



*This week feminists from across Canada are gathering at York University to reflect on the landmark Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada. It is hard to capture the excitement and the influence of the Commission's report but 45 years later how far has women's equity advanced? The Atkinson Centre's Policy Fellow, Kerry McCuaig presented on the Commission's attention to the role of women in the family.*

### **Is a national child care program past its due date? How the Royal Commission on the Status of Women nearly got it right**

The child care references in the 1970 Report of RCSWC read very much as they would in a contemporary document. The second principle of the Commission recognized the care of children as a social, as well as a private responsibility. Women need child care if they are to work or participate in higher education or civic life. Research shows that children benefit from group experiences and good quality programs contribute to their intellectual development, it states.

The child care challenges described are also eerily similar. Women are "unable to work because of the shortage of child care facilities". "Many women with small children find lack of satisfactory child-care arrangements a deterrent to further education". Child care is needed for respite care, and as a support upon the dissolution of marriage. Yet of the more than 1 million children identified as needing care, only 1 percent attends a daycare or nursery school. Instead working mothers turn to older siblings, relatives or neighbours, leaving too many children "in casual even hazardous care arrangements". Looking internationally Canada was a daycare laggard.

Of the services most urgently needed, the commission named homemaking and child care. Of the 167 recommendations in the report, six directly relate to child care. The recommendations have the distinction of being the sole asks for a new program requiring substantive new and ongoing public investments. The commission estimated the public costs at half a billion dollars -- more than federal parties are offering for child care in 2015 -- based on modest coverage to include only 10 percent of infants and 25 percent of preschoolers, greatly underestimating the burgeoning demand.

Through cost sharing agreements with the provinces and territories the commission proposed Ottawa pay 50 percent of the operating costs and 70 percent of capital. The role of each province and territory was to create a Child-Care Board responsible for the establishment and supervision of day-care centres. These would have the job of service planning, setting and enforcing standards, and providing pedagogical support. In other words the Commission saw not only a publicly-funded child care network, but a publicly managed and delivered one as well.

The Commission's vision is far from the service patchwork that exists today. After three failed attempts at a national child care agreement, the latest lasting only a year before its demise in 2007, child care in Canada now limps along without a federal partner. To their credit the provinces and territories have filled the gaps. Spending has doubled on early childhood education and care since the federal government's exit, reaching \$10.8-billion in 2014. Québec accounts for much of the investment, now spending at the same rate as the OECD average. For its \$4.2-billion Québec gets a sound return. An estimated 70,000 more mothers entered the labour market because of low cost child care, cutting income assistance dependence for single led families in half. Overall child poverty rates fell by 50 percent. Meanwhile mothers' earnings provided a \$5-billion boost to Québec's GDP

and generated \$1.5-billion in new taxes. When the tabulation was complete, Québec's child care program paid for itself (Fortin et al, 2012).

But the quest to meet the demand for child care has led to short cuts. A reliance on the private/community sector to create programs creates market competition along with service overlaps, gaps and failures. More money for child care coincides with the growing commercialization of child care. Family child care is seen as a fast and less expensive way to expand services. But few jurisdictions require family caregivers to hold early childhood qualifications, and home-based child care does not build a service infrastructure. When caregivers leave the business, not only the service but the public start-up and support costs leave as well. This was a danger the Commission warned against. Most critically, children do not appear to receive the same benefits from private care. One Québec study found little to no advantage in school readiness for children who attend private centres or family daycare homes compared to children attending publicly managed early childhood centres (*Institut de la statistique du Québec, 2013*).

More recently provinces and territories have looked to their education systems to expand early childhood opportunities. Full day kindergarten for 5 year olds is now the norm. Three provinces are including 4 year olds in publicly-funded kindergarten and most provinces offer some preschool programming at least for vulnerable children (Akbari & McCuaig, 2014).

The suggestion the commission considered to incorporate daycare into public education is becoming a small reality. Policy makers are opting for public education because it's easier to manage than the amorphous child care sector. On one hand early education in schools solves the problem of empty classrooms and a surplus of teachers who can be repurposed to teach younger children. For jurisdictions wanting to improve school outcomes, ministries can exert more control over programming in their schools than inside a family day home. In terms of achieving measurable outcomes schools can catch an entire cohort of children, while child care has difficulty getting the critical mass of children necessary to change population health outcomes.

Critics of education 'taking' children from child care complain that schools don't assist women's equity goals or parents' need for child care. In fact schools are taking on considerable care functions and when it comes to the working poor, are doing the heavy lifting. Where kindergarten is offered full time, mothers are in the workforce at that same rate as mothers with children in primary schooling, an indication that kindergarten is also providing care. Over 80 percent of low income parents don't work traditional, aka daycare, hours, meaning public investments in child care excludes them. Kindergarten -- as a universal, no fee program -- does. As one parent put it: "at least I can count on 5 1/2 hours sleep".

As "child care" becomes "early education" and marches into schools, is there a place for the federal government in an area so clearly under exclusive provincial jurisdiction? There is but it will take some creative thinking that we have yet to see from any of the parties to date.



## References

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*Kerry McCuaig is a Fellow in Early Childhood Policy at the Atkinson Centre, OISE/UofT.*