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# **Issues and Debates**

## **Enjeux et débats**

### **The Child Care Policy That Wasn't**

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Canada does not have a national child-care system; the licensed child-care that does exist is provincially regulated and under-funded. In fact, there have never been enough licensed child care spaces to meet the needs of Canadian families, and the need is even greater today with the changes in family structure and paid work, as a majority of women are now in the labour market. A decade ago, Martha Friendly argued that “the gap between regulated child-care spaces and the number of children with mothers in the labour force has widened considerably (and), as a result, the supply of regulated child care is even more inadequate than it was twenty years ago” (Friendly, 1994, p. 47). Little has improved over the last ten years (Prentice, 2001).

Meanwhile, much paid work is being casualized, with increases in part-time, contract and shift work, and fewer employees working the so-called standard hours of 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. (Broad, 2000). The majority of the licensed care that does exist offers care from 7:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. on weekdays. So, along with the general lack of child care, the growing number of parents who work outside of standard daytime hours cannot usually find licensed care for their children. They must rely on the unlicensed or informal sector to meet their child care needs (Foster & Broad, 1998). Given these changes, one could argue that the already inadequate child care situation in Canada has deteriorated for many families. With real incomes falling since the 1970s and insufficient funding for child-care programming, fewer families can afford to put their children in licensed care.

In the Spring 2001 issue of the *Canadian Review of Social Policy*, a number of authors discuss the child care dilemma and the possibilities for expanding child care services under the Social Union Framework Agreement (SUFA), the National

Children's Agenda (NCA) and the Early Childhood Development Services Agreement (ECDS). Rothman says that the promised "full review of SUFA ... ensures 'significant opportunities for input and feedback from Canadians,'" and adds: "This aspect of the agreement provides a rare chance for broad collaboration on social policy." However, she concludes: "On balance, the ECDS Agreement lacks the teeth needed to deliver on the critical SUFA goal of ensuring access to essential social programs and services" (Rothman, 2001, pp. 90, 93). Martha Friendly (2001) says, "it would be hard to argue that the limited civic engagement that has occurred constitutes SUFA's promised 'effective mechanisms for Canadians to participate in developing social priorities and reviewing outcomes'." She wonders whether the lack of action on child care is the result of "the redesigned federalism of the 1990s or an absence of political will" (pp. 80, 81). But perhaps we should ask whether these recent government policy-making initiatives are flawed because they are top-down exercises in social control rather than bottom-up efforts at citizen-induced social policy.

We would argue that the inadequate state of child care in Canada results from the fact that Canada does not have formal social policy on child care. This situation stems from the fact that Canada, with the exception of Quebec (Jenson, 2001), does not have formal family policy, unlike many European countries where citizen action enforced the "political will" to respond to social needs (Guest, 1997). Part of the problem results from a confusion over what social policy entails. Let us explain. After reviewing various authors' definitions of "social policy," David Gil (1992) provides the following composite definition:

Social policies are guiding principles for ways of life, motivated by basic and perceived human needs. They were derived by people from the structures, dynamics, and values of their ways of life, and they serve to maintain and change these ways. Social policies tend to, but need not, be codified in formal legal instruments. (p. 24)

Much social welfare literature, including that on child care, tends not to give precise definitions of social policy, sometimes equating it with "public policy" and sometimes with "government policy" or legislation.

The benefit of a broader definition like Gil's is that it emphasizes how there is more to social policy than what governments do. Social policy comes from social activism—from organizing, advocating, lobbying, et cetera. We did not acquire, for example, public education and public health care simply because some politician or bureaucrat bequeathed them upon us. Rather, over time, matters of concern to citizens grow as social issues and, with sufficient action, emerge as social policy issues. As such, there is a groundswell of opinion that these issues are important enough to society that they should be acted on. But only once there is consensus

on the part of a sufficient number of the members of various sectors of society do we reach the next step, where the state, as the only social institution with the authority and command over resources to do so, undertakes to address the issue through legislation and programming. We then get what is usually called public policy. In the case of public education, this happened when citizen pressure combined with business need for more-educated workers and government interest in creating "good citizens" (Curtis, 1987).

Following Gil's definition, we would argue that, despite strong advocacy and lobbying since the 1960s, Canada does not have a formal *child care policy*. Canada does have informal social policy on the *care of children*, which assumes that child rearing and nurturing is the responsibility of the individual family, mainly women. Gordon Cleveland and Michael Krashinsky (1998) note that, "Society provided care for its young children by making half the population—women—responsible for child care, and placing considerable obstacles in the path of those women who became, over time, less than thrilled with this role" (p. 73).

Governments have used the argument that families should be responsible for child care to avoid funding universal child care. Successive provincial governments in Saskatchewan, for example, have argued against funding childcare, saying it is a family responsibility. Two decades ago, the advocacy organization Action Child Care (1983) stated: "The NDP provincial government's assumption, prior to their defeat in 1982, that the provision of day care is the individual family's private responsibility (unless they are designated as needy) has been adopted by the new PC government" (p.4) . This assumption is still held by NDP governments after the party's return to office in Saskatchewan in 1991. This belief is reflected in the fact that mothers still have the majority of responsibility for child care, whether they are providing this care themselves or arranging alternate care. In fact, in the post-1980 neo-conservative policy climate, with political parties varying more in style than substance (Teeple, 2000), this belief has been reinforced and reaffirmed by governments across Canada. As long as this view is held to be part of our value system, Canada will continue to have no formal social policy on child care and the role of the family in society, and will continue with a patchwork of child care that relies on bake sales for centres and the informal economy of family and women at home with their own children who take in the children of others to make a few dollars. The recently announced federal framework agreement for child care funding does not fundamentally alter this situation.

### **The Need for Child Care: Balancing Paid Work and Family**

The debate on child care in Canada began 150 years ago, at about the same time that the first child care centres in Canada were established. These centres began in the 1850s in industrial areas of Ontario and Quebec and provided charitable,

custodial care for the children of working parents (Cooke et al., 1986, p. 230). Nothing changed much in child care until the Second World War when women were needed to work in war industries. To facilitate women working outside the home alternate child care was needed, so it was deemed to be of national importance. At that time the federal government found the money to cost share with the provinces the expenditures to care for children of mothers working in war industries. However, only Quebec and Ontario had war industries employing women, so the federal government would only share the cost of care for women working in war industries in those provinces. Following the war, both provinces planned to close their child care facilities. Quebec did so, but Ontario was forced to keep many facilities running, as women demanded care for their children so that they could continue to be employed.

The lack of affordable, quality child care continues to be identified by women working both full and part time as one of the greatest impediments to their labour market participation and advancement (Labour Canada, 1983; Friendly, 1991; Statistics Canada, 2000). Various studies on child care have reported that existing child care does not meet the needs of Canadian families. The members of the Special Committee on Child care reported, in *Sharing the Responsibility*, that “the evidence before the committee leads us to conclude that there are currently problems in matching the supply of various types of child care to the demand” (Martin, 1987, p. 38). The report *The Status of Day Care in Canada in 1995 and 1996* showed that less than 50 per cent of children whose parents were employed or studying 20 hours or more per week, had access to licensed child care spaces (Human Resources Development Canada, 1996). According to more recent studies, summarized by Susan Prentice (2001):

In Canada today, there are over five million children aged twelve and under.... More than 3,323,000 Canadian children have mothers in the paid labour force. For the country's children, there are 516,734 licensed child care spaces (in group centres and licensed homes). Quality, accessibility and affordability vary wildly within and between provinces and territories. The cost of child care and the scarcity of public fee subsidies put the service out of reach for nearly every low-income and most middle-income families. (p. 17)

#### **The Benefits of Quality Child care**

There has been a great deal of research done on the benefits that quality child care offers to children, families and society. Providing quality child care is expensive, but it has been demonstrated that the money spent on this early education is more than saved later through lower costs in special education, juvenile delinquency and

prisons. Cleveland and Krashinsky (1998) argue that:

investment in children's early years is required to meet a set of interconnected social and economic goals. These goals include healthy childhood development and readiness to learn; economic productivity and labour force attachment; women's equality; positive population health outcomes; reduced levels of family and child poverty; and cohesive safe communities. (p. 1)

It is clear that the current patchwork approach to child care in Canada will not achieve these goals. Lack of recognition and poor remuneration also impedes professional growth and development of child care workers, who find it hard to take pride in their job when they are paid less than parking attendants and zookeepers (Prentice, 2001). If it is to advance, child care as an occupation must be valued more highly by society.

### **The Need for Social Policy**

As noted above, there has been a great deal of activism in Canada in favour of expanding the availability of affordable, quality child care. Since the 1960s, feminists, trade unions, child care educators, parent groups and others have set up child care centres and advocated and lobbied for more funding and recognition (Rothman & Kass, 1999; Prentice, 2001). Federal and provincial governments were being pushed to provide more resources for child care programming and, in 1988, the federal government of Brian Mulroney introduced Bill C-144, the child care bill, which died in Senate following an election call. But most child care activists opposed the bill because it would have imposed a ceiling on cost-sharing with the provinces; it promoted expansion of commercial centres; it would impose no national standards; and it included the option of using tax benefits for parents rather than committing funding to child care programming. The bill would have formalized a residual rather than an institutional approach to child care programming.

Since the 1980s, while child care has surfaced as an election issue and in the federal Liberal's so-called Red Book during the 1993 election, commitment to child care has generally declined. The Liberal government made a half-hearted attempt at promoting child care in the mid-1990s, but with insufficient funding to interest the provincial governments (Scherer, 2001). Once again, as part of his desire to leave office having promoted a social agenda, Prime Minister Chretien's government has announced a federal-provincial framework agreement for child care but, at only \$930 million over five years, funding is modest and, while encouraging the initiative, Friendly has stated that the agreement is only the "shell" of a program

(cited in Greenaway, 2003). A cynic might accuse the politicians of setting their child care initiatives up for failure. But this need not be the case, if we could establish a social policy consensus.

Formal social policy on child care has been a feature of other countries for many years as part of broader family policy (Guest, 1997). The 1986 *Report of the Task Force on Child care* noted:

Unlike the approach taken in many European countries, Canadian family policy has never acknowledged the need to accommodate the family responsibilities of working parents, and unlike health care or education, child care has not been recognized in Canada as a public service. (Cooke et al., 1986, pp. 232-33)

But still, there is no public provision of the services. In a background paper to the Task Force on Child care, the authors state that “daycare in Canada has been a concern for over a century, yet, social policy in this area is still elementary/rudimentary” (The Domino Group, 1984, p. 8).

### **Public Health Care, Public Education, Private Child Care**

To understand why Canada does not have social policy on child care, let us compare the history of the struggle for public education and public health care to the struggle for child care, examining the political context at the time in which major changes have taken place. The Cooke Task Force Report pointed out: “Changes in social forces, in public attitudes, values and needs had a dramatic impact on policy development. Shifting economic conditions were also instrumental forces precipitating change” (Cooke et al., 1986, p. 230). These social forces, economic conditions and public attitudes have influenced the fact that we have a public education system, a public health care system, but no public child care system.

Health care and public education were not won in a short period of time. “A lengthy campaign to raise public awareness and generate public support was carried out for both education and health care before major legislation was presented” (The Domino Group, 1984, p. 14). It could be argued that there has also been a long public awareness campaign to generate support from the public for child care. But before there was public provision of health care and education services there was acceptance that these services are community and social responsibilities.

The debate around the provision of child care includes many of the same arguments that were raised in the debate around universal public education. The arguments in favour of government-funded child care include: quality child care is beneficial to children and society; quality child care saves money in the long-run by combating juvenile delinquency; for parents to be productive members of society

they must have child care; and for women to become equal members of society economically they must have provision of child care. The arguments against child care provision include the beliefs that: children should be cared for by their mothers; putting children in child care centres is institutionalizing them; parents should be teaching their own children at such a young age; the family will be undermined and will lose its freedom of choice. These beliefs are clearly ideological, embodying socially conservative guiding principles for ways of life.

The assertion of the ideology variously called neo-conservatism or neo-liberalism, and its hegemony in official politics after 1980, has served to put a brake on the drive for expanding public child care. So, despite all the reports and studies identifying the need for child care, we still do not have a national child care system. In fact, in recent years, while the struggle for a national child care system has been nationwide, federal governments have not only reneged on their promises of increased public funding for child care, but cut funding by approximately one third (Bach and Phillips, 1998; Prentice, 2001). Again, the funds allotted through the recent child care framework agreement are not sufficient to redress the shortfall and meet Canadian's child care needs.

Let us return to the Cooke Task Force's (Cooke et al., 1986) observation that changes in social forces, public attitudes, values and needs had a dramatic impact on policy development, and that shifting economic conditions were also instrumental forces precipitating change. The stronger push for universal child care began when the population became more urbanized and there was a dramatic increase in the number of women employed in the formal labour market. The reports and commissions listed above are dated from the 1970s and 1980s. But by the 1980s social forces and public attitudes were different than they were in the 1867, when education first became compulsory, and different than they were following the 1930s Great Depression when citizens were fighting for social security; back then there was great demand for expansion of social welfare services.

Following the Depression, Canadians organized to demand social security measures that would ensure that people did not suffer again the way they had in the Depression (Guest, 1997). It was at this time that the welfare state was born. There were, of course, those who opposed the social security measures of the welfare state. Since 1980, those most opposed to government intervention in the free market, known as the "New Right," have been successful at getting neo-conservative governments elected in Western countries and shifting the policy climate to the Right. The New Right has gained ascendancy because Keynesian economic policies failed to prevent the post-1970 ongoing global economic crisis, and because capital has made a concerted effort to change the political climate and advance government policies favourable to short-term business interests.

The New Right follows an ideology that has two components: a neo-laissez-faire economic doctrine; and the value of social traditionalism (Broad & Antony,

1999; McBride & Shields, 1997). In practice these two components result in support for the traditional family, with the father as the breadwinner and the mother as the at-home caregiver; and an economic doctrine promising that if our well-being is left to a totally free market our needs will be met. These beliefs are not conducive to expanding public child care programming.

### **Conclusions**

So, while over the last 20 years governments have made a number of promises for increases in public child care provision, we would argue that these promises are unfulfilled because the New Right, which is opposed to government social programs and the public provision of child care, was gaining sufficient credibility and power to set the agenda and define the debates.

Many of the same arguments were made for and against a system of public education as are being made for and against public funding for child care. While it is now being eroded, we did achieve public education. But because we lack the same constellation of social forces, we have not achieved public child care. The same sort of arguments that resulted in public education are not resulting in public child care today because the predominant social forces are different today —the forces advocating for less government and opposed to the public provision of social services are currently more powerful.

According to Bach and Phillips (1998):

Child care has been the first fatality of the construction by the federal and provincial governments of a New Social Union, which has shifted the balance from primarily public to greater private provision of social services, from direct state funding of services to reliance upon the tax base for redistributing income to individuals and families, and from a moderate degree of federal involvement in social services and welfare to emphasis upon the primacy of the provinces. (p. 236)

Until we achieve an ideological shift and develop a social policy consensus on the needs and benefits of public child care for society, families and individuals, governments will continue to renege on their promises for comprehensive child care programming. The ones to benefit will be employers who can cut costs by relying on the casual, informal and unpaid reproductive work of women as child care providers. And many of these same women will continue to be restricted to part-time and other casual employment because of their family responsibilities. Development of a social policy consensus in support of public child care as a social right, codified in law like education and health care, would go a long way in giving families, and women in particular, options for participating more fully in society.

Perhaps this could be advanced through the Social Union Framework Agreement, the National Children's Agenda and the Early Childhood Development Services Agreement, thereby helping to fulfill the promise of those public policy tools.

Child care activists should certainly encourage government to move forward with announced agreements for expanding social welfare programming. But in campaigning for a fully comprehensive public child care program activists need to recognize that their struggle is an ideological one, and must take to the ideological plane and push for a formalized progressive family policy which would include public policy on child care. The apparent socio-economic hardships imposed by recent neo-conservative policy initiatives should, in fact, leave the general public open to alternative values and guiding principles for ways of life (Gil, 1992). The choices confronting child care advocates are those of articulating and promoting these alternatives, or forgetting our ideals and adopting the pragmatic politics of taking what we can get, on the assumption that half a loaf is better than none (White, 2001). The problem with the latter approach, however, is that agreeing to half a loaf can leave one crawling for crumbs, and child care centres will still have to resort to bake sales to raise funds. Canada's children deserve more than crumbs.

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