Kristen Harshman*

“Child Care in Canada – What is the Federal Role?”

* Kristen Harshman is a fourth year student at the University of Toronto. At present, she is studying to complete an honours Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science and Geography. Kristen is hoping to continue her studies in Political Science by pursuing a Masters Degree in Canadian Politics, with a particular focus on Federalism and Political Culture.

Introduction

Childhood is the most critical stage in our life cycle due to the enormous growth and development that takes place. Skills such as reading, writing and communication are developed, and one's emotional state is nurtured during the younger years of a child's life (Government of Canada, 1994). The well-being of children, which includes emotional health, cognitive development, scholastic achievements and physical health among other things, can be impacted in a negative manner by the care they receive in their early years. This means that it is critical that children are cared for in a positive environment especially from birth until age five (Upperman & Gauthier, 1998). Education programs as well as support and awareness are all of great value in the policy field of child care, especially for children whose parents do not have the support of a family network to depend on for child care or the finances to send their children to private care centres (Battle & Torjman, 2000). The federal government, in cooperation with the provinces, has a critical role to play to help develop and promote high quality child care for Canada's children through stable funding.

The purpose of this essay is to explore the appropriate role for the federal government of Canada in the social policy area of child care. In order to understand the current debate about child care, there will be a brief historical review of initiatives in this area in the past two decades, followed by a detailed outline of the appropriate role for the federal government in child care in Canada. In addition, subsequent sections will explore whether the proposed action is justifiable in constitutional and theoretical terms. Even with the traditional dominance of the provinces in child care policy, there is a vital role for Ottawa. There are a number of factors that may influence the federal government's role in a national child care strategy. These factors, which include the division of powers between the various levels of government as well as other influences such as the movement to a more neo-liberal government, are of great importance when formulating the most

appropriate role for Ottawa. Finally, this essay will explain how there can be a meaningful federal dimension to child care, even with various constraints. Certain actors, such as interest groups, communities and school boards, are vital allies for Ottawa in the quest to find an appropriate role for the federal government in child care.

History of Child Care in Canada

The need for child care is not a new phenomenon. For much of the twentieth century, parents have needed child care to enable them to go to work or to attend school. In the past, parents could rely on members of their extended families, who often lived in close proximity to them, to care for their children. However, as society became more mobile, child care support systems have disappeared and parents have had to rely on babysitters and live-in nannies. In more recent years, the increased participation of mothers in the work force has caused an increase in the demand for supplementary child care and a decrease in the availability of informal neighbourhood services. It is for this reason that Canada has reached a crisis point (Status of Women, 1986).

There have been many developments in the policy field of child care since the Second World War. For the purposes of this essay, however, only a brief synopsis of the developments since the 1980's will be presented. In the months prior to the national election of 1984, the federal Liberal government announced that the Task Force on Child Care would examine the need for child care services and parental leave, among other things. However, by the time the Liberal Task Force's report was completed, the federal Conservative government had been in power for two years and had established its own committee to study child care. The Liberal report emphasized a strong leadership role for the federal government in providing stable funding. It also stressed that provinces were to retain their jurisdiction and maintain a funding role. This report was shelved shortly after its 1986 release. In contrast, the Conservative report, *Sharing the Responsibility*, was widely criticized for not advocating the establishment of federal principles and standards in child care. This report also failed. In 1993, the Liberal's Red Book promised to expand “regulated child care dramatically,” which led in part to the creation of the Social Security Review (SSR), a process that was to identify how social programs could be re-organized. The SSR identified that child care was central to the nation's employment, learning and security. However, once again a report that advocated the importance of a strong and viable child care program in Canada was shelved (Cleveland & Krashinsky, 2001).

It seems that history repeats itself as time after time there is a broad consensus on the critical need for funding and program development in the policy field of child care, yet other issues become more pressing and force child care from the agenda. Nonetheless, even with the seeming inevitability of history, there is cautious optimism among

experts, especially since the First Ministers’ Meeting on Early Childhood Development in 2000 (White, 2002). The agreement suggests that a partnership between the federal government and the other levels of government is possible and that child care can be given the national attention that it merits (Canadian Intergovernmental Conference Secretariat, 2000).

The Vision for a Federal Dimension in Child Care

There is a great need for public policy to support the increasing needs that are being placed on the family. The Canadian Policy Research Network suggests the need for government policies to reflect an understanding of income requirements of families in Canada (1998). Furthermore, it is essential that flexibility be a key component of any strategy for child care in order to accommodate the changing nature of the family, specifically the movement away from the traditional nuclear family to more lone parent households (Government of Canada, 1994). There are two ways in which the federal government can take on a role in the policy field of child care, namely income support (e.g. tax cuts and incentives) and program development (e.g. day care centres, literacy initiatives). The latter will be the focus of this next section, as it provides the greatest opportunity for visible federal involvement with child care, while promoting collaboration with the provinces.

Program Development

The federal government of Canada should begin to invest funds for child care in those programs and institutions that will directly aid children. There should be a specific allocation of funds in a grant that is intended for and can only be used to establish and maintain child care services. This subsidy, through which the federal government would provide funding to the provinces, would be dedicated to child care only. In the social policy area of child care, there are four key streams where funding can be funnelled. The first area is early childhood development services, such as pre and post - natal nutrition, play groups, breakfast programs and cultural awareness. The second area includes aid for school aged children and includes initiatives such as after school programs for older children (White, 2002), as well as toy and book lending libraries, etc. (Battle & Trojan, 2000). The third area is support programs for parents. Such projects as family resource drop - in centers and parenting classes would be an important investment (Battle & Trojan, 2000). The fourth and final area where funding can be directed is in the training of child care workers. There should be standards set, not simply for the employees of publicly funded child care centers, but also for the buildings themselves. It has been found that “training and level of pay of teachers in early childhood centers are key determinants of quality”, so the Canadian government should ensure that working conditions, pay, training and quality of care meet and/ or exceed the determined standards (Mitchell, 2002).

Relationship Between Ottawa and The Provinces

Concerning the involvement of the provinces, it is suggested that the negotiating tactics endorsed by the federal government in the policy field of job training also be used in the area of child care. All provinces would be given the opportunity to negotiate either a co - management or devolution relationship with Ottawa (Bakvis, 2002). The first option of co - management would be encouraged since provinces that select this route of program development would also have federal employees available to them, whereas those who choose complete devolution would not. Also, all provinces, including those who selected a devolution option, would be required to produce a report that would be available to the public as to how and where funds were being spent in the area of child care. The only stipulation for a province to receive funding would be that the money must be spent on programs or actual services, not tax benefits. Furthermore, there would be standards set in place to act as guiding principles for the provinces to follow in developing and implementing effective strategies for child care. The principles would be based upon the values set out in the ‘First Ministers’ Meeting Communiqué on Early Childhood Development.’ Although Quebec did not endorse the agreement, the consensus among the other intergovernmental actors suggests that the values set out in the communiqué are widely supported across Canada. Promoting healthy pregnancy, birth & infancy, improving parenting & family supports, strengthening community supports and strengthening early childhood development, learning & care are four of the manifestations of the vision of Canadian leaders detailed in the communiqué (Canadian Intergovernmental Conference Secretariat, 2000).

There exists, then, a myriad of ways for the federal government to have a vital role in promoting early childhood development, good parenting skills and effective training of child care workers while maintaining good relations with the provinces and preserving visibility in an area of social policy where their funds are critical.

Justification for Federal Involvement

The position outlined above for the role of the federal government in the area of child care in Canada is appropriate for a number of reasons. It can be justified constitutionally, and also, most importantly on a theoretical basis.

Constitutional Justification

Child care is a provincial and territorial responsibility; however Ottawa can play a critical role in funding and in providing leadership (Government of Canada, 1994). The authority of the federal government to provide funds for programs in areas beyond its jurisdiction is the *federal spending power*, defined as the “power of parliament to make payments to people, institutions or provincial governments for purposes on which Parliament does not

necessarily have the power to legislate, for example in areas of exclusive provincial legislative jurisdiction (Watts, 1999).” It is thus through this power that Ottawa has been able to, and is justified to continue to, provide funding for social services that are largely the responsibility of the provinces. Despite the debate with regards to the federal spending power and its perceived lack of legitimacy, it is appropriate for Ottawa to allocate funds to the provinces for social policies, such as child care.

Theoretical Justification

Experts and government officials alike support the message derived from the slogan ‘the years before five last the rest of their lives.’ The meaning behind the saying is that childhood is the most critical stage of the life cycle, during which “foundations for lifelong competencies and skills” are established (Government of Canada, 1994). The message conveyed in this slogan is universal and should be the guiding value of program establishment and implementation in all provinces across Canada. It is necessary that a child in New Brunswick have available to them the same basic level of care available to a child in British Columbia. The establishment of national standards is essential for the well being of Canadian children and must be set in place. The provinces, with the exception of Quebec, have participated in discussions, such as the First Ministers’ Meeting on Early Childhood Development, to develop broad national principles that they can adhere to (Canadian Intergovernmental Conference Secretariat, 2000). While this is an important step in cooperation, it is also a step that presents the federal government with an opportunity to participate in the child care field by helping to create an effective national child care strategy that must be implemented in practical ways in every province and territory.

It is during the early years of children's lives that they develop their cognitive and language skills, which are essential to learning how to read and write. Furthermore, with emotional security, encouragement and stimulation, children are able to develop social skills and hand - eye coordination. Research indicates that “there are optimal times for children to develop certain skills and that later remedial efforts may not adequately compensate for missed opportunities at these critical times” (Government of Canada, 1994). The theory that advocates program development for children is also significant, as it advocates the long term benefits for society. By promoting early childhood development, the government of Canada shapes the future of the country. More specifically, if children grow to become healthy, intelligent and socialized individuals, they will enter the labour market with greater ease, rely less on financial assistance from the government and be less of a burden on the health care system etc. Furthermore, due to the complex and costly nature of the crisis in child care, only Ottawa can provide adequate funding for provinces, so it is also appropriate for the

federal government of Canada to be involved in the area of child care. The crisis continues to deepen, as child poverty rates, though improving, are still high in Canada (Upperman & Gauthier, 1998), and governments are discovering that children are not meeting standards when they reach full time school due to the lack of strategy and vision for childhood development (National Liberal Caucus, 2002). Child care is thus an issue of national concern. From coast to coast children need to have quality care services available to them that promote development and learning. Therefore, based on the theoretical philosophy that investing in children is an investment in a prosperous and sustainable future, it is highly appropriate for the federal government to take a role in the area of child care in Canada.

Constraints on Federal Involvement

There are forces in existence that may hinder or somehow affect the involvement of the federal government in the social policy area of child care. They include the division of powers between the federal and provincial governments as well as the neo - liberal mentality that has been prominent in Canada since the 1990's.

Division of Power

Child care, as mentioned earlier, is a substantive provincial responsibility, though the federal government does have a large role to play with regards to funding (White, 2002). Despite the necessary role of the federal government in this policy field, Ottawa should be aware of the fact that the provinces will most likely not agree to funding with guidelines or ‘strings’ (CBC, 2003). Furthermore, the provinces will not likely want to be accountable to the federal government for programs in a policy area that is not within federal jurisdiction. However, in the vision for federal involvement put forth in this paper, accountability is not forgotten as provinces would be accountable to their constituents. The federal government would then outline key objectives for the provinces to include in their program development, but regarding the effectiveness of the implementation, the provinces would publicly report to their constituents. Provincial governments would then be required to set up volunteer committees, comprised of voters, which would take on the role of ensuring that their province was receiving the best possible care using the available funds. The fact that child care is a provincial responsibility for the most part should not deter the federal government from providing its vision for early childhood development for Canada as well as its financial support, because without both, as Linda White outlines, a child care strategy is not feasible due to budget constraints of the provinces (2002).

Neo - liberalism

Beginning in 1994, due to the concern about Ottawa's finances, especially the debt and deficit problem, there was

a movement to reduce spending, by downsizing public services and downloading the costs of government programs to the next level. These developments meant that child care, which was to be an important part of the Liberal platform in 1993, was pushed aside due to what were viewed then as more pressing difficulties (Cleveland & Krashinsky, 2001). Although recently there have been federal surpluses both in 1997 - 98 and 2000-01 (Government of Canada, 2001), many groups such as the Certified General Accountants Association have called for broad based tax relief (CGA). The call for tax relief could be detrimental for child care in Canada. However, it is the choice of the federal government whether or not Canada wants to invest in its children or lower taxes. The view proposed in this essay strongly endorses an investment in childhood development and care, which is in great need of funding and will be beneficial for Canada's immediate and long term future.

Non-Governmental Actors: A Useful Aid

In order for the role of the federal government to be most effective, Ottawa must rely on the knowledge, expertise, influence and support of outside actors. Parents, municipalities, employers, trade unions, schools, child care providers, voluntary groups, communities and children's advocates and experts are all actors. They are all actors that, with cooperation, could bring about effective, broad - based change in Canada. In fact, in order for change to take place in the realm of child care, actors other than the federal government must play a role. “Strong family policy is a complex undertaking that requires shared objectives and principles as well as coordinated activity on the part of a variety of stakeholders” (Battle & Torjman, 2000). This suggests that campaigns to encourage childhood learning or to advertise parental help groups are jobs that can be shared among the various actors. Another value of the various groups listed above is that they will help inform the federal government as to where the most pressing needs are and how various programs help or hinder the child care agenda. For example, if the federal government were to allocate a sum of money for the creation of day care spaces across the country, a daycare advocate would be able to describe exactly how many spaces would be created and what the impact would be on the child care employees (CBC, 2003). Therefore, in creating an effective child care strategy for Canadian children, non - governmental actors are a valuable resource. In addition, Canadians themselves can also be of great use to the federal government by expressing what policy area they believe is in the greatest need of investment. A 1998 poll indicates that 88 percent of Canadians supported more government funding for a child care program (Cleveland & Krashinsky, 2001). Thus the Canadian public can help the federal government to determine what should be on the agenda and why. Non - governmental actors should not be discounted or ignored as their impact on the child care agenda is significant and

necessary, especially in the coming years when changes may begin taking place.

Conclusion

There is a necessary and urgent role for the federal government of Canada to fill in the area of child care. In a time of change within the family unit, specifically with more mothers becoming employed in the labour market and the increase in lone parent households, the government should help to offset the often exorbitant costs of child care. The federal government should provide financial assistance to the provinces for the creation of early childhood development programs and parental support centres. As suggested in this paper, Ottawa, in promoting the creation of support programs in child care, can arrange with each individual province the relationship most appropriate for its provincial needs. This means that amicable relationships can develop between Ottawa and the provinces, thus eliminating disputes and tensions. Furthermore, Ottawa can maintain a clear, visible role in this policy area. In the next year or two the federal government will be given the opportunity to implement the ideas of the First Ministers' Meeting Communiqué on Early Childhood Development as well as the report released by the Liberal caucus *A National Child Care Strategy : Getting the Architecture Right Now*. The response of the Canadian government will determine not simply the future of child care, but the future of Canada's children. ■

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