



House of Commons Debates

Private member's motion on child care

March 30, 1993

Ms. Dawn Black (New Westminster—Burnaby)
moved:

That, in the opinion of this House, the government should incorporate the following national objectives in all of its child care initiatives:

1. child care services should be licensed and regulated so that they apply the highest standards consistent with current knowledge of early childhood development;
2. cost should not be a barrier to access to child care services;
3. child care services should be universally accessible, irrespective of a person's income, employment status or geographic location;
4. child care services should be comprehensive enough to offer services for infants, pre-schoolers, school-age children, and children with special needs, and be culturally sensitive;
5. child care services should be flexible enough to accommodate the demand for full-time, part-time, seasonal, shift and occasional services;
6. child care services should be operated on a non-profit basis.

She said: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to call for a national child care program which is accessible, affordable, comprehensive, culturally sensitive, of good quality and flexible and non-profit. Yes, that is a tall order, but it is an essential goal.

Many may lead us to believe that such a program is impossible but that does not explain how a number of European countries have achieved comprehensive publicly funded national child care programs, some of which even include allowances for homemakers who raise small children full time.

Unlike most other developed affluent nations, Canada does not have a system of child care. Child care in Canada has developed in a haphazard manner driven by market forces.

Child care is a women's rights issue. The royal commission on equality and employment reported in 1984 that child care is the ramp that provides equal access to the work force for mothers.

In our society women are primarily responsible for child-rearing. This has resulted in the incredible poverty of older women who do not have pensions built up in their own name. It has also resulted in inequality between women and men workers. Our society must come to terms with blending work and family responsibilities in a way that does not penalize either the mother at home or the mother in the paid work force.

In 1990 Canada signed the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Child care is recognized in that convention as a significant children's rights issue. Every child has the right to adequate care either by a parent or by another caregiver.

France has an extensive and well-funded system of child care and women's equality is not used to justify it. They consider what is best for the children. Child care is a family issue. It should be there for parents who want or need to do paid work and to provide respite care for those at home who are child care workers 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

The Vanier Institute for the Family estimates that 1.3 million Canadian children are in need of child care. Yet there are only 300,000 licensed child care spaces in the entire country.

Child care is a social policy issue. Child care is a way to identify and to help abused children and to provide educational and other resources and opportunities for poor children that their parents are not able to afford.

Child care is an economic issue. It is an investment in a skilled and educated work force. It is about time government and employers realized that the majority of workers are parents and that the future workers and citizens may now be growing up with inadequate care that will have a major and long lasting impact on the future of our country.

Child care is an important issue, one which this government and the Liberals when in power have chosen to ignore. Even during these times of economic hardship

the New Democrat governments in both British Columbia and Ontario have invested in the creation of new licensed child care spaces.

Canadian families have changed. Children are being raised in smaller families. This means fewer siblings and fewer aunts and uncles to care for children. Families are more mobile. Over 16 per cent of the Canadian population are immigrants. This means that parents and children may not live in the same city as their grandparents and other family members, or they may have no extended families or strong networks of people who can care for their children while they financially support them.

Before the 1980s the paid labour force participation rates for mothers of pre-school children were lower than that for all other women. Now the rate for mothers of pre-schoolers has surpassed the paid labour force participation rate of all women.

The 1992 Canadian national child care study found that over half the families with pre-school children were dual earner couples or employed sole support parents.

It is harder to make ends meet these days and it is becoming impossible to raise a family on one income. Wages have not kept pace with inflation. Taxes have increased while services have been cut. The number of women raising children on their own has risen, both due to divorce and to the fact that many young unmarried mothers choose to raise their children themselves.

I want to go through each point of my motion. First, child care must be of good quality. Child development research shows that the quality of care children receive has a profound effect on their future development. Some unregulated, informal or private arrangements may suit all parties; for instance, sometimes a grandmother who cares for her grandchildren while her daughter or son is in the paid work force. Sometimes for some families that works and it is a positive arrangement. She may be a good, experienced caregiver who has a lot of love and wisdom to share.

We have all heard the horror stories of other types of unlicensed care such as the alleged sexual abuse ring, run from an unlicensed, unregulated child care centre in Martensville, Saskatchewan. Abuse can also be a problem in unregulated care provided by friends or relatives.

A child is most likely to be abused by someone they know, by a friend, a family friend or a relative, than by anyone else. We must ensure that all Canadian children are being cared for in conditions which do not hurt their health, imperil their safety or close their minds. That means good staff-child ratios so that caregivers can interact frequently with each individual child. It means

fair wages, benefits and working conditions for child care workers so they do not burn out and a child can count on having the same caregiver for a period of several years. It means a physical environment which is safe and pleasant where kids can get fresh air. It means training in early childhood education for caregivers so they can structure programs appropriate for children's developmental levels.

When compared to France, Denmark, Sweden or Italy, Canadian child care is substandard on many counts and particularly deficient in staff training requirements. Not only must we have standards for care of our most important resource, our children, but those standards must be enforced.

Second, child care must be affordable. Since 1966, child care has been funded through the Canada Assistance Plan which is essentially a welfare program. The government has talked about giving parents choices, but currently many parents have no choice. They do not qualify for a subsidy, but cannot afford the full fees for care. Child care costs can take up almost all or a majority of a woman's yearly salary. A family with a pre-school child and one school-age child can pay up to \$12,000 a year for child care costs alone. It means a woman can end up working for \$5,000, \$6,000 or \$7,000 a year after she has paid her child care costs.

The crying shame of this is that there are empty child care spaces out there that no one can afford and yet the line for subsidized child care spaces can be over a year long. That is a year when a parent must stay out of the paid work force or on welfare. Because of the shortage and ineligibility of many families for subsidized regulated spaces, many families are forced to turn to informal arrangements which can be unstable and for which they may not be able to get receipts to deduct on their income tax. Studies have found that unregulated arrangements have a high turnover rate which means the child is shunted about to a different caregiver every few months. People must have the option of affordable licensed child care.

Third, child care must be accessible regardless of income, employment status or geographic location. In Canada today, child care is simply not available in many rural areas, while both parents may be busy working on a farm or one is working in town while the other is working on the farm. Licensed child care is not accessible in Canada. Many families do not qualify for a subsidy

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and yet cannot afford the enormous costs of child care. The gap between the availability of licensed child care and the number of mothers in the paid labour force has been widening over the past decade until it has become a huge gulf. By 1990 there were half a million more children under 13 with a mother in the paid labour force for whom there was no more regulated child care than there was in 1983.

Fourth, child care must be comprehensive, culturally sensitive and be able to deal with special needs. Cultural sensitivity, training and screening should be a part of staff training and hiring. No child should go to child care and come out of that child care centre with a lack of self-esteem.

Aboriginal communities face a particular challenge in terms of instilling knowledge and respect of traditional language, customs, values and spirituality. Aboriginal child care must be controlled by aboriginal communities.

Fifth, child care must be flexible enough so that it can be used on a full- or part-time or occasional basis or seasonally or by shift workers.

I had three children in two years. I know what it is like to be at home in a low-income, one-income family trying to deal with the needs of three very small children, one of whom was critically ill. Parents who are in that position must have the availability of respite so that they can have care for their children and continue to have their young children socially interact with other children and move out of their own home environment for the health of both the parents and the children.

The Canadian national child care study reported last year that 55 per cent of parents with paid employment did not have a standard work schedule, that is Monday to Friday with no evening or weekend work. Yet most child care centres are only open from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. or fewer hours. What care is there for children whose parents must work shift work? The need for flexible child care cannot be underestimated.

Why should taxpayers be paying good money for a child care centre's owner's profit rather than putting it directly into good nutrition and educational resources for children? There is a body of research that shows that commercial child care is on average of poorer quality than non-profit child care in the areas of child-staff

ratios, staff training, staff turnover and wages and benefits.

Far from giving parents an increased choice most parents trying to find child care have little choice but to take whatever is available unless they are wealthy enough to be able to shop around.

Choice in child care is a myth. Many choices for families are constrained by economics in more ways than one. Some women who are in the paid work force would prefer to be at home with their young children. Some women who are at home being supported by a partner or on welfare or living on small savings would prefer to be in the paid labour force but are constrained by the lack of child care.

They cannot go to school. They cannot go for training or retraining. They cannot look for work. They cannot accept work because there is no alternative care for their children.

We are living in Canada in a society with a declining birth rate. The 1986 task force on child care known as the Katie Cooke task force reported that people wrote to them saying that the lack of parental leave and child care had directly affected their own child-bearing decisions not to become parents. Our society does not acknowledge the work women do in the home and consequently underpays child care workers as well.

Many child care workers particularly in regulated non-profit centres have degrees or certificates in early childhood education, experience, patience, responsibility and love and they are paid much less than many male workers in jobs that require less education and certainly less responsibility.

This government and the Liberals when in power have chosen to avoid the fact of the increased need for affordable child care until it has now reached crisis proportions.

As a society we will prosper or decline based on how we collectively care for our children and on what opportunities they have to learn and to grow and to receive adequate nutrition and care. These early years are very important in shaping the health and abilities of our future society. We cannot afford to overlook it or to shrug it off just because pre-schoolers cannot write letters to members of Parliament or lobby or demonstrate on the lawns of Parliament Hill.

In 1970 the Royal Commission on the Status of Women said of child care that we are faced with a situation that demands immediate action. That was in 1970. Twenty-three years later nothing at all has changed except that federal child care funding contributions to the Canada Assistance Plan have been capped which is choking the ability of the provinces to pay for child care and a Child Care Initiatives Fund was set up to fund research in innovative projects only to be cut back twice by millions of dollars.

The Family Allowance Program was a way that Canadian society recognized albeit in a small way the contribution made to society by those who raise children. That program was eliminated.

We are still faced with attitudes like that of the Conservative member of Parliament from Fraser Valley West who recently said that child care centres are: "little more than temporary orphanages".

The Liberals had 14 years to act and they did absolutely nothing except study the issue. The time to act has long passed. Let us join together now with parents and with communities to build a comprehensive child care system which also recognizes and values the contributions of parents in the home and a child care system on which to base our future as a nation.

Canadian women and Canadian families are in desperate need of licensed child care in this country. They are very tired and very fed up with a government that continues to spend money on big-ticket items like \$5.8 billion for 50 helicopters at the expense of our nation's children.