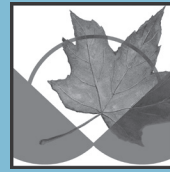


Election 2016 UNSPUN



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Childcare and the Manitoba Election

Childcare is a surprisingly important election issue. It figured prominently in the 2015 federal election, and is playing a role in the 2016 Manitoba provincial election. Why does childcare warrant such political and public attention? The answer lies with demographics, care deficits, federal cutbacks and most importantly political choices.

The demographics are unmistakable: in greater numbers than ever before, Canadian mothers are in the labour force. Nationally, between 70 - 82 percent of mothers are employed. Well over 3 million Canadian children aged 0-12 have a working mother (it is worth noting that many of these children also have a 'working father' – but Canada does not collect data on employed fathers.)

Despite the staggering numbers, Canada faces a care deficit. There are only 1.2 million licensed childcare spaces across the country. Manitoba also has a care deficit. In Manitoba, at least 111,000 children have a working mother, although there are just 33,500 licensed provincial spaces. There is a childcare space for just 22.9 percent of Manitoba children aged 0-5 years (lower than the national average of 24.1 percent).

Federal cutbacks have been severe. In 2005, the first act of the newly elected government of Stephen Harper was to cancel the child-

care agreements Ottawa had signed with the provinces. Manitoba was to receive \$233.6 million over the five-year term of the agreement - \$54.8 million in 2009-2010 alone. If the Conservatives had honoured and renewed the agreements, Manitoba would have had tens of millions of new dollars in 2016 to spend on childcare. More than a decade ago, a full 33 percent of the childcare budget came from federal dollars, a sign of how important Ottawa's decisions are to Manitoba's childcare system.

Political Choices

Justin Trudeau campaigned on a platform that included increased childcare spending. Despite a promise to begin within 100 days of being elected, the first Liberal budget postponed any new childcare spending to 2016-2017. Childcare advocates pointed out that in deferring urgently needed funds for childcare, the Trudeau government missed an excellent opportunity to advance women's equality, reduce poverty and support working families. There are no indications how much of the promised billions in infrastructure spending will be transferred to the provinces for childcare. But Manitoba should insist on no less than we would have received under the old plan – at least \$70.2 million in 2017, just to keep pace with inflation.

Since their election in 1999, the NDP has overseen improvements in the childcare system. The number of childcare spaces in Manitoba

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grew slowly but steadily. Nevertheless, demand vastly outstrips supply and a care deficit remains. The central registry lists more than 12,000 children who are waiting for care. While the province's innovative 'flat fee' structure means the maximum fee is lower in Manitoba than anywhere in Canada outside Québec, costs remain a barrier for many parents. Early childhood educators earn painfully low wages.

Manitoba struggled to expand childcare services and increase childcare quality for a decade without a supportive federal partner. In 2014, Premier Greg Selinger declared his support for 'universally accessible childcare.' One year later, Family Services Minister Kerri Irvin-Ross struck an Early Learning and Child Care Commission. The Commission's report, released in early 2016 (available at https://www.gov.mb.ca/fs/childcare/childcare_news/pubs/final_report.pdf), provides a clear-eyed diagnosis of current troubles and an ambitious and achievable prescription for improvements.

The upcoming provincial election puts the Childcare Commission's recommendations at risk. While the NDP has endorsed the Commission and committed to implementing its recommendations - including the creation of 12,000 new childcare spaces - other parties have not. The Liberals have promised to invest an additional \$30 million in childcare, to raising fees and revising the fee structure, and to improving the salaries of early childhood educators. The Green Party is on record as supporting a publicly-funded, affordable and high quality childcare program but does not mention childcare in its election website. The Progressive Conservatives were the last to release their platform, which prioritizes family home childcare expansion. Their focus on family home operators is puzzling, since the sector provides less than 10 percent of the province's total spaces, and turnover is very high. Moreover, the PCs have proposed just \$3.5 million new dollars, and their plan for family homes would cost more than that, leaving no funds for licensed centres or ECE wages. The Manitoba Child Care Association

organized an election forum on March 17, with representatives from the NDP, Liberals and Conservatives - their presentations on childcare policy, including a lively Q&A, is available for viewing at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ORr05Gxoqpw&feature=you.tube>

What do concerned voters need to know? The demographic facts are not reversible: Manitoban women, like all Canadian women, are in the labour force and there's no turning back. Therefore, public policy must modernize. The federal government must support provinces to build quality affordable childcare services - this will help to undo the damage caused by Conservative cutbacks over the past decade. Childcare is primarily, however, a provincial responsibility.

Fixing the provincial childcare deficit is a political choice. It requires that the next Manitoba government build thousands of stable new childcare spaces, while ensuring that quality is high, that services are affordable, and that early childhood educators earn fair wages.

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Further reading: Provincial Election 2015: Child Care Promises at a Glance - compiled by the Manitoba Child Care Association at <http://mccahouse.org/party-pledges-for-child-care-provincial-election-2016/>

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UNSPUN is the 2016 provincial election commentary from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives Manitoba

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