, gender and other indices of discrimination.

### **Child care policy changes since 2001**

Table 1 (see p. 19) summarizes the child care policy changes that have been implemented or announced in BC since 2001. These changes will reduce provincial expenditures in this policy domain by 24 per cent as of 2005. Four policy trends are particularly important for the analysis in this article. The first is the Liberal retreat from the previous government's plan for a universal child care system. In the final year of its mandate, the New Democratic party (NDP) government introduced the *Child Care BC Act* (SBC 2001, c. 4). The Act established a plan to subsidize the cost of child care for all children regardless of parental income by creating a new expenditure delivery mechanism, the Funding Assistance Program (FAP). FAP was designed to inject \$353 million in new operating funding for licensed centre-based or 'group' child care services, as well as for 'family child care' programs run by self-employed women out of their own residences. Providers were eligible to receive FAP on the condition that they limit fees to a maximum of \$14 for full day care and \$7 for before and after school services.

The Act set a four-year timeline to phase in the additional funds. However, the NDP implemented only the first phase before its electoral defeat, entering into contracts with licensed out-of-school programs to subsidize 17,000 spaces at a cost of \$30 million

annually. Following their election to office in 2001, the Campbell Liberals amended the *Child Care BC Act*, eliminating sections that committed the government to universally reducing the cost of care (*Miscellaneous Statutes Amendment Act*, SBC 2001, c. 32).

The second policy change saw the Liberal government cut \$24 million from the subsidy budget that delivers child care assistance to families with low incomes. These savings are achieved by restricting eligibility criteria for the working poor and students. In 2002 the Liberal government reduced by \$285 the monthly income threshold above which the child care subsidy is clawed back for employed or student parents (Ministry of Human Resources) (MHR, 2002a: 20). The former threshold was above low-income cut-offs (LICOs) except in cities with populations of 500,000 or more. The 2002 change reduced the threshold below the LICOs in all communities other than in rural areas. In response to public outcry, the government reallocated \$3 million to the subsidy budget in 2003, allowing it to return \$100 to the subsidy threshold (MCAWS, 2003). However, the current threshold remains below the LICOs, except in small urban communities and rural areas.

The initial changes to child care subsidy eligibility criteria reduced the caseload by approximately 1,500 families. Another 9,000 of the roughly 20,000 families that continued to receive subsidies saw the value of their public assistance decline considerably.<sup>1</sup> A single working or student parent with two children earning a monthly income of \$1,775 lost roughly \$171 a month per child from her subsidy in 2002. The subsequent return of \$100 to the threshold repositions approximately 500 families to once again be eligible for the subsidy, although ministry staff report that it is difficult to reconnect these families to the subsidy system. Approximately 3,000 families also stand to retrieve a share of their 2002 subsidy reduction. Thus, a family that lost \$171 gains back \$60, for a net loss of \$111 a month per child.

The third BC policy trend concerns the mechanics of issuing operating funds to licensed child care providers. In 2003 the government consolidated four grant mechanisms into one Child Care Operating Fund (CCOF) and reduced total provincial operating funding by \$14.5 million (23%). The new grant mechanism imposes cuts on a minority of service providers. Of approximately 2,200 group centres, 880 (or 40%) now receive less operating funding. The remaining centres and another 2,400 family day care providers enjoyed a funding increase (*Debates*, April 1, 2003: 1635). The centres that incurred reductions provide 28,000 (or 38%) of the province's 73,000 licensed spaces (*Debates*, April 1, 2003: 1710).

Non-profit child care centres that aim to improve the quality of care by paying better wages to attract staff with higher qualifications are among the principal losers under CCOF. The former Compensation Contribution Program (CCP) delivered a wage supplement to child-care-centre workers in recognition of low remuneration rates in the field. More valuable CCP payments were made to centres that employed caregivers with



the strongest qualifications.<sup>2</sup> This element of the CCP system is not retained by CCOF. In addition, CCOF eliminates the Munroe Agreement funding that was negotiated as part of union bargaining in 1999, and awarded an additional wage redress to child care workers at 106 centres. The agreement raised hourly wages in the centres by roughly \$3 to an average of \$16.80 an hour.

In contrast to centres employing staff with strong qualifications and paying higher wages, self-employed family child care providers whose earnings are typically below centre-based teachers are among the principal winners under the new operating grant system.<sup>3</sup> CCOF extends grants for the first time to family child care services in respect of care provided to children older than age three. Licensed family providers are now entitled to a daily grant of \$60 per child aged three to five and \$31 per child in grades one and up. Family providers who care for children under three also benefit from a daily grant increase of \$18 per child compared to the former Infant/Toddler Incentive Grant (ITIG) (MCAWS, 2002b).

The fourth policy change is the announced elimination of funding for Child Care Resource and Referral Services (CCRRS) in 2004. These services run a number of programs for child care providers, including the coordination of training and professional development opportunities for family day care providers across the province. Thus, just as the province is reallocating funding to increase reliance on the family day care sector, it is dismantling the infrastructure that coordinates training for these caregivers.

### **Policy changes diverge significantly from research findings**

The four policy trajectories described above depart from the recommendations of a range of scholarly findings. To begin with, the retreat from a universal system diverges significantly from research indicating that state investments in child care yield very strong returns to the public purse. Cleveland and Krashinsky (1999) have developed the only cost-benefit analysis of a universal pan-Canadian child care system. Their work investigates the cost of a program that would be available to children between the ages of two and five inclusive. The study estimates that the cost of such a program would be \$7.91 billion annually, \$5.3 billion more per year than federal and provincial governments spent in 1997 on child care. The Cleveland/Krashinsky study concludes that the additional \$5.3 billion will eventually generate more than \$10.5 billion in annual benefits in terms of better early childhood development outcomes and increased female labour force participation – a favourable two-to-one benefit/cost ratio.

American research by Berrueta-Clement, Schweinhart, Barnett, Epstein and Weikart (1984) supports the Cleveland/Krashinsky work and raises particular concerns about the Campbell government's decision to cut subsidy funding. Berrueta-Clement et al. developed a cost-benefit analysis based on the Perry Preschool Project, which

analyzed the long-term effects of participation in quality child care among children from families with low socio-economic status. Their results suggest that “over the lifetimes of the participants, preschool is estimated to yield economic benefits with an estimated present value that is over seven times the cost of one year of the program” (Berrueta-Clement, 1984: 1).

In addition to cost-benefit analyses, the Liberal policy changes depart from an extensive historical and theoretical literature that illuminates the ideological forces, social policy incentives and material constraints that structure labour market opportunities for women very differently than for men (for example, Sainsbury, 1994). Econometric studies attempt to quantify the negative influence that child care costs exert on female labour supply. Two Canadian studies draw similar conclusions. Powell (1997) and Cleveland, Gunderson and Hyatt (1996) find that a 10 per cent increase in the expected price of child care correlates with reductions in the probability that a mother will engage in paid work of 3.8 and 3.9 per cent, respectively. Powell further suggests that a 10 per cent increase in child care costs corresponds with a 3.2 per cent decrease in the number of paid hours that mothers work. Cleveland et al. add that a 10 per cent rise in child care fees will result in an 11 per cent reduction in the probability that the mother will purchase care arrangements, with the result that care work is shifted to unpaid settings. These Canadian findings fall in the middle range of US results (for example, Kimmel, 1998; Ribar, 1995).

In the light of this research, the Liberal government’s decision to rescind the universal child care system abandons the substantial positive consequences for women’s employment that the reduction of daily fees for full day care to \$14 would have generated. This maximum daily charge would have reduced the mean provincial fee for licensed care by between 40 and 58 per cent depending on the care setting and the child’s age. Such a reduction is predicted to correlate with a 15 to 22 per cent increase in the probability that mothers will accept paid work.<sup>4</sup>

Some US econometric work finds that research about the influence of child care costs on employment decisions among all mothers underestimates the barriers that fees pose for low income mothers specifically (for a review, see Baum, 2002: 140-41). Poor mothers’ heightened sensitivity to the costs of care provides further reason for new investment in child care subsidies for economically marginalized households, not the opposite policy course as is the case in BC. The government’s deviation from this research is particularly interesting given that it aims to reduce its social assistance caseload by compelling single mothers to search for paid employment when their youngest child reaches the age of three, down from age seven (MHR, 2002b: 4).

The provincial government’s cuts to provincial operating funding run contrary to a third body of research reported in the study *You Bet I Care* (YBIC). YBIC is “the largest ... study ever conducted in Canada” to explore the relationships between quality service

provision and characteristics of child care settings (Goelman, Doherty, Lero, LaGrange, and Tougas, 2000: ix). The study identifies factors that predict the level of quality care in child care centres (Goelman et al., 2000) and family child care homes (Doherty et al., 2000a). YBIC findings reported in this article are again consistent with US research results (Helburn, 1995: chapter 13).

YBIC reports an “inextricable link between financial resources and child care quality.” Goelman et al. (2000: 84) conclude that “Child care programs that are under continued financial stress for their very existence and viability ... provide lower quality child care.” The financial stress imposed on a substantial share of the BC child care sector as a result of the 23 per cent reduction to operating funding is at odds with this finding.

Among financial factors, YBIC concludes that the “most powerful” predictor of quality in preschool settings is “the wage received by the observed teacher” (Goelman et al., 2000: 63). Researchers therefore urge governments to provide wage enhancement grants to centre-based staff (Goelman et al., 2000: 86) and regulated family providers (Doherty et al., 2000a: 114) to compensate for meagre wages in the sector. Cleveland and Hyatt (2002: 577-78) find that “on average, female workers with similar education get paid nearly 40 per cent more annually than female child care workers for full-time work.” Recent changes to provincial funding under CCOF diverge from this research because the operating grant system no longer includes an explicit wage enhancement and it eliminates the pay equity award granted by the Munroe Agreement.

Wage redress in the sector is not merely about pay equity. YBIC indicates that it is also about the quality of care. Researchers conclude that a caregiver’s “level of ECCE-specific education ... contribute[s] significantly to a program’s level of quality” (Goelman et al., 2000: 82). They therefore recommend that governments implement incentives and licensing standards that would require higher minimum training requirements. This recommendation is dismissed by CCOF, which de-links government funding from the educational credentials of caregivers.

Given the importance of caregiver training, YBIC explains that child care infrastructure is also directly correlated with quality service provision, particularly in respect of family child care. Doherty et al. (2000a: 110) find a positive correlation between a caregiver’s membership in a child care resource program and her completion of training or professional development activities in the past three years. In contrast with this finding, the BC government will dramatically cut funding for CRRs in 2004, reducing the programs on which family providers have relied for training and professional development opportunities.

The growing disconnect between child care research and policy is largely in keeping with what one would expect from a neoliberal government concerned with reducing taxes and limiting social spending. Careful attention to the discourse with

which the BC Liberals defend their child care policy blueprint is therefore useful for examining the influence of ideology on the public policy process, particularly in terms of understanding how ideology mediates the consumption of research. This is the subject of the next section.

### **'Choice' discourse in BC child care: Explaining the research/policy divide**

Analysis of the child care discourse in BC since 2001 reveals a disconnect between the rhetorical frameworks concerned with early childhood development generally and child care specifically. Whereas ECD debates are informed significantly by research, discussions of child care are completely silent regarding scholarship. This disconnect is facilitated in part by the separation of ECD and child care into two ministries: the former is the responsibility of the Minister of State for ECD in the Ministry of Child and Family Development (MCFD); the latter is the responsibility of the minister of state for child care and women's equality in the Ministry of Community, Aboriginal and Women's Services (MCAWS).

The disconnect also reflects the subject of debate. ECD research focuses on children. Child care research, in contrast, often engages with barriers that confront disadvantaged groups of adult women, including women who work in the child care field. In the process, child care research challenges assumptions about the patriarchal division of labour and the skill required for quality care provision, while it also recommends government action to mitigate gender inequalities. This line of research is not consistent with many tenets that define the new right in Canada, including: (1) 'big' government limits choices; (2) equality requires that groups are treated the same; (3) markets should regulate wages; (4) social programs are only for persons in need; (5) adults are responsible for the consequences of their choices; and (6) 'special interests' demand undeserved benefits that deviate from formal equality.<sup>5</sup> We will see below that the choice concept allows the BC government to articulate these neoliberal principles in a rhetorically neutral way, while also granting it moral ground on which to question the objectivity of child care scholarship. Appearances notwithstanding, my analysis reveals that the choice discourse is not neutral. It articulates a sympathy for the gender division of care, reinforcing the assumption that women care 'naturally' without need for training, and it distracts attention from policy decisions that exacerbate gender and class inequalities.

*The Liberal government refers to research with regard to ECD but not child care*

Linda Reid, the Minister of State for ECD, regularly invokes academic scholarship to defend and evaluate her government's record on ECD policy. She argues that "the existing body of research that we have on early childhood development ... [is] vitally important work.... For us to have good, solid science from which to proceed is absolutely the goal" (*Debates*, July 26, 2001: 1135-1140). Consistent with this view, Reid

refers to scholarship by a number of experts, including Dr. Clyde Hertzman (*Debates*, July 26, 2001: 1135; March 31, 2003: 1640-1730); Dr. Fraser Mustard (*Debates*, July 26, 2001: 1140; March 31, 2003: 1730); Dr. Kimberly Schonert-Reichl (*Debates*, March 31, 2003: 1655); and Mary Gordon (*Debates*, July 26, 2001: 1145). Reid summarizes their work by stating that “research has shown that investment in early childhood development can produce dividends and lower costs to child welfare and youth justice, as well as broader human and social benefits” (*Debates*, March 26, 2003: 1720). Her frequent discussions of research have influenced some of her caucus colleagues, prompting a number to refer to the ECD scholarship in their questions and comments (for example, *Debates*, March 31, 2003: 1645; *Debates*, March 31, 2003: 1720-1730).

Reid locates research findings squarely within the BC government’s broader concern to promote choices in the province. For instance, she explains that social investments urged by the research signal “the necessity” for her government “to do better in this area of public policy so that indeed we can have children and families in our province with *greater choices*” (*Debates*, March 26, 2003: 1720; emphasis added):

We don’t want children’s opportunities to be constrained by their very early development, and yet that is exactly what the research tells us....If you hamper that learning in the very early ages, they indeed will not have the same opportunities as you and me (*Debates*, July 26, 2001, 1140).

The role of science in the discourse of Linda Reid stands in stark contrast to the discursive strategy employed by her colleague Lynn Stephens, minister of state for child care and women’s equality. Scholarly research about child care is entirely absent from dialogues initiated by Stephens in the legislative assembly. Her lack of attention to research is also conspicuous in the light of the previous government’s multiple references to studies to defend the *Child Care BC Act*. References include findings from the Cleveland/Krashinsky and Perry Preschool cost-benefit analyses (for example, *Debates*, March 22, 2001: 1545) and regular allusions to the negative influence that child care costs exert on mothers’ employment decisions (for example, *Debates*, March 22, 2001: 1510-1515).

Instead of referencing research, Stephens and other Liberal MLAs rely largely on the concept of choice to organize child care debates in the legislature. But the manner in which they invoke the concept differs significantly from the choice discourse of the Minister of State for ECD. Reid emphasizes the role of policy investment in expanding choices for the province’s youngest citizens by minimizing social and economic barriers that can contribute to children ending up in the welfare and youth justice systems. When child care is at issue, however, the concern over minimizing the barriers that confront some citizens is muted in favour of a choice logic that justifies social disinvestments by invoking the neoliberal tenets identified earlier. This logic is articulated through two thematic discussions: one advocating consumer sovereignty; the other attributing social

inequalities primarily to the decisions that adults make. I document and analyze these discussions in turn.

### *Consumer sovereignty*

The Liberal party's 'New Era' electoral campaign literature included a commitment "to increase child care choices for parents" (MCAWS, 2002a). This commitment reflects the primary critique that the party waged against the *Child Care BC Act* while still in opposition: namely, that big government and bureaucracy are inflexible and therefore limit citizenry choices. According to Liberal then Opposition critic for the portfolio, K. Whittred, universal child care is 'a one-size-fits-all' plan that is out of step with the cultural diversity in the province (*Debates*, March 22, 2001: 1440). She argues that:

We live in a province where we have many, many cultures.... [D]ifferent cultures have very, very different ideas about child rearing. None of those are bad; none of them are wrong. They are simply different.... How does a program that is going to put every child into a similar slot going to respond to that wide variety of mix? ... There are many, many different choices that families make, and on this side of the House we feel that child care should respect all of those choices.

Since coming to government, the Liberals continue to prioritize flexibility as a criterion for revamping the child care sector. MLA T. Christensen argues that "we all have unique needs, and in a province as diverse as British Columbia, flexibility needs to be key in addressing those local needs" (Christensen, April 15, 2002: 1655). This concern motivates the government to reconsider its role in licensing child care providers. Legislative debates link allegedly inflexible licensing standards with space shortages, which in turn limit families' options. For this reason, Christensen queries whether "the regulations make it too onerous to develop a licensed facility? Certainly, we have anecdotal evidence that it is the case in some instances" (Christensen, April 15, 2002: 1655).

Although the government has not finalized a revised licensing system, it has made significant changes to operating funding grants with the introduction of CCOF. CCOF is at the heart of the Liberals' position that "we are acting on our New Era commitment to increase child care choices for parents by encouraging the expansion of safe, affordable child care spaces." As the press release explains, CCOF increases the "number of government-supported child-care spaces ... from 45,000 to 70,000" (MCAWS, 2002a), although it reduces the total amount of provincial operating funding by \$14.5 million.

The reallocation of operating funding under CCOF to the family day care sector, where earnings are especially low, at the expense of child care centres paying higher salaries is defended on the grounds of formal equality – the imperative to treat all

providers alike. According to the CCOF press release, “The previous child care system was fragmented, inequitable and inconsistent in the way funding was provided.... Under the previous system, most family providers were not eligible for government support ... [nor was there a] consistent or equitable formula to establish how much government funding each group centre received” (MCAWS, 2002a). Commenting on the decision to eliminate the Munroe low wage redress, Lynn Stephens (2002: A19) argues that a “special agreement” benefiting just 106 child care centres “is not equitable” when “there are 4,600 licensed child care facilities in BC.”

The government further justifies the elimination of pay equity by suggesting that the labour market – not government – should be responsible for setting wage rates. Stephens contends that rescinding Munroe funding does not mean her “government is ... cutting funding to child care centres. What we have at play is a labour negotiation” (*Debates*, November 7, 2002: 1420). Stephens further states that “It’s up to the centres to do those contract negotiations, and we are not interfering in any way with free collective bargaining” (*Debates*, November 5, 2002: 1410).

The Liberal government’s unwillingness to participate in labour negotiations in the child care sector signals its intention to pursue formal equality among caregivers near the bottom of the wage scale rather than towards the top. This decision contributes to the government’s objective of increasing parent choices. The high cost of care pushes regulated arrangements out of reach for many families. Since wages constitute roughly 80 per cent of the cost of delivering child care, there is a trade-off between affordable fees for parents and provider earnings in the absence of public funding. Intent on reducing public expenditures, the current government responds to this trade-off by prioritizing services which pay caregivers relatively low wages. This policy decision transfers more of the costs of providing care to child care workers who implicitly subsidize parent fees and government operating grants through their limited earnings.

There are thus disturbing class and gender consequences associated with the BC government’s child care choice discourse. In a policy context bereft of significant public financial support for caregiving, some women are released to pursue careers only because other women provide poorly paid care services. By resorting to care arrangements that reflect hierarchies indexed to sex and class, middle-class women (and men) capitalize on, and perpetuate, the disadvantages of less economically privileged women, but do not obviously challenge the gendered division of caring that constrains the options available to all women.

The consumer sovereignty version of the BC choice discourse, however, does not just distract attention from policy consequences that are gendered. The discourse also gives voice explicitly to gendered assumptions. For instance, the pursuit of equity among caregivers near the bottom of a wage scale that is already well below remuneration rates in other fields can only appear justifiable to a government if it views child care work as

unskilled labour. Inattention to the skills and training required for quality caregiving is articulated by Stephens when she asserts that “almost all – virtually all – of the child care centres and the child care providers in this province provide quality ... care for parents” (*Debates*, November 7, 2002:1420). This statement disregards YBIC research, which reveals that quality varies across child care settings in BC in a pattern that tracks education levels within the sector. Caregivers with limited training in the area of early childhood education are more likely to provide services where there are few activities to stimulate children’s social, language and cognitive development (Goelman et al., 2000: chapter 4; Doherty et al., 2000a: chapter 6). Rather than embrace this research, the minister of state’s assertion that virtually all providers in the province deliver quality care, regardless of their education, reflects the view that women rear children naturally and that the biological capacity to reproduce is sufficient to fulfill the job of expert caretaker for children. This presumption is further manifest in the government’s decision to reduce funding for child care resource and referral services, which coordinate training and professional development opportunities for family day care providers.

The gendered element of the BC government’s consumer sovereignty discourse is rendered more complex still in the light of discursive features that are not neutral with respect to low income families. The Liberals argue against a universal child care system on the grounds that “the principle is wrong” (*Debates*, February 21, 2002: 1440-1445). MLA R. Nijjar argues that universality reflects a misguided commitment to ‘socialism’ and ‘ideology.’ “The reality is: (1) we don't have that money; (2) it doesn't matter whether we did.... Day care services funded by the public are supposed to be for those that need the assistance” (*Debates*, February 21, 2002: 1440-1445).

Despite this rhetoric, the reality of Liberal policy decisions is that they exact the largest child care budget cut from the subsidy system that is designed to assist low income families (see table 1). The recent reductions to subsidies exacerbate constraints on child care choices among low income families that arise because maximum subsidy rates are below the average provincial cost of regulated care. The gap is at least \$120 a month for full day arrangements regardless of care setting.<sup>6</sup> The fee portion that subsidy recipients shoulder institutionalizes incentives for low income families to make child care arrangements in the unregulated sector where costs are typically lower. These incentives are inconsistent with studies, which consistently report that poor quality care is more likely to be found in unregulated than in regulated settings (for example, Cleveland and Krashinsky, 1998: 29-35).

As families lose subsidy assistance, the affordability barriers that confront low income families are exacerbated, despite the government’s rhetorical commitment to target funds to families that need them most. Rather than enjoying the option of choosing among a range of regulated care settings where quality services are more common, many low income families are now further compelled to seek less expensive unregulated care or to retreat entirely from the paid child care market in favour of female relatives, friends



or neighbours in unpaid domestic settings. The probability calculations developed by Cleveland et al. (1996) allow for some quantification of the latter option. The single working or student parent discussed above who lost \$111 a month as a result of subsidy changes is 59 to 102 per cent more likely to use care arrangements for which she does not pay a fee.<sup>7</sup>

The minister of state for child care defends her government's departure from its commitment to target funds to low income families by invoking the concept of formal equality. In response to subsidy cuts, she argues that "We're not talking about needy parents paying more; we're talking about trying to provide equitable child care services for families in British Columbia. That includes all families" (Stephens, *Debates*, March 12, 2002: 1610). The Minister of Human Resources, Murray Coell, offers an alternative explanation, one that explicitly supports re-domestication of care work. According to Coell, "[T]here are different types of care. A lot of income assistance clients use relatives. I think people have to look at options which fit their needs" (cited in Lavoie, 2002: A1).

There is a symbiotic relationship between the government's stated preference for people to rely further on unpaid care and the elimination of the plan to universally reduce child care fees. The latter decision abandons labour support measures which econometric research suggests would have increased women's employment by between 15 and 22 per cent. It therefore allows the BC government to tap into a larger pool of unpaid child care labour in its hope that low income families will turn to family, friends and neighbours rather than the state.

This finding reveals an interesting parallel between the choice discourses in BC and elsewhere. The Campbell government has not yet used the choice concept to introduce added financial support for mothers to remain at home. Its overarching concern to reduce social spending to minimize the deficit created by dramatic tax cuts and a sluggish economy is not consistent with the introduction of new child care allowances for stay-at-home parents. Nonetheless, the analysis thus far complements earlier literature by revealing that the government is achieving an outcome that is comparable to other jurisdictions – re-domestication of some care work – through the process of state retrenchment. Cuts to subsidies push low-income parents to drop out of the paid work force or rely more on unemployed relations for care, while the retreat from universality reinforces obstacles to women's employment imposed by high child care costs.

#### *Adults are responsible for the consequences of their choices*

The consumer sovereignty discourse in BC is complemented by a discursive strategy that reflects the assumption that adults are principally responsible for the consequences of their decisions, regardless of social constraints. Lynn Stephens conveys this assumption particularly clearly when discussing the Ministry of Women's Equality.

She explains that the ministry was initially envisioned as a “sunset” institution for which the need would dissipate over time as gender inequality was overcome. In her view, the province is “getting closer to the sunset”: “The opportunities are exactly equal. A single woman and a single man have exactly the same opportunities, with the same education.” The continued existence of a gender earnings gap reflects women’s choices to work part time, she surmises. “That’s a choice they have made. People make choices. This government is not about to say you can do this, but can’t do that. From choices flows everything else. You are free to work where you wish, for whatever you wish” (cited in Groeneveld and McKay 2002: 30).

The connection between the gender earnings gap and women’s hours of paid work is confirmed by research. Statistics Canada (2000: 141) reports that women who work full time, year-round earn, on average, 73 per cent of men’s earnings. Part of this gap reflects the fact that full-time employed women ages 25 to 44 perform fewer paid work hours than men (Statistics Canada, 2000: 111). The earnings ratio drops further to 64 per cent when part-time workers are added to the equation, because women account for 70 per cent of the part-time workforce (Statistics Canada, 2000: 141, 103).

Stephens’ assumption, however, that it is simply a matter of choice that adult women regularly accept lower earnings and fewer paid work hours compared to men neglects research (summarized above) about the negative influence that child care costs exert on women’s decisions to seek employment. Instead, the assumption that “from choices flows everything else” attributes responsibility for social inequalities among adults entirely to individual decisions. It thus overlooks the social, cultural and economic contexts that constrain options available to adults in distinct ways, depending on their location amidst relations of class, sex, race and other differences. This individualization of responsibility for inequalities leads Stephens to downplay the extent of gender discrimination. In some instances, she naturalizes economic disparity. For instance, in an interview with her local newspaper, she agrees with the claim that ‘the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.’ “That’s the world we live in,” she affirms, “the world we’ve always lived in” (cited in Groeneveld and McKay, 2002: 30). On other occasions, she acknowledges that there are “still systemic issues to address,” such as “violence against women.” However, she distinguishes violence from gender discrimination: “More women are abused, not oppressed” (cited in Groeneveld and McKay, 2002: 30).

Insofar as income differences and other inequalities are portrayed as being a result of personal choices, the Campbell government does not find gender discrimination a compelling reason to support a universal child care system. Instead of child care, it aims to assist women in making economically prosperous choices through “reductions in taxes and red tape,” which will allegedly support “self-employed” women (including family day care providers) and “women-led firms” (Stephens, *Debates*, February 25, 2002: 1610). “Women’s equality” organizations, which often oppose this laissez faire approach to governance, are labelled as “special interests” (Anderson, *Debates*, August 7,

2001: 1515), as are advocates who lobby for universal child care. For instance, MLA R. Nijjar argues that, in contrast to a universal system, his government's child care plan "doesn't back up any one interest group and help them get their workers in there and increase their wages and benefits and structure it so that it benefits those that fund the election campaigns of certain members" (*Debates*, February 21, 2002: 1445).

To be charitable, the Liberal government is not always so cavalier in its comments about gender inequality. In some cases Lynn Stephens offers limited recognition of the fact that caregiving responsibilities mediate women's employment decisions. For instance, commenting on the gender earnings gap, she acknowledges that "young women, particularly aged 25 to 29, came the closest to catching up with their brothers, making 81 cents for every dollar that men made. For older women it's a little bit different, because usually they're the ones that are raising their children or that care for other family members and leave the workforce for periods of time, so it makes it a little bit more difficult" (*Debates*, April 1, 2003: 1035).

The reference to the gender division of care runs contrary to Stephens' choice discourse. Nonetheless, the government's decision to abandon the plan to universally subsidize care indicates that addressing women's work-family balance challenges is not a policy priority for the Liberals. This interpretation is consistent with Stephens' contention that these challenges pose only "a little bit" of difficulty for women and is further confirmed by the series of cuts to child care programs documented in table 1. In light of this policy blueprint, there is solid reason to believe that the government's ideological predilections align more closely with the minister of state's claim that "from choices flows everything else," than with her modest recognition of the constraints on women's choices that result from the gendered division of labour.

Stephens' tendency to individualize responsibility for social inequalities is distinct from the choice logic employed by the Minister of State for ECD, Linda Reid. When focussing exclusively on the needs of Canada's youngest citizens, we have seen that Reid indicates public policy is a necessary tool in overcoming socio-economic barriers and thus mitigating the factors that may limit children's choices. A similar concern for the social, economic and cultural context is typically absent from Stephens' discourse. This rhetorical difference between the Ministers of State for ECD and for child care/women's equality is another example of the neoliberal trend described by Brodie (1995, 60), which has seen "[a]ll adult dependency on the state [become] suspect and avoidable," leaving "[o]nly children ... to claim a benign dependence."

### **The apolitical character of 'choice' parallels the alleged objectivity of technical discourses**

The success with which the BC government employs a neoliberal choice discourse to politically disqualify or distract attention from evidence-based child care research

provides an interesting counterpoint to literature that explores the power of technical discourses in defending policy strategies that have deleterious gender and class implications (for example, Philipps, 1996; O'Connor, 2001). This literature warns that technical discourses tend to deny the normative content of debates, thereby deflecting political challenges to prevailing patterns of inequality. Such discourses enjoy this authority because their technical elements convey a scientific quality that confers value neutrality against which knowledge generated from theoretical or historical inquiry, and especially everyday experience, is denigrated as subjective, advocacy, or ideological.

The choice discourse in BC, however, demonstrates a different pattern. In this case a distinctively non-technical rhetoric is dominating debate at the expense of discourse informed by technical, evidence-based research that would otherwise provide strong reason to question the current government's child care agenda. However, similar to the scientific quality of technical discourse, the power of choice as a rhetorical strategy lies with its claim to a privileged status of apolitical objectivity. A discourse that promotes choices appears neutral with respect to the options that people select, and thus conveys a sense of impartiality. The alleged impartiality obfuscates the moral issues that underscore child care policy, given that existing patterns of inequality constrain the choices available to citizens in diverging ways that track class, sex and other differences.

By contrast, the recommendations that flow from YBIC are unapologetic in advocating policy to advance the status of a particular sector of the labour market, while econometric research quantifies barriers specifically related to female employment. Despite the evidence researchers can marshal to defend their positions, such scholarship is vulnerable to dismissal within the political arena on grounds that it represents the claims of 'special interests.' As Laycock (2002), Brodie (1995) and others report, the hostility towards special interests fostered by the new right in Canada has resulted in a loss of moral authority from which the disadvantaged can demand the redistribution of power. The neoliberal presumption that "from choices flows everything else" articulated by the Minister of State for Women's Equality reinforces this loss of moral authority. It implies that individuals should take personal responsibility for their inequality, and treats lobbying efforts for state assistance as attempts to gain undeserved public benefits, regardless of the social science evidence that corroborates the lobbyists' positions.

Neoliberal choice discourse plays a role in discounting technical child care evidence that illuminates class and gender inequalities. This helps to explain the gap between research and policy in BC, which in turn contributes to Canada's status as an international laggard in the child care arena. It is also a clear signal that the need for a Ministry of Women's Equality is not in fact diminished, as suggested by the Minister of State for this portfolio. Instead, the choice discourse reveals that the sun is setting on the provincial government's concern to minimize gender inequality through the strategic use of child care policy, as well as to advance pay equity in female-dominated occupations.

The arguments in this article do not deny that the promotion of choices is a laudable goal in a society which prioritizes liberty. But this objective should not mean facilitating choices for the privileged at the expense of the less fortunate. The BC government's choice discourse disregards interconnected systems of gender and class oppression, and motivates policy that reinforces these systems as a result. In contrast, a discourse that is genuinely concerned with citizens' choices would relocate these moral issues to the foreground of debate. Such a discourse would illuminate that, if genuine choices for women are to be a government priority, child care policy must mitigate the gender division of caregiving labour by substantially reducing parent fees without limiting the quality of care services by failing to challenge the low wage rates that economically marginalize women who work in the child care sector.

TABLE 1

Child care funding changes enacted/announced  
by the BC government since May 2001

Funding program	2001/02 Allocation	2002/03 Forecasted allocation	2003/04 Forecasted allocation	2004/05 Forecasted allocation	Actual/announced allocation change since 2001	Per cent change since 2001
Figures reflect announcements as of April 2003	(\$ millions)	(\$ millions)	(\$ millions)	(\$ millions)	(\$ millions)	(5/1)
	1	2	3	4	5	6
<i>Child care subsidy</i>	\$125	\$101	\$104	TBA	-\$21	- 17%
<i>Operating funding</i>	\$62.58	\$50.95	\$48	TBA	-\$14.58	- 23%
Funding assistance program	\$30	\$7*	\$0	\$0	-\$30	
Out-of-school care transition funding	\$0	\$10.1*	\$0	\$0	No change	
Compensation contribution program	\$21.93	\$21.85	\$0	\$0	-\$21.93	
Munroe wage redress	\$8.65	\$10	\$0	\$0	-\$8.65	
Infant/toddler incentive grant	\$2	\$2	\$0	\$0	-\$2	
Child care operating funding	\$0	\$0	\$48	TBA	+\$48	
<i>Capital funding</i>	\$1.99	\$1.54	\$2.5	TBA	+\$0.51	+ 26%
<i>Child care resource/referral</i>	\$13.12	\$13.12	\$13.12	\$0	-\$13.12 <sup>8</sup>	- 100%
<i>Supported child care</i>	\$36.79	\$35.40	\$26.4	TBA	-\$10.39 <sup>9</sup>	- 28%
<b>TOTAL CHILD CARE PROGRAM FUNDING</b>	<b>\$239.48</b>	<b>\$202.01</b>	<b>\$194.02</b>	<b>\$180.90**</b>	<b>-\$58.58</b>	<b>- 24%</b>

\*FAP funding finished June 30, 2002. The Transition Funding replaced FAP for the remaining 9 months in the 2002/03 fiscal year, reducing the cut to FAP in that year to \$12.9 million.

\*\*These cumulative figures assume that budget allocations that have not yet been announced (TBA) will not change from the previous year.

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## NOTES

\* I owe thanks to Hillel Goelman, Andrea Long and two anonymous reviewers who provided insightful editorial feedback on earlier drafts. I am also grateful to the BC government employees who patiently responded to my numerous questions. The research was supported by funding from the BC Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) through the Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP). The views presented are solely those of the author and do not represent the policy of HELP or the Province.

<sup>1</sup> Statistics confirmed by Ministry of Human Resource employee, Brad Gee.

<sup>2</sup> CCP paid wage supplements to licensed group providers according to a sliding scale that accounted for training. Caregivers who completed a post-secondary basic ECE training program *and* a post-basic ECE specialization in special needs or infant/toddler education were eligible for a supplement of \$1.67 per hour. Caregivers with the basic ECE training program were eligible for a supplement of \$1.53. Assistant teachers in the process of completing a basic ECE certificate or who had completed one ECE course were eligible for a wage top-up of \$1.39 per hour.

<sup>3</sup> The BC mean income for family child caregivers is \$18,900, and \$9,500 after expenses are deducted (Beach et al., 1998: 81). The average annual salary of child care teachers in BC is \$23,537 (Doherty et al., 2000b: 81).

<sup>4</sup> Twenty-one days of care at \$14 per day results in a monthly fee of \$294. Average provincial fees for full-day care in 2001 ranged from \$494 to \$705 depending on the setting (group or family) and age of the child (Forer and Hunter, 2001: 42, 108).  $(494-294 = 200. 200/494 = 0.4 \text{ or } 40\%. 40\%/10\% = 4. 4 * 3.8\% = 15\%;$   $705-294 = 411. 411/705 = .58 \text{ or } 58\%. 58\%/10\% = 5.8. 5.8 * 3.8\% = 22\%)$ .

<sup>5</sup> See Laycock (2002) and Brodie (1995) for a detailed discussion of neoliberal principles in Canada.

<sup>6</sup> Author's calculations based on 2002/03 provincial subsidy rates. Data about average parent fees are drawn from Forer and Hunter (2001: 42, 108).

<sup>7</sup> The family's \$1,775 monthly income is equivalent to the subsidy income threshold in 2001/02. The family was therefore entitled to maximum provincial subsidies, leaving it with a parent portion of between \$120 and \$207 a month per child. The loss of \$111 per subsidy raises its parent portion by between 54 and 93 per cent. Based on Cleveland et al.'s (1996) finding that a 10 per cent increase in cost decreases by a 11 per cent the probability that a mother will purchase child care, the subsidy cut reduces the probability that the family will buy care by between 59 and 102 per cent.  $(54/10 * 11 = 59; 93/10 * 11 = 102)$ .

<sup>8</sup> While the article was in press, MCAWS indicated that funding for the CCRRs may not be eliminated entirely. No firm figures have been announced, although it is expected that more than half of the forecasted cut will be restored.

<sup>9</sup> While the article was in press, MCFD indicated that BC's share of federal funds under the intergovernmental *Framework Agreement on Early Learning and Child Care*, roughly \$3.5 million in 2003/04, will be used to minimize the cuts to supported child care.

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