

Why Women Still Ain't Satisfied

Politics and Activism in Canadian Child Care, 2006

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Le militantisme des femmes du 21e siècle autour de la garde des enfants est à multiples facettes. Il englobe tout, organise, fait du lobbying, de la recherche, de l'éducation publique, du développement de politiques et de l'action directe. Dans le but de garder le programme national du Service de garde au programme, les femmes à travers le Canada qui ont longtemps milité pour ce programme ont formé le «Code bleu pour le service de garde», une coalition souple avec objectif de remettre le programme du Service de garde sur les rails.

It's now 35 years since the Royal Commission on the Status of Women first recommended a *National Day Care Act* (1970) and more than 20 years after Judge Rosalie Abella called child care “the ramp that provides equal access to the workforce for mothers” (Royal Commission on Equality in Employment). Sixty years have passed since women organized to fight closure of Toronto's wartime day nurseries (Prentice 1996) and more than two decades since the inspired day care activism of the 1970s and 1980s put child care on Canada's political map to stay (Rebick).

Yet Canada has not achieved the “free, non-compulsory, publicly-funded, non-profit, 24-hour national day care system” promoted by Toronto's Action Day Care in the 1970s and 1980s. Indeed, although in most modern countries the idea that high quality child care and early childhood education are synonymous and a benefit to young children is well accepted (OECD 2006; UNESCO), the very idea of early learning and child care is under attack by the religious right in Canada (McDonald) and by the federal government. In the words of the Honourable Diane Finley, Federal minister responsible for child care: “There have been many studies that show that the best people to raise children are the parents” (*CTV News*).

At the same time, the idea that child care is an issue of special interest to women is disparaged by the right, as, for example,

Child care, caregiving and poverty are not just women's

concerns but the problems of the Canadian family. To ghettoize them ... does a disservice to others in the game including men, children and extended family members. (Kheiriddin¹)

This suggestion that today “women's priorities are everybody's priorities” and that gender wars over issues like child care are “old wars” is consistent with the statement of the Honourable Bev Oda, Conservative Minister responsible for women's issues, who contends that “We don't need to separate the men from the women in this country”² (qtd. in “An agency well pruned”).

Nevertheless, research shows that while both mothers (including employed mothers) and fathers devote more time to their children than previously (Gauthier, Smeeding and Furstenberg Jr.), women still carry the major responsibility for children in a variety of ways—taking parental leave (available to either parent) at a considerably higher rate (Friendly and Beach), working a “double day” (Gauthier, Smeeding and Furstenberg Jr.) and—if they are lone-parents—claiming the very lowest incomes among family types (Statistics Canada).

Most early childhood educators and child care workers—a notoriously underpaid group—are women as well (Beach, Bertrand, Forer, Michal, and Tougas). And over the years, organizing and activism for child care has been primarily by women (Prentice 2001). While now there are undoubtedly more men—fathers, child care workers, trade unionists, politicians, economists—who are essential and dedicated players in the Canadian fight for child care, by and large, the child care movement is still mostly made up of women.

The Current Child Care Situation in Canada

In 1986, the federal Task Force on Child care concluded that sound child care and parental leave programs can no longer be considered a frill but are, rather, funda-

mental support services needed by all families in Canada today (Cooke, London, Edwards and Rose-Lizée iii). But Canada has made little or no progress towards this system at the national level or outside Quebec³—in any of the provinces.

Canadian women with young children have joined the paid labour force in ever-increasing numbers for the past three decades. By 2003, their labour force participation rate had risen from 61 per cent (1995) to 66 per cent for mothers whose youngest child was 0-3 years, 75 per cent for those youngest was 3-5 years and 82 per cent with a

suggests that all low-income families can access a subsidized place. As a result, high user fees for regulated child care—required to support most of the cost of program operations—are a main barrier to access for modest and middle-income families.

While there has been growing recognition (based on child development research) that learning begins at birth, young children learn through play, development in the early years forms a foundation for the future, and early childhood education programs have an important role to play in how all young children develop, research shows

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child 6-15 years (Friendly and Beach). Canadian mothers' employment rates are high among the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, higher than those in France, Denmark, Hungary, the U.S., the UK, and others (Friendly).

In its review of Canada undertaken as part of its 20-nation comparative study of early learning and child care, the OECD commented that:

national and provincial policy for the early education and care of young children in Canada is still in its initial stages. Care and education are still treated separately and coverage is low compared to other OECD countries. (2004: 6)

Canada's child care lags not only when compared to western Europe but also to the Anglo-American nations and even in some developing countries (OECD 2006; UNESCO). As the OECD's 2006 analysis showed, Canada was the lowest spender in the OECD at 0.25 per cent of GDP (compared to Denmark, the highest spender, at two per cent of GDP). Canada also had very high costs to parents relative to most other OECD countries and had very low rates of access both for children aged 0-3 and aged 3-6 years (Friendly, 2006a).

No province/territory provides space for anywhere close to a majority of young children. There are no national standards or approach and while each province/territory has regulated child care centres, part-day nursery schools, regulated family day care (in private homes) and public kindergarten, the range, quality and access to early learning and child care programs varies considerably by region and circumstance. Funding in all provinces except Quebec still relies heavily on a residual welfare model—fee subsidies for eligible low-income families—which by no means

that the quality of regulated child care programs are more likely to be mediocre than excellent (Goelman, Doherty, Lero, LaGrange, and Tougas).

The Politics of Child Care: 2003-2006

Following the activism for child care throughout the 1980s, child care mostly remained off national policy agendas until 2003 when the Multilateral Framework on Early Learning and Child care was put in place by Federal Human Resources Minister Jane Stewart who called it "the beginning of a very solid national day-care program for Canadians" (Lawton). Then, in the 2004 election campaign, the federal Liberals under Paul Martin promised to build on this commitment to begin developing national early learning and child care system based on four principles—Quality, Universality, Accessibility and Developmental [programming] (QUAD). After the Liberals won the 2004 election with a minority government, they committed \$5 billion over five years (new dollars) to begin to build the system. In 2005, the federal government came to agreements-in-principle with all provinces based on only one condition⁴—that the federal funds be used for regulated early learning and child care programs.

This marked the first time that a Canadian government had followed through with an election commitment to improve child care at the national level. While there was considerable variation in the provinces' directions, in coming to agreements-in-principle with the federal government, provinces committed to detailed action plans specifying how the federal transfer funds would be spent. On the federal side, in signing the agreements-in-principle, the federal government promised five year funding upon production of the action plan.⁵ Two provinces, Manitoba and Ontario, had completed and publicly released their



Universal childcare is a woman's right, May 2004. Photo courtesy of Vancouver Rape Relief.

action plans, and concluded five-year funding agreements with the Government of Canada in November 2005 as did Quebec.⁶

In the 2006 election campaign, the Conservatives under Stephen Harper made child care one of their five priority election issues, vowing to reverse the processes set in motion by the Liberals. The Conservatives' intention was to cancel the agreements; to send all families a monthly check for \$100 (taxable) to promote "choice in child care"; and to set out capital financial incentives to encourage employers to establish child care (Conservative Party). Following the January 2006 election of a minority Conservative government, the new government's first announcement after officially taking office was that the agreements would be terminated. They announced that all jurisdictions—the three provinces with five year funding agreements (Quebec, Ontario, and Manitoba), the seven provinces that had not yet released their action plans and the three territories (who had not yet finished negotiations) would get federal funding for just one year. Thus, all federal funds for the nascent national child care program would end March 31, 2007.

Instead the Conservative government promised an individual cash payment to parents—the "Choice in Child care Allowance"—a payment to all parents with children under age six of \$1,200 a year, taxed in the hands of the lower-income spouse. In addition, the Conservatives said that they would initiate a capital funding program to "help employers and communities create child care spaces in the workplace or through cooperative or community associations by establishing a tax credit" of \$10,000 per space (Conservative Party, 2006). Following the election, cancellation of the previous government's early learning

and child care commitment through agreements with the provinces was the first announcement the new government made after the swearing-in ceremony; the first month's cheques to families were in the mail on July 1.

La Lutte Continue: Code Blue for Child Care⁷

The federal election of 2006 is over. As a result, child care is at risk as never before. After 30 years of hard work, the foundation of Canada's newest social program is on the chopping block, with cuts of almost \$4 billion on the line. Families, communities, providers, and advocates will not stand by and watch this happen.

...Code Blue for Child Care is a Canada wide campaign to protect the progress we've made on child care. Code Blue brings together national, provincial/territorial child care organizations; labour, women's and social justice groups; and Canadians from all walks of life. Code Blue will speak for the 64 per cent of Canadians who voted *for* a child care system to meet the needs of Canada's children, families and communities. (Code Blue for Child Care)

The election of the Conservative government of Stephen Harper in January 2006 brought to power (albeit with a minority) a federal government which was the first in modern Canada with a stated position of opposition to regulated child care.⁸ With a goal of keeping the national child care program on the public agenda, women from across Canada who had long advocated for a universal national child care program formed Code Blue for Child Care, a loose national coalition with goals dedicated to

putting the national child care program back on track.

The membership is broad, cross-Canada and cross-sectoral. It includes women's groups such as the YWCA and Feminist Alliance for International Action (FAFIA), labour groups like the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), child care advocacy and professional groups from across Canada, teachers' groups and the Ontario Public School Boards Association, social planning councils, Aboriginal and anti poverty groups, Canadian Association of Food Banks, and many others. Even before the child care agreements were cancelled, the group's steering committee developed goals and a work plan and implemented a series of activities designed to keep child care on the political agenda.

Code Blue's Goals

- (1) Saving existing federal-provincial agreements on child care.
- (2) Building on the foundation of the agreements to press all levels of government to build the system that Canada's children and families deserve and need.
- (3) Supporting families: Comprehensive family policy must address families' income needs *and* support expansion and operation of early learning and child care.

Code Blue's Activities

Almost immediately after the federal-provincial early learning and child care agreements were scrapped in February 2006, the activist's activities lead off with an evening vigil at the Prime Minister's Ottawa residence. This was followed by the launching of an Open Letter addressed to Stephen Harper, provincial premiers and federal opposition leaders. The Open Letter, posted on the internet and primarily circulated electronically called upon all the players to:

Honour the child care agreements.

We are calling on you to work together to honour the promise of a national child care program. The place to start is by protecting the early learning and child care agreements between the Government of Canada and the provinces. The federal-provincial agreements on child care were negotiated in good faith. They lay a foundation for a full system of early learning and child care that can meet the needs of all Canadian families. Cancelling them sets back the development of a national child care program for years to come, leaving families with young children to fend for themselves. Breaking federal-provincial child care agreements would be a breach of public trust and would lead to a cut of almost \$4 billion from child care funding. The federal election results were not a mandate to turn back the clock on child care. While income support for families is a valid policy goal, a taxable family allowance and a tax credit for employers will not create early learning and child care

services that are high quality, available and affordable. Families need income supports and publicly funded child care services. We call on all governments to protect and enhance progress on child care.

The letter was ultimately signed by about 80,000 Canadians and was released in July 2006 at a press event organized by women activists from Newfoundland outside a First Minister's conference in St. John's.

Code Blue rallied child care supporters in Ottawa on International Women's Day with an event featuring a panel presentation shared by the three Opposition Women's Critics, an approach the group would use a number of times to good effect. Other Code Blue activities included promoting and developing information, resources and research, developing radio ads, opinion pieces and letters to the editor; advocacy across Canada for local governments to adopt resolutions supporting the child care agreements⁹ and opposing the cancellation of the agreements. In March, with the work of Saskatchewan child care activists, all parties in Saskatchewan's legislature passed a unanimous motion to retain the child care funding. Throughout the spring, summer, and fall, the Ontario Coalition for Better Child care, Code Blue's Ontario partner, held Town Halls on the subject in towns across Ontario.

A national public opinion poll was commissioned by the child care activists was conducted by Environics. Released in June, it concluded that:

It is clear that the Canadian public places a high value on child care programs and the importance of affordable child care to the fabric of society. The vast majority regard the lack of affordable child care to be a serious problem, and there is almost unanimous agreement on the need for governments to play a role in helping parents meet their child care needs.... Given the public's support for a strong child care infrastructure, it is not surprising that a strong majority of Canadians endorse the plan announced in 2004 to create a national early learning and child care system that has a goal of providing affordable child care to all parents who need it. This support is consistent across all demographic and geographic groups and among supporters of all political parties, including the Conservatives. (1)

Finally, Code Blue worked with the NDP Child care Critic and pro bono legal expertise to develop national enabling legislation for early learning and child care, Bill C-303, introduced in the House of Commons by Denise Savoie (Victoria, BC). The activists worked to bring the Opposition Parties together to ensure that the bill would move through the legislative process. All three political parties supported Bill C-303 as it passed second reading November 22, 2006 to move to Committee stage.

Are We There Yet?

The woman-lead child care activism of the twenty-first century exemplified by Code Blue for Child Care is quite multi-faceted, encompassing organizing, lobbying, research, public education, policy development and direct action and involves a wide range of sectors and players in all regions on Canada.

Women in Canada are still struggling to balance work, family and personal lives without the support of a well-developed accessible system of child care. Although the percent of children for whom child care is accessible has crept up over the years, the situation isn't fundamentally better than it was in the 1980s when a much smaller proportion of women with young children were in the paid labour force. The 2006 election of the Harper government eliminated even the better-late-than-never first steps that were being taken. But at the end of 2006, a federal election is on the near horizon and the child care movement is well positioned to ensure that child care will be at the top of political agendas.

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¹Tasha Kheiriddin is the Ontario Director of the Canadian Taxpayers Federation and a frequent commentator from the right.

²On the occasion of shutting down regional Status of Women Canada offices

³It should be noted that—although the Quebec government made very significant advances in ELCC in the late 1990s and first part of the 2000s, and provides much greater accessibility to publicly supported programs for all children who can find a space—when Quebec is compared to countries in Europe, it is apparent that there is still a long way to go. Space shortages, problems with quality and staff wages, surcharges, and cutbacks by subsequent Quebec governments are well documented both in the media and in the data. See Friendly 2006b for comparison of Quebec with the rest of Canada and Quebec with OECD countries vis-à-vis ELCC programs.

⁴Child care activists continued to advocate for stronger national policy, especially with regard to funding to for-profit child care.

⁵The agreements also committed to collaborative work on early learning and child care data, research and a national quality framework.

⁶Eventually all provinces but Quebec signed a bilateral agreement-in-principle with the federal government although several balked for some time. With Quebec, the agreement-in-principle stage was skipped and the federal government and Quebec went right to a final five-year funding agreement. For an analysis of the intergovernment-

tal child care agreements and their demise, see Friendly and White.

⁷The sources for the information on Code Blue in this section are www.buildchildcare.ca and the website of the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada: <http://www.childcareadvocacy.ca/action/codeBlue/index.html>.

⁸Usually, federal governments in the 1980s and 1990s stated commitment to child care although they didn't deliver or, at least, were silent on the issue (as was for example the Chretien federal election platform in 1997).

⁹For example, a resolution by the City Council in Edmonton resolved: 1. That Council support the continuation of the established National Child care Program and Alberta federal—provincial child care program; and 2. That the Mayor write to Prime Minister Harper and all Edmonton MPs informing them of Council's support. There were similar resolutions in Toronto, Ottawa, N. Vancouver, Vancouver, and other cities and towns.

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MARLENE KADAR

The morning a child leaves

There are so many times I say hello and then I have to say good bye to you again.
But no words or space or distance really separate you from me when those times come.

Just as there are no words to describe the cardinal's song in the dead of morning and you are sleeping just a few feet away from me.

I could hear your breathing if night grabbed your throat
(as it sometimes used to do)

when I awaken and know all is well with the world because you are asleep in your room and the world is in you, and there was no grabbing.

And if you are not there, asleep, the cardinal will sing anyway,
in the dead of morning.

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