

Canada's Early Childhood Education and Care Policy: Still a Laggard?

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Canada's early childhood education and care (ECEC) system has fared poorly in recent international comparisons. Its laggard status can be attributed to the "liberal" character of its social policy regime and to the federal structure of the Canadian state. This paper argues, however, that there are signs of change. While these are currently most visible in certain provinces, the issue of creating an effective pan-Canadian ECEC framework is still very much alive on the federal agenda.

Key words : early childhood education and care, federalism, liberal regime

In *Starting Strong II*, the Organisation for Economic Development and Cooperation (OECD) ranked Canada last of fourteen countries in public expenditure on early childhood education and care (ECEC) for children 0-6. Earlier, its country report had concluded that "it is clear that national and provincial policy for the early education and care of young children in Canada is still its initial stages. Care and education are treated separately and coverage is low compared to other OECD countries. Over the coming years, significant energies and funding will need to be

invested in the field to create a universal system in tune with the needs of a full employment economy, with gender equity and with new understandings of how young children develop and learn" (2004, p. 6). Several years later, it seemed that Canada had failed to move beyond the "initial stages", as the ECEC league tables produced by UNICEF's research arm, Innocenti, placed Canada last among twenty five OECD countries (2008). In 2008, there were spaces for only 20% of children 0-5 in regulated childcare centres and full-day kindergarten for five year olds in only three provinces, with part-day kindergarten for four year olds in only one. This failure is all the more striking given the high labour force participation rate of mothers with young children – 69% with children 0-2; 77% with children 3-5 in 2008 (Beach, Friendly, Ferns, Prabhu, & Forer, 2009, p. 179).

Canada's laggard status can, in part, be explained by the liberal character of its social policy regime in which it is embedded. For many years, the federal

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governments' primary support was of a residual character, targeting low income families, with the rest largely left to purchase what care they could on the market. Moving forward has been further complicated by the fact that official jurisdiction lies in the hands of the provinces and territories. The combination of a liberal, market-orientation and federalism does not provide a sufficient explanation for Canada's laggard status, however. The federal government has previously demonstrated an ability to establish pan-Canadian standards within another important area (health care) of provincial jurisdiction. More broadly, other countries with market-oriented social policy regimes -- notably New Zealand, the United Kingdom and Korea -- have exhibited sufficient capacity to act, gaining a middle rank on UNICEF's scale. These examples demonstrate that "regimes" do not have a life of their own: they can be altered and even transformed by a combination of structural pressures (e.g., rising women's labour force participation rates, demographics); evidence-based knowledge of the importance of ECEC not only to facilitate the reconciliation of work and family life but also to human capital formation; and political activity highlighting the significance of both.

As we shall see, all three factors have been generating pressure to develop an adequate pan-Canadian ECEC policy since the 1980s. In fact, the country report noted that at the time of the OECD team's visit, federal-provincial bilateral agreements then being concluded promised to provide a clearer focus on child development and learning (2004, pp. 5-6). Unlike Korea (Peng, 2009), however, the consensus did not extend to the Conservative Party, then in opposition. When the latter formed a new government in January 2006, one of its first acts was to announce the termination of the agreements. As a result federal funding dropped from a high of \$950 million in 2006-2007 to \$600 million in the subsequent two years (Beach et al., 2009, p. xxii).

The next section begins with an overview of Canada's liberal social policy regime and then

reviews federal involvement in ECEC, with particular emphasis on the most recent decade. This will be followed by a review of provincial ECEC programs, ending with a more detailed discussion of the most promising of these, that adopted by the government of Quebec in 1997. The last section reflects on current issues and initiatives, primarily at the provincial scale. The article concludes with an assessment of prospects for moving beyond the "initial stage" to develop an adequate pan-Canadian ECEC system.

Canada's Liberal Social Policy Regime: The Federal Government's Role

Canada clearly belongs to the liberal family of social policy regimes (Esping-Andersen, 1999) and the liberal stamp is clearly evident in the federal government's involvement in ECEC. Yet liberal regimes admit for considerable variety across time and space (O'Connor, Orloff, & Shaver, 1999; Myles, 1998). Classic liberalism, with its strong pro-market bias, favours a residual approach to social intervention, while the social liberalism that informed social policy in the Keynesian era was open to a more positive state role, with the aim of supporting the development of individual capacities. Assumptions about gender relations also influence the way liberal principles are translated into policy. Thus while post-war liberalism may have involved the expansion of social programs reaching the whole population, it was also oriented to sustaining, to a greater or lesser extent, the male breadwinner/female caregiver family form. By the 1970s, women's rising labour force participation rates, made salient by the emergence of second-wave feminism, began to challenge the latter assumption, opening the way for more active interventions in support of the adult earner family, including childcare (Prentice, 1993).

These patterns are clearly visible in Canada's social policy regime. Thus the Canadian government embraced a modest version of the Keynesian-welfare

state in the post-war period. At the same time, while the federal government withdrew its support for childcare (begun during the war), it introduced a universal family allowance along with other measures to support the male breadwinner/female caregiver family. As part of the continuing development of a pan-Canadian welfare regime, in 1966 the Canada Assistance Plan (CAP) was enacted, making federal funds available for the first time for the support of lone mothers.¹ In recognising their "right to care", however, the federal government also nodded in the direction of their "right to choose" employment by opening the possibility of federal contributions, on a 50-50 basis with the provinces, to subsidised childcare. These arrangements institutionalised the classical liberal view that childcare was a residual "welfare" service, targeted at those in financial or "moral" need. CAP funds did not, moreover, mark the start of a truly national childcare program. There was no obligation on provinces to develop childcare support programs. Although CAP did provide some broad regulations should a province decide to participate, it also left it to them to determine the number of childcare spaces to subsidise, eligibility rules and levels of subsidy. As a result, the levels of regulated childcare provision vary substantially across the country.

Childcare's status as a residual service was soon contested in the name of women's equality. The Royal Commission on the Status of Women (1967–1970), called for a national daycare act, in recognition that all women needed access to childcare if they were to enjoy equal opportunity to men. Although the recommendations came at a time that seemed ripe for major policy innovation,² the femocrats within the federal bureaucracy faced stiff opposition. Thus childcare remained in CAP, albeit with some modest revisions: the provinces were given a new, less intrusive, option (an income test) for determining need and those choosing the new option could also cost-share operating costs – but only for non-profit providers. The range of potential eligibility was also

widened, though this was limited to families earning less than the provincial average.

By the mid-1980s gender equality had become an important part of national political discourse, providing an important opening for childcare advocates. The Abella Commission on Employment Equity (1984) gave the demand for universal childcare a new prominence at the federal scale, which was reinforced that same year by the appointment of the Cooke Task Force on Childcare. Feminist issues were also highlighted in the 1984 election. Childcare advocates also seemed well placed to take advantage of this opening, having recently developed pan-Canadian organization – the Canadian Day Care Advocacy Association (CDCAA).

The situation changed, however, when the Conservative party won the 1984 federal election. The party came to office with a neo-liberal agenda combined with elements of social conservatism, especially with regard to gender relations. It not only eschewed the "interventionist" economic policies pursued by previous Liberal government and aimed to eliminate universal social programs, including the family allowance, but it also promised to promote "family values" (Teghtsoonian, 1993). Without waiting for the Cooke task force report, the new government organized its own cross-Canada hearings on childcare. Although the CDCAA and their allies in women's organizations, trade unions and other progressive social movements managed to dominate the hearings, the Conservatives introduced a Childcare Act reflecting its particular agenda. Thus, for the first time, a ceiling was to be imposed on federal contributions. The Act would also have made operating funds available to commercial as well as non-profit operations, a move opposed by the childcare advocates and their allies. While the Act was allowed to die on the books when the 1988 election was called, the government did however establish a refundable Child Tax Credit, providing tax relief for traditional male breadwinner families and Child Care Initiatives, a program providing funding

for research and development.

A new opportunity appeared in 1993 when the Liberal party featured childcare prominently in its “Red Book” of election promises. Following a Liberal victory, a sympathetic minister was appointed to the department responsible for CAP. Once again, however, these openings were to prove disappointing with the government’s turn toward fiscal austerity. In social policy terms, this meant an increased emphasis on “activating” social assistance recipients, including lone parents (Bashevkin, 2002). All talk of universality was abandoned as targeted programs were seen to offer the best “value for money.” The political field had altered too. Gender equality and other values that had held such a prominent place in the 1970s and 1980s, were replaced by a singular focus on the child (McKeen, 2003). Moreover, the advocacy community had been severely wounded by cuts to core funding initiated by the Conservatives and deepened by the Liberals.

This policy shift is often seen as “neo-liberal”, and certainly the Liberal government’s policies initially fit the mould. Childcare resumed its residual character, this time as a support for the “activation” of lone parents as well as a program aimed at helping poor children to escape the “poverty cycle.” Even this opportunity for enhanced federal funding closed with the 1995 budget, however, which eliminated CAP, rolling a substantially reduced amount into a new block fund, the Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST). The provinces were now “free” to decide how to allocate the substantially reduced federal transfers among different social programs, with childcare often the loser to high profile areas like health and education. In addition, the 1996 Speech from the Throne promised that the federal government would not use its spending power – the instrument on which it had relied to establish most pan-Canadian social programs – to mount new programs without the consent of the majority of provinces.

As the 1990s drew to a close, however, the Liberal

government’s social policy interventions came increasingly to be guided by an “after-Keynesian” version of social liberalism, that favoured “social investment” in human capital formation over the older “passive” (consumption oriented) policies (Mahon & Collier, 2008). Childcare had a place on this new agenda, but one quite different from the 1980s, when it was clearly associated with the achievement of gender equality.

The social policy turn, and the central place of the child in the new agenda, reflected, in part, the impact of the generation and widespread dissemination of research on the importance of the ‘early years’ to the development of the human brain, in which the work of experts like Fraser Mustard and Clyde Hertzman figured prominently. Ongoing research on the factors influencing the “social, emotional and behavioural” development of children and youth within the federal bureaucracy³ underlined the message. Within civil society, the importance of investing in the “early years” was picked up and promoted by a broad alliance of voluntary agencies, the National Children’s Alliance.⁴ At the same time, the childcare advocates had developed expertise of their own, aided by Child Care Initiative fund, as well as good connections with key politicians and civil servants, which helped keep childcare on the agenda.

The government’s embrace of the child as social investment was signalled by the adoption of the National Children’s Agenda (1997), a federal-provincial agreement to develop a comprehensive, cross-sectoral children’s strategy. The first such initiative, the Canada Child Tax Benefit, retained the focus on child poverty and “activation” of those on social assistance. In addition to tax benefits reaching low and middle income families, the benefit included a National Child Benefit Supplement for low income families, whether their income was derived from work or social assistance. The provinces were also invited to claw back the equivalent amount from payments to social assistance recipients, which the provinces could then reinvest in children’s services.

The next initiative, the Early Childhood Development agreement, committed the federal government to transfer \$2.2 billion over the next five years, with the funds to be invested in any of four areas, including childcare. In these negotiations, the federal government backed off the requirement to invest in all areas, however, enabling some provinces, including the three largest, to invest nothing in childcare. The next agreement was more focused. The 2003 Multilateral Framework Agreement on Early Learning and Childcare committed \$1.05 billion in federal transfers to improve access to affordable and regulated early learning and childcare for children under six. The provinces/territories were not, however, required to invest matching funds, as they had been under CAP and were free to select from a broad menu of early learning and care programs and funding models, perpetuating the patchwork of provision.

Both agreements were also flawed by weak accountability requirements. While CAP had required the provinces to send detailed accounts to the federal government, the Early Child Development initiative only committed the provinces/territories to report progress in priority areas to their respective publics. The Multi-lateral Framework Agreement too lacked the means to require the provinces/territories to live up to their commitments. Instead of publicising underinvestment, the federal government resorted to quiet diplomacy to persuade under-investing jurisdictions to live up to their commitments (Kershaw, 2006). Despite these flaws, the OECD country report commented favourably on the “growing consultation and co-operation between the federal and provincial governments” leading to a “clearer focus on child development and learning” (2004, pp. 5-6).

Starting Strong II, which showed Canada's poor international ranking, was released when the federal government was poised to act. In fact, the background document prepared for the OECD, which detailed the flaws in Canada's ECEC, had

come into the hands of key Liberal advisors looking for a “big idea” as they prepared for the 2004 election.⁵ Accordingly, the Liberals focused their campaign on the achievement of a pan-Canadian ECEC system based on the ‘QUAD’ (quality, universally inclusive, accessible, and developmental) principles and soon after the election moved to negotiate agreements with the provinces. By the end of 2005, agreements in principle had been negotiated with all ten provinces. All agreements referred to the QUAD principles and eight promised only to invest in regulated childcare. All made specific reference to inclusion of First Nations children and noted the need for appropriate ELCC programs for minority official language children, children with distinct cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and children with special needs. All indicated preparedness to exchange information with an eye to improving the system as a whole. Finally, the fact that Quebec was prepared to participate, represented a major shift in Canada-Quebec relations as Quebec had refused to be party to the three earlier agreements.

The QUAD agreements, however, had one critical flaw: they made provision for any government to terminate their involvement with one year's notice. Moreover, agreement on the need to establish a strong pan-Canadian ECEC system did not extend across all parties. Thus when a Conservative government was elected in January 2006, one of its first acts was to announce the termination of its involvement. Reflecting its neo-liberal, social conservative ideology, the Conservative government created the so-called universal child care benefit – a taxable benefit of \$100 a month for each child under six, which would cost the government \$2.4 billion per annum. The pre-tax amount for parents falls well short of the over \$500 monthly fee for children over 18 months. Moreover, the benefit offered the most to upper income families with a single breadwinner (Battle, Torjman, & Mendelson, 2006).

Nevertheless, the Conservative government was aware that funds were needed to encourage the

Table 1.
Snapshot of Canadian Childcare Provision, Canada and Provinces

	% of Labour force participation of mothers with children 0-2 (2007)	% of Labour force participation of mothers with children 3-5 (2007)	Kindergarten provision for 5 year olds (2008)	% of children 0-5 for whom there are regulated childcare spaces (2008)	% of spaces in regulated childcare centres offered by non-profit providers (2008)	Provincial allocation for each regulated childcare space (2008)
Canada	69	77		20.3		
Newfoundland and Labrador	66	74	Part day	17.3	30	\$3,323
Prince Edward Island	78	85	Part day	41	42	\$1,407
Nova Scotia	71	78	Full day	22.1	50	\$2,701
New Brunswick	76	77	Full day	19.9	33	\$1,692
Quebec	74	80	Full day	25.0	86	\$4,691
Ontario	68	79	Part day	19.6	76	\$3,040
Manitoba	66	76	Part day	20.9	95	\$3,898
Saskatchewan	69	73	Part day	9.1	100	\$5,138
Alberta	61	77	Part day	17.4	49	\$1,429
British Columbia	65	71	Part day	18.3	58	\$2,476

Note. Data taken from *Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada 2008*, section on The Big Picture (CRRU, 2009)

expansion of childcare spaces. The initial proposal for its “child care spaces initiative” aimed to provide incentives for businesses, but consultation by federal officials with the various stakeholders and a report by the government-appointed advisory committee made it clear that business, while aware of the need for childcare, was not interested in taking an active part. The government then simply handed the \$250 million per annum over to the provinces. As a result of these changes, total federal transfers earmarked for childcare fell from a high of \$950 million in 2006–07 to \$600 million per annum in 2007–08 and 2008–09 (Beach et al, 2009, p. xxi) and the pace of childcare expansion dropped below the average achieved in the first five years of the decade.

The Provincial Childcare Patchwork

The history of weak federal leadership has left a patchwork of childcare across the country that does little to meet the needs of young children and their working parents. As the table below shows, the majority of mothers of young children across the country participate in the labour force, albeit with significant variation. The three Maritime provinces and Quebec have the highest labour force participation rates for mothers of the youngest, and above average too for children 3–5 in Canada’s most populous province, Ontario. Nevertheless, full day kindergarten (part of the public school system) is available for five year olds only in three provinces while only Ontario offers part day kindergarten for all

four year olds who want it. The picture is worse with regard to access to regulated childcare spaces. No province provides enough spaces for all the children of working parents and six provinces, including the three richest ones (Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia) provide less than the Canadian average, with the prairie province of Saskatchewan well below average. The amounts invested per regulated childcare space vary substantially, and are especially low in Newfoundland, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick and oil-rich Alberta. In terms of auspice, CAP provided some incentive for non-profit provision and the effects are clearly reflected in the data for six of the provinces. Nevertheless, for-profit provision is very high in Newfoundland and New Brunswick, and over fifty percent in Alberta and Prince Edward Island.

The OECD report did, however, note “the effort made by several provinces post 1996 to maintain early childhood services from their own revenues” and singled out in particular the province of Quebec (2004, p. 5). While in the late 1990s, Ontario and Alberta (both under neo-liberal governments) actually cut expenditures on childcare, Manitoba not only maintained but also expanded its support for ECEC. Between 1996 and 2007, 75,000 new spaces were added while salaries and benefits increased by 15%. In addition to providing operating, start up and social inclusion grants only to non-profit providers, Manitoba is the only province to have imposed a maximum fee. In 2002, it adopted a five year plan that prioritised increased salaries, recruitment, and training incentives, so it was well placed to enter into a bilateral agreement with the federal government in 2005. In 2008 – after the Conservative government had withdrawn from the agreement – it announced its new five year agenda, which included the creation of 6,500 new spaces; the conversion of surplus school space to childcare; the development of an age appropriate ECEC curriculum; increased training and access to service for diverse cultural communities including francophone Manitobans, Aboriginals and

immigrants. It also announced its intention to increase wages and benefits for staff by 20%.

The stellar example, however, is Quebec, the francophone province that had remained outside the Canada Child Benefit, Early Childhood development and Multi-lateral Framework agreements. As the OECD report hopefully noted, Quebec’s experience “will be useful for Canada in developing a publicly managed, universal early childhood system” (OECD, 2004, p. 5). Quebec’s innovations began in 1997 with the adoption of its “\$5 a day” (now \$7) childcare policy. With this came a commitment to adding 200,000 spaces, which it has achieved and plans to add 20,000 more by 2010. As of 1998 all school boards were required to provide out-of-school hours care for kindergarten and elementary school children where there is sufficient demand. As a result of these developments, Quebec has spaces for 36% of all children aged 0–12.

The policy also included the development of an age-appropriate early learning curriculum, a substantial improvement in wages and benefits, investments in training and the requirement that 2/3 of the staff in centres have postsecondary certificates in early childhood education. The increase in required staff qualifications was accompanied by an innovative in-service program. While family childcare providers continue to provide the majority of spaces, quality improvement and other supports were to be provided by the non-profit “centres de la petite enfance” (CEPs), the cornerstone of the new system. The original plan was also to phase out for-profit providers, but a change in government – from the social democratic Parti Québécois to the Liberals – in 2003 enabled the for-profit sector to expand. In addition, the Liberal government weakened the position of the CEP’s in the system by removing them as the primary supports for family childcare. Instead, it created 165 new regional planning centres, although, the majority of these are run by CEPS (Beach, Friendly, Ferns, Prabhu, & Forer, 2009, p. 58). Finally, despite Quebec’s impressive efforts to expand

regulated childcare spaces, the majority of families have still to rely on other forms of care. In response to the resultant equity concerns, the Liberal government added a generous tax credit for those having to rely on (receipted) for-profit childcare outside the system.

In addition to ECEC specific measures, the Quebec government introduced a parental leave program that is substantially more generous than the federal government's.⁶ The new plan offered a higher replacement rate, inclusion of the self-employed, and the setting aside 5 weeks as "daddy leave." In 2005, under pressure from the "pro-family" party, the Action Démocratique du Québec (ADQ), a universal family allowance scheme was also adopted.⁷ The latter measure has not resulted in a drop in women's labour force participation rate as some feared, however. Quebec women's labour force participation has continued to rise – from 67% in 1995 to 80% in 2007 for those with children from 3–5, and from 61% to 74% for those with children 0–2 (Beach, Friendly, Ferns, Prabhu, & Forer, 2009, p. 199).

Current Issues and Initiatives

Although Quebec and Manitoba stand out for their efforts to establish a universal, high quality ECEC system, despite the federal Conservative government's termination of the important bilateral QUAD agreements and the consequent reduction of federal transfers earmarked for ECEC, ECEC-related issues remain on the agenda across the country. This section will focus on three sets of issues. The first pertains to the recruitment, improvement and retention of ECEC staff. The second highlights two concerns of particular import in Canada – minority language rights for francophones outside of Quebec⁸ and access to culturally-appropriate ECEC for Aboriginal children. The third goes to the heart of ECEC – the need to integrate early childhood education, thusfar largely the preserve of public kindergartens, and care, long considered a (residual) service for working parents.

One of the OECD's recommendations to Canada was the improvement of recruitment levels and strengthening of in-staff training. In the aftermath of the termination of the QUAD agreements, the provinces and other stakeholders also made clear to federal officials that the Conservative government's intended focus on space creation was meaningless in the absence of measures to attract, retain and strengthen ECEC staff. The government's own advisory committee also recognised that "the current shortage of qualified childcare staff in Canada could seriously hamper efforts to expand the supply of spaces" (2007, p.22). Low wages, limited benefits and lack of career development opportunities contributed to high turnover rates, while also making it difficult to attract people to the field. The following table shows that salaries for ECEs remained well below provincial averages. In Alberta, New Brunswick, Newfoundland, Saskatchewan and Nova Scotia, the salaries for certified early childhood educators remain below 60% of average wages for women in their respective provinces. Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia and Quebec also offer limited incentives for the acquisition of improved qualifications.

Most provinces have used a share of federal transfers to attract people to the field and to staunch the exit therefrom. Manitoba's progress on improving staff salaries is clear: ECE salaries in that province come closest to average salaries for women in that province (approximately 72%), though Quebec (69%) and Ontario (68%) come close. A number of provinces such as, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Ontario have on-going operating grants and quality improvement incentives designed to support wages and benefits. Thus for instance 75% of Nova Scotia's operating grant must be allocated to salaries and benefits, while its stabilisation grant requires at least 80% to be dedicated to salaries and up to 20% for benefits and professional development (Beach, Friendly, Ferns, Prabhu, & Forer, 2009, pp. 3-34). In Quebec, where there is province-wide bargaining for CEP staff,⁹ childcare workers and their

Table 2

Average annual wage rates by province and median annual salary levels for ECEC staff

	Average annual full time full year wage rates 2008	Average annual full time, full year wage rates for women 2008	Median annual salaries for centre-based full time full year ECEC assistants 2005	Median annual salaries for centre-based, full time full year certified ECEs 2005
Newfoundland and Labrador	\$43,368	\$34,632	\$15,884	\$18,608
Prince Edward Island	\$38,292.80	\$34,299.2	\$19,616	\$21,970
Nova Scotia	\$40,185.6	\$36,025.6	\$20,060	\$20,945
New Brunswick	\$40,185.6	\$34,507.2	\$17,429	\$17,942
Quebec	\$45,718.4	\$39,540.8	\$26,240	\$27,298
Ontario	\$51,001.6	\$42,806.4	\$27,199	\$29,298
Manitoba	\$44,345.6	\$38,272	\$21,126	\$27,420
Saskatchewan	\$47,028.8	\$39,374.4	\$19,193	\$22,022
Alberta	\$54,704	\$44,428.8	\$18,774	\$22,009
British Columbia	\$48,755.2	\$41,558.4	\$24,987	\$26,145

Note. Data on average annual wage rates calculated by multiplying the average hourly wage by 2080 hours (www4.statcan.ca/101/cst01/labr69k-eng-htm). Data on median salaries for ECEC staff taken from *Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada 2008* (2009).

unions have also successfully fought for pay equity (Beach, Friendly, Ferns, Prabhu, & Forer, 2009, p. 65). Since the late 1980s, Ontario has offered wage supplements and in 2007, it established the first College of Early Childhood Educators – clear recognition of their professional status. At the same time, Ontario made grants available to cover training and associated costs for staff in licensed childcare.

In provinces where the salary gap between ECEs and the average for women workers is especially high, governments have launched new initiatives. Thus Newfoundland offers a bursary of \$5000 for those who have recently graduated from recognised ECE programs and worked for two years in a regulated program (Beach, Friendly, Ferns, Prabhu, & Forer, 2009, p. 12). Recent initiatives in Alberta and British Columbia suggest the depth of the staffing crisis in these provinces. In Alberta, with an unemployment

rate of only 3.4% in 2008 and the lowest ECE salaries relative to average provincial salaries for women (49%), centres were clearly facing a challenge in attracting and keeping ECEs. In response the government offered the following:

- A 60% increase in wage top-ups for staff in licensed centres participating in the provincial accreditation program;
- A new wage supplement of \$144 a month for staff in licensed out-of-school care programs, linked to participation in the accreditation program;
- Expansion of eligibility for a childcare staff attraction incentive allowance worth \$2,500 after one year for those entering the profession and \$5,000 for those returning to the field who have at least six months experience, after two years of employment in

the field;

- A new \$2,500 scholarship for high school students completing the child care orientation course who have enrolled in a post-secondary early childhood program;
- A free childcare orientation course online for those living in rural areas.¹⁰

British Columbia also began to offer generous incentives for people to enter the profession and to attract ECEs back, to the field (Beach, Friendly, Ferns, Prabhu, & Forer, 2009).

Section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms obliges the provinces to offer minority official language speakers education in their first language (Beach, Friendly, Ferns, Prabhu, & Forer, 2009, p. xxx). In support of this, Heritage Canada transfers funds to the provinces. As noted above, there are substantial concentrations of francophones in parts of New Brunswick and Ontario, as well as small, but significant, minorities in Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia and Manitoba (Beach, Friendly, Ferns, Prabhu, & Forer, 2009, p. xxxi). For these communities, “the establishment of a range of francophone early childhood services as a way to promote linguistic, cultural and identity development during early childhood and to encourage enrolment in French schools constitutes the major goal...” (Beach, Friendly, Ferns, Prabhu, & Forer, 2009, p. xxxii).

New Brunswick has developed an ECEC curriculum for both language groups. Ontario, Nova Scotia, Manitoba and Saskatchewan offer four year old kindergarten for francophone students. Francophone school boards across the country are also playing an important role in supporting access to childcare in that language. For instance, the City of Toronto has contracted with the its francophone school boards to promote the expansion of French-language childcare programs, while the lone francophone school in St. John's, Newfoundland made provision for a childcare centre when planning the construction of the new school. Franco-Manitoban school board has taken a

particularly active role. Thus francophone schools are not only obliged to share resources with childcare centres but school principals are also required to sit on centre boards (Mahon, 2006, June, p.16).

The OECD report also drew attention to the “need to support and include Aboriginal children”, co-constructed with First Nations groups (2004, p. 10). This is an extremely important issue. The fertility rate for Aboriginal Canadians (2.6) is significantly higher than that of non-Aboriginal children (Senate, 2009, p.51). Not surprisingly, therefore, Aboriginal children account for a higher (9%) of the 0-4 population than non-Aboriginal Canadians (5%) and this is projected to rise by 28% by 2012, in contrast to 1% for the Canadian population (Senate, 2009, p. 51). While there are Aboriginal populations in all parts of Canada, Aboriginal children account for as much as 8.1% of British Columbia's 0-9 population and 9.2% of Alberta's, rising to 30.5% and 36% in Saskatchewan and Manitoba respectively.¹¹ Many, both on-reserve and in urban centres, live in poverty and come from educationally disadvantaged homes. And as the Senate report noted, “there are 257 First Nation communities without access to child care and many more communities do not have enough spaces to support even 20% of children from birth to six years of age” (2009, p. 54).

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1994-1996) helped to draw attention to the need for federal action to support Aboriginal children. The resulting First Nations, Inuit Child Care Initiative (1995) led to the creation of 462 sites across the country by 2006-2007 (Beach, Friendly, Ferns, Prabhu, & Forer, 2009, p. xxv). In 2002, the federal strategy on Early Childhood Development for First Nations and other Aboriginal Children led to the investment of \$350 million over five years in various early childhood development programs, including ECEC (Senate, 2009, p.52). Some provinces are also involved in funding on-reserve programs¹² and Ontario, Quebec, Manitoba, and British Columbia regulate on-reserve childcare programs (Senate, 2009, p.58).

The majority of Aboriginals no longer live on reserves, however (Beach, Friendly, Ferns, Prabhu, & Forer, 2009, p. xxiv). Many live in Canada's largest urban centres, especially the main cities in the western provinces. Some federal funding for off-reserve Aboriginals is available through the Aboriginal Head Start in Urban Areas program. In many provinces, municipal school boards play an important role. Thus for instance, Toronto's school board offers language instruction in Ojibway in three of its schools and also includes a First Nations school offering kindergarten to 4 and 5 year olds. Winnipeg has several elementary schools strongly oriented to Aboriginal education, as do Saskatoon and Calgary (Mahon, 2006, June).

A key barrier to ECEC provision for Aboriginal Canadians, however, is the legacy of the residential schools:

The legacy of residential schools when children were removed from their parents and placed in institutions haunts Aboriginal communities. The residential school policy was designed to assimilate Aboriginal children into mainstream culture by denying them access to their language, culture and values...Consequently even new group programs for children, particularly those operated or influenced by non-Aboriginals, are often viewed with suspicion. (Senate, 2009, pp.52-53)

There are, however, some innovative programs designed to change this. For example the Meadow Lake Tribal Council for Northern Saskatchewan developed a curriculum integrating Aboriginal language, cultural practices and child care goals with the School of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria. That program now is being used by fifty five First Nations communities (Senate, 2009, p.122). Quebec has agreements delegating some legal authority over childcare to the Inuit, Cree and Kanawake Mohawk communities (Beach, Friendly, Ferns, Prabhu, & Forer, 2009, p. 58). Manitoba's new five year agenda includes training to service "diverse cultural communities" including Aboriginals. British

Columbia has provided funds to the British Columbia Aboriginal Child Care Society to develop culturally focused training and resource programs (Beach, Friendly, Ferns, Prabhu, & Forer, 2009, p. 130).

Perhaps the OECD's most important overall recommendation was to "build bridges between care and kindergarten, with the aim of integrating ECEC both at the ground level and policy and management levels" (OECD, 2004, p. 5). At the top, ECEC is only managed by the Ministry of Education in Saskatchewan, although childcare for school-aged (including kindergarten) children in Quebec is also the responsibility of the Ministry of Education. There are, however, a number of initiatives designed to foster greater integration. Thus Prince Edward Island's "Bridges" project (2006) brings together the Ministries of Education and Social Services with the Early Childhood Development Association to collaborate in the development of seamless support in the areas of curriculum development, program delivery and parental engagement (Beach, Friendly, Ferns, Prabhu, & Forer, 2009, p. 23). As part of its ten year strategy, New Brunswick has launched four pilot projects whereby non-profit boards are to support "neighbourhood hubs" in local schools offering full and part time childcare, parent and child drop in centres, immunization, and toy and resource lending libraries.

The most encompassing plan for is currently on the agenda in Ontario. In 2005 the province launched its "Best Start" program, which aimed to provide out-of-hours childcare for junior and senior kindergarten students and, in the longer run, wrap-around childcare for children from 2.5 to four at no cost to parents, with schools as the preferred site. Forty seven Best Start networks and 4 regional French language Best Start Networks were created to lead the planning and implementation at the local level. In 2007 the Liberal government appointed a special advisor to look into how to implement the program. The resulting Pascal report (2009) called on the province to turn schools into hubs of an integrated care system,

offering full day kindergarten for 4 and 5 year olds provided by a team of certified teachers and EC educators; pre- and after school care for children 6–8; appropriate after school programs for children 9–12; and quality programs for children 0–4. In line with the OECD’s emphasis on avoiding the “schoolification” of care, it also emphasized the importance of a play-based curriculum. While the fiscal problems resulting from the economic crisis-induced haemorrhaging of manufacturing jobs and, more specifically, opposition from the elementary teachers union to incorporation of ECEs into the system, raise questions about the government’s willingness to fully implement the recommendations, there are grounds for cautious optimism (Radwanski, 2009).

Conclusions

Canada’s poor showing in the recent UNICEF benchmarking exercise can be attributed to its longstanding liberal-market orientation and the impediments to pan-Canadian reform imposed by federalism. Yet closer scrutiny reveals important initiatives. As we have seen, several provinces have taken important steps toward the creation of a universal, high quality ECEC system within their jurisdictions. Quebec has gone the farthest, but significant initiatives have been launched in other provinces, most notably Manitoba and Ontario. Nor is the issue dead at the federal scale. While true to its neo-liberal, social conservative ideology, the Conservative government remains deaf to the need for concerted federal engagement, the three opposition parties¹³ have united around a private member’s bill “to establish criteria and conditions in respect of funding for early learning and care”.¹⁴ In addition, a Liberal-dominated Senate committee recently released its report which recommended the following:

- That the Prime Minister appoint a Minister of State for Children and Youth with

responsibility to work with provincial and territorial governments to advance the quality of early learning, parenting programs and childcare, as well as research on early childhood development and learning;

- The appointment of a National Advisory Council on Children – “to include parliamentarians, other stakeholders, community leaders and parents, with appropriate representation from Aboriginal communities” in order to advise on how best to support parents and advance the quality of ECEC;
- The government of Canada should call a series of meetings of federal, provincial and territorial ministers responsible for ECEC to establish a pan-Canadian framework for policies and programs supporting children and their families and create a federal-provincial-territorial council of ECEC ministers annually “to review Canada’s progress with respect to other OECD countries and to share best practices in Canada”;
- That the two levels of government, together with researchers, create “an adequately funded, robust system of data collection, evaluation and research” to support the development of appropriate curricula, program evaluation and child outcome measures (Senate, 2009, pp. 7-8).

What does this tell us about the “dead weight” of institutional path dependency? In other words, is the achievement of a comprehensive, universally-accessible ECEC system possible in Canada, despite the liberal character of Canada’s social policy regime and despite the impediments created by federalism?

There are strong underlying pressures for change. Women’s labour force participation rates are high across the country, and not only among mothers of school-aged children. While parental leave insurance enables many parents (usually mothers, with the

partial exception of Quebec) to care for the very youngest children for as much as a year, non-parental care is needed by the majority of young Canadian children. As Beach et al note “of more than 70% of children with both parents or a single parent in the paid labour force, many or most were presumed to be in family childcare provided by an unregulated family childcare provider, an in-home caregiver or a relative for at least part of their parents’ working hours” (2009, p. xi). In addition, Canada’s fertility rate at 1.5 is substantially below replacement rate. Despite the fall in fertility, women’s rising labour force participation rates together with immigration, which remains relatively high, have helped to maintain the proportion working age adults in the population as a whole. In 2003, nearly two-thirds of the population was of working age, while the proportion of senior citizens (13%) remained lower than that of children under fifteen (18%) (OECD, 2005, p. 37, Table 2.2).

“Needs” do not, however, speak for themselves: they need to make it onto the political agenda. Through its carefully documented studies and online data base, the Childcare Resource and Research Unit (CRRU) has helped to keep the need for childcare visible. Jenson’s (2002, 2006) analysis of the Quebec case highlights the importance of a strong and influential women’s movement active in civil society, the governing party and the bureaucracy. This is echoed by Collier’s (2006) comparative analysis of childcare politics in Ontario and British Columbia. It also helps to explain the near-breakthrough at the federal scale in the 1980s (Mahon & Phillips, 2002; Mahon & Collier, 2009).

Yet political parties – or more importantly, their ideological orientation – play a critical role as it is they who form governments with the power to act. The advances made by Manitoba and Quebec can, in part, be attributed to the social democratic orientation of their governments – the New Democratic Party (NDP) in Manitoba and the Parti Québécois in Quebec. This explanation is consistent with the experience of British Columbia under previous social

democratic governments and in Ontario¹⁵ (McDonnell, 1992), but the case of Saskatchewan, which has had social democratic governments in office for the greater part of the last four decades, serves as a reminder that social democratic governments do not necessarily make ECEC a priority.

Ideas, which affect how an issue is framed and thus the potential for constructing supportive alliances, are also important. In the 1980s, feminist activists and researchers and their allies in the state made the link between universally accessible childcare and gender equality. Like gender equality, ECEC as human capital formation has the potential to reach beyond the left, tapping into the important strand of social liberalism, which has resonance within the Liberal party. Social liberals, from John Stuart Mill to the architects of Canada’s post-war social programs and more recently, Amartya Sen, accept a positive role for the state in providing all individuals equal opportunity to develop their capabilities (Mahon, 2008).

ECEC can be seen in this light. As the Pascal report noted, an integrated universal ECEC system is needed to “ensure all Ontario children have an even-handed opportunity to succeed in school, become lifelong learners and pursue their dreams” (2009, p. 2). Experts like Fraser Mustard have played an important role here, spreading the message that investment in early childhood, including universal ECEC, is important at the federal scale and across the country. In Quebec, child development experts also helped pave the way for Quebec’s breakthrough. As Jenson notes, experts like Camil Bouchard often provided “the glue that held all the parts together” (2002, p. 319). ECEC as a wise social investment also has resonance the business community. Thus, the Business Council of British Columbia commissioned a study of early childhood investment by Clyde Hertzman’s research group, the Human Learning Partnership. The report, *15 by 15: a comprehensive policy framework for early childhood investment in British Columbia*,¹⁶ made the case that “governments,

business, bankers and citizens have 10 times as much reason to worry about the early childhood vulnerability debt as we have reason to worry about the fiscal debt" (2009, p.1). While the emphasis here was on the "business case" for universal ECEC, gender equality was not forgotten. Thus the report argued that "society confronts a serious care gap, which requires a public policy response that equitably supports both mothers and fathers to care and earn" (2009, p.79). As a consequence it argued for the introduction of a "daddy quota" in parental leave and for the redefinition of full time work to 30-35 hours, giving both parents more time to care.¹⁷

In other words, even in "liberal" countries like Canada, there is room to frame the issue in such a way that new alliances of sufficient breadth to make a breakthrough can be constructed around the need for universal ECEC.

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¹ Various provinces had begun to implement mothers' allowances in the interwar period but it was not until the passage of CAP that the federal government recognized this right and began to cost-share social assistance with the provinces.

² The sixties in Canada as in many other Western countries was a decade marked by the ascendancy of the New Left and second wave feminism. It also witnessed the emergence of a social democratic party, the New Democratic Party, which was sufficiently strong by the early 1970s to push the minority Liberal government toward the centre-left. It was also in this era that the federal government began to provide core funding for groups, the National Action Committee on

the Status of Women (NAC), which became an important umbrella organization for Canada's feminist movement.

- ³ The study National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth, launched in the Department of Human Resources and Social Development in 1994.
- ⁴ The more conservative childcare association, the Canadian Child Care Federation, was a member of this alliance while the CCAAC continued to work with more critical groups like Campaign 2000, feminist organizations and the trade unions.
- ⁵ Telephone interview with Peter Nicholson, 20 August 2008.
- ⁶ While the federal government's has a replacement rate of 55%, at 75%, Quebec's is more like the Swedish system. In addition, 5 weeks are reserved for the father, a measure designed to make it truly shared parental leave. Finally, provision is made for the inclusion of the self-employed.
- ⁷ The original PQ plan had eliminated the old universal family allowance along with other child allowances that aimed to raise the birth rate. In their stead was a new family allowance targeted at low income families. Similar to the Canada Child Tax Benefit (but without the claw back) it was designed to supplement, the PQ's plan targeted low income families, both those on social assistance and those with low incomes. As it was employment neutral, however, it provided an activation incentive (Jenson, 2002, pp. 320-321).
- ⁸ Canada has two official languages, French and English. While the majority of francophones live in Quebec, there are important "islands" of French in other parts of Canada, especially New Brunswick, parts of Ontario and Manitoba.
- ⁹ Initially family childcare providers were unionized but the Liberal government declared them self-employed hence ineligible. This was recently overruled by the Quebec courts, opening the way again for unionization.

¹⁰ <http://alberta.ca/acn/200805/23490CED55609-98BC-B51C-511D68>

- ¹¹ Calculated from data provided in *Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada 2008* (2009). The share in the remaining provinces are 6.6% Newfoundland, 4.3% in Nova Scotia, 4.2% New Brunswick, 2.9% in Ontario, 2.6% in Quebec and 2.6% in Prince Edward Island.
- ¹² Newfoundland, Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Alberta, British Columbia and the three territories.
- ¹³ In addition to the official opposition, these include the social democratic New Democratic Party (NDP) and the Bloc Québécois, the Quebec-based independentist party that, like the Parti Québécois, is somewhat social democratic in orientation.
- ¹⁴ The NDP introduced Bill 303 in May 2006. With the support of the other opposition parties, the Bill made it to third reading before Parliament was prorogued for the November 2008 federal election. The Bill was reintroduced in April 2009 (Beach et al, 2009: xxvii).
- ¹⁵ From 1985-1987 the Liberals governed in Ontario with the support of the NDP, who made advances in childcare one of the conditions. When the NDP was also in office from 1990-1995 progress was also made toward expanding and improving childcare, though much of this was undone by the neo-liberal government that succeeded it.
- ¹⁶ 15 by 15 refers to the aim of reducing the share of preschool children regarded as 'developmentally vulnerable' from the current 29% to 15 by 2015, a commitment made in the British Columbia Liberal government's 2009 strategic plan.
- ¹⁷ It also included the controversial suggestion that in part, funding for such a system could come from some reduction in public health care coverage - but that is another debate.