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The Struggle for Child Care: One Advocate's Story

I can only begin this story where it began for me. A full generation has passed since we initiated our struggle for what seemed like such a simple and reasonable demand — a universal, publicly funded, high quality, non profit child care system. And now my son, who first got me involved in child care, is 30 years old and about to be a father himself.

Thirty years later, the quick and easy assessment is that we have failed in our goal. The harsh reality is that in spite of our efforts, our grandchildren are no more entitled to quality early care and learning (yes — for me it all starts with care) than their parents were and their mothers still have no more right to supports while they work or study than we did.

As other articles in this issue highlight in more detail and with more rigor, federal promises for action on child care have been repeatedly broken. Today, Canada ranks last on a range of international comparisons of developed countries' records on early care and learning. And even these ratings are overstated because they include Québec — the only place where politicians made a commitment to build a system and stuck with it.

But my mother, who began campaigning for universal kindergarten in public schools almost 70 years ago, hates it when I say

that we have “failed”. She patiently reminds me that “we have worked so hard”, “we have made progress” and that “real change takes time”.

The fact that I am writing this article today indicates that I agree with her. For me, the more accurate assessment of our story is that we haven’t won a child care system yet — but on our journey we have achieved some remarkable successes.

The struggle

We certainly have worked hard. We knew from our roots in the women’s movement that our demand for women’s equality in the economic, social and political life of our communities was inextricably linked with our demand for child care. But as mothers of young children entered the labour force in unprecedented numbers and we were still without a child care system, we realized the need to broaden the base and case for child care. So we began to amass the evidence and break down the barriers.

A significant step came in 1998 when the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada initiated the first cost-benefit analysis of a universal child care system in Canada — *The benefits and costs of good child care: The economic rationale for public investment in young children — A policy study*.

At the time, moving our argument into the economic realm was not an easy step to take. Many of us resisted thinking of our commitment to women and children in the business language of “investments”. And there was no guarantee that traditional economic approaches would capture the true value of child care. But this seminal work by Gordon Cleveland and Michael Krashinsky successfully began to make the economic case for those who were not convinced by the “softer”, “social” benefits.

Our struggle for universal child care also attracted the attention of epidemiologists and brain scientists. And, with all due respect to their work and expertise, their studies confirmed what mothers have always known — the first few years of life matter. Good experiences in the first years set the path for healthy development but poor care does harm.

We framed and reframed child care as a child development issue, a family policy issue, a poverty reduction strategy, a labour force attachment issue and a community building tool. We changed our language from daycare to child care to early learn-

ing and care. We worked to get business on our side. We reached out to all political parties. We looked for unlikely allies. And at each step along the way we integrated the latest evidence into our arguments and into the concrete solutions we offered for how a system could and would work. In fact, we designed the system, laid out an implementation plan, and developed a budget, even though no one had committed to building the system we need.

Over the decades, we built our collective capacity to confidently answer these key questions: Do Canadian families need child care? YES. Does the current approach work? NO. Is good quality care good for children? YES. Is public spending on child care a good investment? YES. Will the market take care of child care? NO. Is building a system that works affordable and doable? YES.

As Stephen Lewis so eloquently put it,

I've never seen an issue so extraordinarily well-documented. The materials are superb, every single aspect of this issue, of this objective, of this remarkable cause, has been analyzed and documented and thought about and written about *ad infinitum*. It's almost supernatural, the amount of contemplative and intellectual and emotional energy that has gone into the formulation of responses.¹

So we are proud, as we have a right to be, of our hard work.

Making progress

And my mother is also right when she says we have made progress. In 2005 the federal government entered into historic agreements with provinces and territories to fund the first building blocks of a child care system. Even though this initiative did not last long enough to make a real difference, today an overwhelming majority of Canadians still agree with the need for government action on child care. In a poll conducted during the 2008 federal election, 85% of people in BC, my home province, agree that the lack of affordable child care is a serious issue and 90% believe government has an important role to play in helping families meet their child care needs.²

While I know that opinion polls have their weaknesses, by any standard these numbers reflect a sea change in public attitude over the last 30 years. You would think that any politician would want to jump on the bandwagon and deliver.

OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

But for me, an even more important measure of our progress is the degree to which action on child care is supported across diverse sectors and is seen as an important part of the solution to a growing range of social justice and equity issues. Look at what the December 2008 issue of *Paediatric Child Health* had to say:

All children have the potential to thrive in and benefit from quality early childhood care and education. And all children in care settings have the right to the advantages of a nurturing and stimulating environment. It is not enough to simply 'look after' children while parents are away. Child care now goes hand-in-hand with opportunities for early learning, which helps children maximize their developmental potential...The Canadian Paediatric Society (CPS) believes that the only way to achieve sustained improvement is through a national strategy on early childhood education and care.³

We couldn't have said it better ourselves.

Spend some time on the websites of the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada or the Child Care Resource and Referral Unit and you will find articles about child care and women's equality, poverty reduction, crime prevention, economic growth, health care, unionization, Aboriginal self governance, literacy and educational achievement — just to name a few. From the former Edmonton Police Chief Doug McNally, to creative city theorist Richard Florida, to former Bank of Canada Governor David Dodge, to new U.S. President Barack Obama — almost everyone “gets it”. Now, that's progress.

Over the long haul...

And — yes, my mother is also right when she says that real change takes time. This wisdom has helped me understand that the change we seek is not simple at all. Rather, it is profound.

Our struggle for a universal, publicly funded, community-owned child care system directly challenges the dominant political ideology of the last 30 years — an ideology that says government is the problem and tax cuts the solution; the marketplace is the measure of true value; and individual pursuit of wealth is the highest goal. In this context, our message--that we are collectively responsible for the care of our children and that

our democratic structures, as imperfect as they may be, are the way to deliver on that responsibility — was and is radical.

I remember in the early 1990's being regularly asked what role business should play in meeting the child care needs of their workforce. My answer — “Why, they should pay their taxes” — always got a good laugh. The proposition that taxes are best way to pay for some things was so outside the way in which the debate was framed that no one even took it seriously.

The very models that we use as examples of strong, publicly funded universal systems — health care and education — are under attack. The attacks come from those who have spent years undermining our confidence in these systems and then use this as an excuse to reduce public spending in order to open the door to the privatization and commodification of our own ability to take care of each other.

If swimming upstream against this ideological tide isn't enough, there is also the cost of introducing and building a new social program to consider. When the economy is bad and debt and deficit reduction the mantra of the day, it is next to impossible to get reluctant politicians and the Canadian public who have never experienced a quality child care system to make building a national system a priority.

Interestingly, during difficult times, Québec took a very different approach and introduced a comprehensive family policy — including the famous \$5- (now \$7-) a-day daycare. Québec moved quickly to make affordable child care available to thousands of families. It wasn't and still isn't perfect, but when a subsequent provincial government tried to eliminate the program, thousands of families were in the streets because they understood what they had to lose.

Yet all too predictably (and often successfully), politicians continue to trot out the old technique of patting us in the head while complaining about the difficult economic times that make it easy to praise the idea of child care while explaining “we just can't afford it right now.”

Then, for much of the last decade, two things happened that brought the debate into sharper focus.

First, Canada and most provinces experienced tremendous economic growth and years of surpluses. As Jenny(s)-on-the-spot, we child care advocates had been waiting for the window of

opportunity that presented itself and took advantage of the economic growth to demonstrate that Canada (in my case BC) already had the funds required to build a child care system without raising taxes. But even in good economic times Canada didn't put the foundations of a quality child care system in place.

Then the world economy collapsed. All of a sudden the marketplace didn't look so perfect and people across the political

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spectrum remembered that when the chips are down the only things we can really count on are the democratic, public institutions that we collectively build. Public spending is back in vogue. Deficits are okay and invest-

ing in infrastructure to create jobs is at the top of the agenda.

As with other infrastructure projects, investment in child care creates jobs — many of which will go to women. Public spending to reduce the cost of child care will help families meet other pressing needs. And, during difficult times, child care makes it possible for parents to work, train, or retrain.

Child care also has additional benefits when compared to other infrastructure investments. Most importantly, it supports children while they become healthy, happy, active participants in our communities. In dollars and cents, this translates into reduced long-term demands on education, health, policing, and courts. In human terms, it translates into stronger, healthier families and communities.

It seemed to me that if surpluses and good economic times didn't move child care forward, perhaps this new understanding would. But once again public investment in child care still isn't making government's priority list.

A decade of lessons learned

So what have we learned from the last decade? First, it's clear that it's not *really* about the money. At the peak of good economic times, the current federal government cancelled the first step that had been taken towards system-building and replaced it with individual payments to families—which cost us more than the amount that had been committed to building a child care system.

It appears that the change we seek is even more complex and profound than reframing the role of government in a failed market — as big a task as that is. And after decades of demonstrating the need for a universal child care system, amassing the evidence and providing the solutions, my only answer to “why not?” takes me back to where we started.

It's about *women*! Not only about women's right to participate in the labour force — as key as that is — but about something even bigger. Our struggle for universal, publicly funded child care challenges some pretty deeply held values about the nature of caring — the traditional sphere of women's work, at home and in the economy.

While only a few social conservative still explicitly say women should go back home, scratch the surface of any “child care” discussion and you find patriarchal values. Values that don't fundamentally respect women's work of “caring” as essential to the health and wellbeing of individuals, families and communities. Values that still see caring as a private matter — not something that belongs in the public, collective sphere. As a result, we as a society still don't let young mothers feel proud when they give their children the opportunity to participate in great child care programs. And we still don't let early childhood educators feel proud about the value of their work.

Changing these values is real indeed and, as my mother says, it takes time.

Interestingly, this realization makes me more, rather than less, optimistic. First, it reassures me that if it was only a matter of the perfect letter (or the most convincing study or the most creative slogan), we would have the system already. And it makes me appreciate the successes we have achieved so far.

Most importantly, it makes me reflect on our movement's incredible capacity to advance our agenda in ways that reflect the very values and culture of the system we “fight” for. While we are clearly able to hold our own in male-dominated environments, we are grounded in and proud of our women's ways of knowing and being.

Our leadership is collective — not individual. It honours the unique contribution each of us brings to the table. Formal titles aren't important. In fact, they get in the way and attempts at hierarchies or majority rule go nowhere.

OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

Don't get me wrong. We certainly don't always agree and we have very different personal and regional approaches to the work. Like all other women's organizations we suffer from a lack of adequate resources. But at the core our movement is about caring and relationships. We laugh together; we cry together. For us these are strengths, not weaknesses. We feed each other, house each other, and celebrate and mourn our children's achievements and tragedies together.

In short — we are a movement that takes care of each other. Much like the child care system we seek, we are a movement where our minds, hearts and souls matter; a movement where what we learn from our sons, our daughters and our mothers is important and a movement whose value of sharing can and will change the world.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Stephen Lewis. Speaking notes from Child Care for a Change! Conference. Winnipeg MB. 2004. (<http://www.ccsd.ca/subsites/childcare/lewis.pdf>)

² Attitudes Toward Child Care: Environics Research Group, October 2008. (http://www.buildchildcare.ca/updir/buildchildcare/EnvironicsReport_Attitudes_toward_child_care.pdf.) Retrieved October 14, 2008.

³ Danielle Grenier and Denis Leduc. "Let's put a national child care strategy back on the agenda." Paediatric Child Health. December 2008. (<http://www.cps.ca/English/advocacy/Grenier.htm>.)