

Web-exclusive comment

In child care, 'the greatest choice for the greatest number'

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Last month, I appeared as a "witness" at the parliamentary committee reviewing Bill C-303. "Combatant" would be a more accurate term, as these committees often resemble full-blown contact sports, especially when it comes to emotionally wrought subjects such as child care.

This New Democratic private member's bill is another attempt to impose a government overlay on family child-care decisions by forcing any future federal money going to the provinces to be used only for state-regulated care. The whole exercise could be for naught — it could die a quick death if an election were to be called, or a slow painful one if federal money is never funnelled into it. Those who still believe in universal daycare, however, insist that the bill's greatest strength is to keep the daycare debate going. So be it.

That it is one of the most illiberal bills ever proposed in Canada is enough reason to hope for its early demise. With brown being the new black, liberalism appears to be the new conservatism when it comes to the lives of working mothers.

A recent article on super-mothers in Britain — CEO moms — found that these women could not pull it off without serious domestic help. On average, they paid 2-1/2 women to perform the domestic chores they had no time to do.

What is not as well appreciated is that domestic help is just as much a necessity for mothers working in lowly paid jobs as it is for the corporate mom. Research and experience show that without it, many of these mothers simply choose not to be in the work force, even with the offer of fully subsidized daycare.

Since the 1996 U.S. introduction of the euphemistically titled "welfare reform program," there has been a decidedly mixed level of success for single mothers. While analysis is still being teased out on why some benefited and others didn't, a report called "The Effect of Work and Welfare on Living Conditions in Single Parent Households" by the population division of the U.S. Census Bureau sheds some light.

In classic academic understatement, it notes: "That single mothers in the work force may have lower material well-being despite higher income is a potentially interesting finding." Even controlling for the cost of daycare, the report suggests several reasons why this may be so, not the least of which is "loss of time to take care of household needs." Many poor women realize that this loss of time — the kind CEO moms can buy — is simply too high a price to pay. Their best option is to remain on income support.

Canadian universal-daycare advocates routinely point out that our experience can't compare to that of Americans. But when it comes to the hardships many parents face, similarities prevail.

Such is the lack of "daycare uptake" by poor mothers that in 2004, British Columbia's child-care advisory council actually lamented that "families are not applying for subsidies." And, while the Toronto Children's Services website shows waiting lists, it also reports numerous vacancies for subsidized spots in all wards. Furthermore, the amount of children whose parents have applied for these spaces is but a fraction of those living below the poverty line in Toronto.

One would think that if parents saw the offer of heavily subsidized daycare as the poverty-alleviating solution it is purported to be, Canada's poor mothers would be beating a path to its door. Clearly, they are not. Each parent is so unique in their life circumstances that although daycare may be a solution for one, it may be the defeat of another. That parents are in the best position to determine this should be the basis for all child-care policy in this country and should be a guaranteed right for all parents. To not do so is tantamount to promoting a monoculture.

Indeed, it was truly liberal U.S. feminists such as Anna Quindlen and Barbara Ehrenreich who saw their country's "welfare reform" for what it really was — workfare — and correctly predicted that many lives would be the worse for it.

While Canada's daycare policies are not yet workfare, poor mothers do receive a massive and disproportionate amount of state benefits only if they fit themselves and their children into the market economy. Toronto will pay the full \$18,000 daycare fee if a mother goes out and earns the same. Will it pay \$36,000 if she has two children? If we follow Sweden's lead, it will. It was reported that a mother in that country along with her truck-driver husband requested a small subsidy to lift them above the poverty line while they looked after their own children. City officials said no, offering two \$20,000-a-year daycare spots instead.

Returning to the committee proceedings, irony abounded. The sight of two eloquent witnesses, a Christian minister from Ontario and a home-schooling mother of five from Alberta, arguing for diversity, choice and inclusiveness while never once criticizing daycare or a family's right to choose it was something to behold, especially when compared to the intransigence of the federal parties still supporting this bill.

Perhaps we need a 21st century update of a classic liberal doctrine. "The greatest choice for the greatest number" should be our country's new mantra. Family policy would be a wonderful place to start.

Kate Tennier was an organizer for the "Fund the child (not the system)" rallies that took place in 17 cities across Canada on Nov. 19, 2005.

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