

2013 – MHF Comment – Economy – Universal Day Care and Early Learning

The Canadian government should (finally!) implement, in cooperation with participating provinces, a national day care and early learning program. We were so close in 2006, thanks in large measure to the efforts of Ken Dryden – but when the NDP helped bring the government down, we lost it all. This is not just a social issue, but one of fundamental importance to our collective economic prosperity, and the notion of equality of opportunity.

I have three kids, born during my university and law school years. I have lived the daycare dilemma. In 2006, Stephen Harper's "offer" to Canadian families of money so that they could "choose" what they wanted to do with their kids, offended all those who cannot make do without affordable day care. Money does not provide "choice" if there are no daycare spaces – it only gives more money to those who can already afford to have one parent stay home, or those lucky enough to have other help, such as grandparents. That's NOT most Canadians. But it's not just the money, either – even if there are spaces available, \$4 a day does not provide day care.

Let's be honest--most people don't get to choose whether they need to work, and too many children live in pretty tough circumstances. We can help those families, which is why I believe in minimum Canadian standards, to provide all Canadian children with access to a minimum level of care, where needed.

It's not just a 'social' question – it's economic. For someone to get out and work, to provide for his or her family, means that, instead of being a drain, they can contribute – to their own prosperity, that of their families, their communities – and they pay tax. At the same time as too many Canadian businesses are in desperate need of more skilled workers, why on earth do we make it hard for so many well-educated and capable Canadians to fill that gap – simply because they can't find a safe, educational place for their kids?

Even more, I believe that we should provide a minimum standard of early learning, a minimum level of opportunity to start off their lives with. Everyone seemed to agree decades ago that we needed to provide school for young children—and somehow we decided that it should start at five or six years old. But that was an arbitrary age—and our world, with more and more parents of younger children working, has changed. In 2005 and 2006 the then-Liberal government, with the work of Ken Dryden and his provincial counterparts, showed that the federal and provincial governments can agree on this.

We need to find that level of cooperation again. To me, a fundamental Canadian value is that Canadians, wherever they live, should have a minimum level of equal opportunity in this life—and that starts with the children.