

The *National Post* and the Nanny State: Framing the Child Care Debate in Canada

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Introduction

It is uncommon for Canadian citizens to get a sense that their country might be on the brink of achieving a significant social policy breakthrough. This is the situation we found ourselves in with regard to child care (Polanyi, 2005) during the minority Liberal government of Paul Martin, which, for a time, survived with the support of the left-leaning NDP. Of course, with the instability inherent in a minority government, no one could be certain how much progress would be made. However, many social policy analysts and activists felt in 2004-2005 that we were closer to a real child care initiative than we had been in many years. The first step was the announcement by the federal government of a modest (but significant) commitment of \$5 billion over five years, followed by the signing in 2005 of a series of agreements-in-principles, with all 10 provinces to establish the parameters of a would-be system.

In that context, an ideological struggle unfolded to shape the view of Canadians regarding the pros and cons of a child care system and the shape(s) it should take. It is thus pertinent to examine how a major Canadian newspaper dealt with this burning social policy issue. Canada has only two national newspapers, the moderately conservative *Globe and Mail* and the aggressively neo-conservative *National Post*. The latter published, on December 7, 8, and 9, 2004, a series of articles on the child care debate under the running theme of "the Nanny State." To ensure the message was clearly understood by all, the *National Post* concluded this series on December 11 with an editorial subtly titled: "Say No to the Nanny State."

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In this commentary, I will first summarize the conservative arguments presented in the *National Post* to construct a clear picture of the position of the political right in Canada on this issue. I will then address a number of points made or ignored by this position: the need for an organized and structured system for the supply of services; the sole reliance on a (demand-side) tax credit; the wages and unionization of workers; the type of service delivery and governance (private, public, or non-profit) envisaged; the question of choices; and the potential impact for low-income families.

**Summary of the National Post's Opposition to a
National Child Care Program**

In the first part of its series ("The Next Medicare? What Can Taxpayers Expect?" December 7), *National Post* journalist Peter Shawn Taylor explains the principles said to be at the core of the new system (quality, universality, accessibility, and development — or QUAD) and traces a parallel with the medicare system (i.e., the five principles of the Canada Health Act).¹ He adds that Quebec is the inspiration for the new proposal and that this should be a concern because costs have been pushed up by the unionization of daycare staff, who negotiated substantial wage increases for the entire industry.

Taylor opposes the idea of a national daycare system because it would, he says, offer limited options to parents and would, in effect, discriminate against stay-at-home parents. The alternative he presents is to give every family a \$2,000-per-child annual tax deduction (a tax break).² Such a tax deduction, he argues, would allow parents to make independent choices.

Another noteworthy feature of this first article is that it calls on an academic researcher (in this case economist Philip Merrigan of Université du Québec à Montréal) to support the idea that a universal system like the one in Quebec is inherently unfair, as the uptake of services tends to be unequally distributed in society, with lower-income families using it less than middle-income families.

This line of argument is at the core of another article in the series by Heather Sokoloff, published on December 8, 2004, with the title: "Daycare's Impact Traces Class Lines — Does Class Matter?" Sokoloff urges Ottawa to drop the idea of a universal system (which she calls the "one-size-fits-all approach") and to adopt instead a targeted focus on children from low socio-economic backgrounds, because these (the poor) are the children "who really need child care." A large part of the article argues that universality favours the middle class and that it would be wiser to focus our attention on children of disadvantaged backgrounds. Sociologist Roderic Beaujot of the University of Western Ontario and education specialist Doug Willms of the University of New Brunswick are cited in support of this position.

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The other main theme of the article relates to the issue of choice and community input. "Let parents decide for themselves" says Sokoloff. Then, citing Dr. Hillel Goelman of the University of British Columbia, she reminds us that it is important for communities to have a say in how to best deliver child care.

On December 9, the *National Post* published two articles in the series. The first, by Graham Hamilton ("Quebec's Sacred Cow Has Quality Issues — Access vs. Quality"), looks at quality in the Quebec system, while the other, again by Sokoloff, asks, "Who Should Care for Our Children?" That is, should it be non-profit or private daycares?

According to Hamilton, the Quebec program costs far more than anticipated due to soaring demand and, of course, higher wages driven up by unionization; it is now characterized by long waiting lists. Moreover, the program, he says, has "quality issues," although admittedly less so in the non-profit centres. Further on in the article, he returns to the issue of unionization and stresses the importance of maintaining private, for-profit daycare and resisting "the lobby of trade unions pushing for a non-profit national network." Hamilton cites Université du Québec à Montréal economist Pierre Lefebvre, who revisits the recurrent theme that the "real beneficiaries of subsidized daycare are not disadvantaged children who need a head start but upper- and middle-class parents who could easily afford to pay more." Even Camil Bouchard, a child psychologist turned PQ member of the Quebec National Assembly, is cited as saying that Ottawa should use the limited resources of its proposed child care program on the children most in need.

Sokoloff's December 9 article argues that the push for non-profit daycare is coming from unions eager to take control of public-sector workers and that, basically, there is nothing wrong with the current structure of the system, aside from a lack of resources.

The series is capped by the editorial "Say No to the Nanny State," in which the *National Post* reminds us that the needs of Canadian parents differ widely and argues that the Liberal government and "daycare lobbyists" are seeking to impose a one-size-fits-all institutional model of daycare. The *National Post* clearly states its preference for the Conservatives' proposal for a tax deduction per child, which would permit parents to choose the child care option they prefer. The newspaper even wonders why the idea of a national child care system is being explored, given, as the editorialist tells us, that "there has been no significant popular pressure for more formal daycare in more than a decade." The idea is qualified as "... a recipe for yet another expensive, mediocre, bureaucratic social program imposed on the already overburdened Canadian taxpayer." The *National Post* adds: "As we see it, the last thing this country needs is another massive top-down government-run program — especially one animated by such questionable theories of child development." The final conclusion offered in the editorial is unambiguous:

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The best way to provide Canadian parents with relief is to grant them tax credits to spend on the child care arrangements that they think will best benefit their kids. Call us old-fashioned, but we think parents understand their children's needs a lot better than bureaucrats.

What Is Wrong and What Is Missing in the Position of the *National Post*

Organizing and structuring the supply of services

As a conservative or neo-liberal newspaper, the *National Post* has a problem with the State setting up any social programs to organize a structured service offering. In principle, the market is supposed to be the most efficient agent to organize the supply of services, so to consider another option is to admit that there are market failures in regards to child care services in Canada. But this is obviously the case, as the current reality across the country (with the exception of Quebec) is a "non-system" of child care made up of a patchwork of provisions in which the majority of families are still forced to rely on unregulated services, with substantial variations in the service offering from one location to the other (Mahon, 2004, p. 9). The current non-system resembles, in fact, a puzzle with many pieces that do not fit together. It is thus baffling to be told, basically, that there is nothing wrong with the current system on the supply side, but that some more money has to be freed up to support the demand in order to make the system work.

Based on the Canadian example in child care provision in the last 30 years, the onus of presenting the case should be on those who argue that the presence of a strong demand is a sufficient condition to create an appropriate system to deliver the services needed. Evidence for that is sketchy at best, and the position of the *National Post* seems based on ideology more than research or anything else. State intervention on the supply side is warranted in this field, given that the long focus on market supply and moderate subsidies to support demand among low-income families have not created on the ground the availability of services required by a society in which most families now have two earners (and are thus susceptible to work-life conflict), where most single parents are employed, and where (in New Brunswick) 75% of women with preschoolers are in the labour force (New Brunswick Advisory Council on the Status of Women, 2004: 1). The extent of the needs makes universal child care a necessity in today's Canadian economy. This position is consistent with that expressed by Esping-Andersen (1996) regarding the centrality of family policies in the adaptation of welfare states to the transformation of family structures.

The proposed (demand-side) reliance on tax credits

The logic of the *National Post* shows a clear preference for the reliance on tax credits for two reasons. The first, related to the point above, is that it frees the State from

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the responsibility of setting up any kind of system. The second is that it is supposed to preserve parental choice (including that of stay-at-home parents) and is more compatible with the maintenance of a significant commercial child care sector.

However, in the absence of a system, the choice in many communities might be indeed quite limited and the power to choose illusory for many parents with scarce resources who can rarely choose what they want, but take what they can get. As pointed out by Ferguson and Prentice (2001), such a notion of choice is conceptualized only as a form of consumerism in which individuals can, in principle, select a service and drop it for another if they are not happy with it. This is almost like suggesting that one could move a child from one child care centre to another every month to take advantage of better arrangements. Child care decisions cannot follow this logic, as they are very different from the moving of investments from one stock to another on the stock market. There are both emotional costs to children and practical costs to parents in leaving a centre (Ferguson and Prentice, 2001). In the end, the demand-side conservative policy option of a tax credit would do little to insure the quality of care.

Parental involvement in the governance of non-profit centres

The *National Post* argument tells us as much by what it omits as by what it proposes. For instance, while it is preoccupied by parental choice, the series of articles does not touch at all on the issue of parental involvement or control in child care provision. The newspaper, it seems, has no opinion on the level of input that parents should have in the running of the child care centre attended by their child or on the role they should play in overseeing the operations of such a centre. In a commercial, private centre, a parent's capacity to be involved is limited to the level of the consumer who, if disgruntled, may opt to quit that centre. However, in a non-profit centre, parents usually sit on a board of directors, sometime making up the majority of the board. Should parents be represented on the board of the child care centre their children attend, where they can each be a sort of "auditor general" of how activities are run? The *National Post* prefers to be mute on this obvious advantage offered to parents by the non-profit formula in the delivery of child care services. Moreover, in view of the fact that non-profit centres have been shown to offer superior quality to commercial ones based on indicators such as staff training, wages, turnover, and staff-child ratios (Cleveland & Krashinsky, 2005), one wonders why the *National Post* is so concerned about defending the turf of commercially operated centres.

The Unionization and Wages Issues

Much of the rhetoric of the *National Post* in its focus on child care is permeated by a clear anti-union sentiment in which the labour movement is presented as a

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special interest group whose only aim in this affair is to enlarge its membership base. It is true that the union movement has been preoccupied for several decades with the child care issue from a social policy perspective, both in Quebec (Aubry, 2001) and in the rest of Canada (Rothman & Kass, 1999). For that, the labour movement needs to be saluted, rather than criticized, for taking a leadership position while representatives of the business world have been burying their collective heads in the sand on this matter for so long.

As for the fact that child care workers are unionizing in the hope of securing better wages, one can hardly blame them, given the low level of compensation traditionally offered in this field. A 2000 report by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) shows that, on average, an annual wage for a full-time teacher in a child care center was \$22,716. This compares to the compensation received by parking lot attendants (\$21,038) in 1996. The relationship between unionization and higher wages can be seen by comparing the situation in Saskatchewan, where only 13% of child care workers are unionized, with that in Quebec, where 30% of child care workers are unionized. In Saskatchewan, the average hourly wage is \$11.16, as compared to \$15.36 in Quebec. As for New Brunswick, at the end of 2002-2003, the average wage of staff working in the province's licensed day care centres was very low, standing at only \$7.95 per hour (New Brunswick, 2003, p. 17). What we are not told by the *National Post* is that higher wages tend to reduce turnover rates and thus contribute to improved quality. Adequate remuneration of staff has, in fact, been shown to be a predictor of quality. Therefore, unionization is not only good for workers (Kass & Costigliola, 2004), it also impacts the quality issues the *National Post* seems most concerned about when talking about the Quebec system.

The Interest of the *National Post* in Class Analysis

A surprising feature of the series is the sudden interest shown in class analysis by this conservative newspaper. One of the main arguments formulated against the Quebec system, and thus against the establishment of a similar scheme in the rest of Canada, is that the uptake of services by parents from lower socio-economic backgrounds is lower than expected, while the use of the services by the middle-class is very intensive.

We must recognize that this is the case, but that it is not specific to the child care system. Many well-regarded social programs, such as French immersion in the public education system, may be unequally used across social classes. Better-educated citizens with higher income are often able to make more effective use of such programs than their counterparts from lower socio-economic backgrounds. But few would, on that basis, argue that we should not have French immersion as part of our public education in Canada! Instead, efforts should be made to ensure

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that parents from lower socio-economic backgrounds take full advantage of all social programs. Some barriers exist that contribute to preventing this in the case of child care. One is that there is a sort of cultural reticence among the poor to have their children cared for by others, as if using child care services is an indication that they are not good parents. Leski and Thériault (2004) found some indication of this sentiment in a recent study of welfare recipients in Saskatchewan. Another barrier is the potential for the middle-class parents who populate the boards of directors of child care centres to discriminate against parents who live in different situations and have different needs, such as non-working parents living on social assistance, in the way they offer and structure services in these centres.

Certainly, some work needs to be done to eliminate such barriers, but their presence does not represent a sufficient argument against an organized system of child care services. Nor do stay-at-home parents need to believe that a child care system is not for them. If we consider such a system as a vehicle for early childhood development, rather than as “babysitting” or “warehousing” of children, we can see that these services can benefit all families with preschool children, whether or not their parents are in the workforce (Polanyi, 2005). After all, as pointed by Battle and Torjman (2000), learning does not begin at age four or five with kindergarten or elementary school.

Conclusion

In its final attempt to convince the Canadian public (always referred to as “tax-payers”), the *National Post* tries to associate a national child care system with a “bureaucratic social program” or a “massive top-down government-run program.” Conceptualized like this, it is obviously rather unattractive. Yet the child care system many of us are hoping for does not have to be run by Ottawa’s bureaucrats. What should be envisioned is a pluralistic system of mixed delivery (including both for-profit and non-profit child care centres) in which some basic standards are established and regulated by the provincial governments (such as the responsibility to set parameters for quality³), and for which sufficient public funding is provided, through federal-provincial transfers, so that the out-of-pocket share paid by parents is low enough to make it possible for families across the income spectrum to use the services. Preference should be given, in this system, to non-profit centres that are, in effect, community-operated social economy initiatives (not a program run by bureaucrats) governed by boards of directors populated by parents who are in the best position to “understand their children’s needs” and to oversee operations of the centres that serve them. These are some of the characteristics found in the Quebec system that should be retained in large-scale initiatives in other parts of Canada. This is not to say, however, that all provinces should adopt a copycat version of

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what has been done in Quebec; the different jurisdictions should be allowed sufficient flexibility to reach common objectives through various means.

In a recent study on the policy landscape of early childhood development in Saskatchewan, McIntosh, Muhajarine and Klatt (2004) state that "... announcements of increasing spending on early childhood development programs generally meet little opposition" (p. 7). The "Say No to the Nanny State" ideological campaign orchestrated by the *National Post* shows that there are some exceptions to this rule. With the recent election of a Conservative government, it is important that Canadians see through the argument that a simple tinkering with the taxation system or a direct transfer to parents will suffice to fix the problems generated by the absence of a child care system in Canada.

It is obvious that the policy window of opportunity for a more comprehensive child care system has been at least temporarily shut by the election of Mr. Harper. However, social activists cannot wait for the next electoral campaign to take the lead on this issue. If Canadians want to say no to the sorry state of child care services in this country, pressure must be maintained on elected officials so that long-lasting solutions can be found to this social problem in the near future.

Finally, on the issue of social policy-making, we must remember that, as with Medicare several decades ago, social policy innovations are not always born in Ottawa but sometimes in provinces such as Quebec or Saskatchewan. Work on producing innovative child care services can be done locally until a more favourable climate returns to Ottawa.

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Notes

- 1 On that same day, December 7, journalist Ann Marie Owens contributed a largely descriptive piece entitled "Letting the Company Look After the Kids." It basically argues that setting up daycare at the office is not the solution for companies, since about 40% of child care arrangements rely heavily on family members and other informal help to care for children. (The journalist assumes here that existing arrangements are those that would be preferred anyway.) The innovative (and cost-effective) alternative described is to offer only emergency backup daycare

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- services to supplement existing arrangements, as is being done at the CIBC's Toronto offices.
- 2 As a variation on this theme, during the last election campaign, Prime Minister Steven Harper proposed a \$1,200-per-year child care allowance.
 - 3 In my view, this would imply that the system would be open to unionization, while not all centres would necessarily be unionized.

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