

## NATIONAL POST

### **A day care plan that deserves to die**

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The Liberal party's new leader, Stéphane Dion, believes "We need child-care facilities to provide ... parents with real choice." As Mr. Dion sees it, his party's top-down \$5-billion childcare plan is a matter of both "social justice" and "sound economics." It is one of the ways the new Liberal leader is seeking to distinguish himself from Stephen Harper, who Mr. Dion said on Friday "thinks child care is delivered through the mailbox."

Yet polls consistently show that Canadian families do not want what Mr. Dion and his party are promising. The Institute of Marriage and Family Canada commissioned one such poll in spring 2005. The results were overwhelming: 80% of Canadians prefer a parent stay home with the children.

These results echo an earlier survey conducted by the Vanier Institute in 2003, which showed that parents' first choice for child care is a spouse, then parents, then extended family, then home-based child care and only then, institutional child care.

Why the Liberal push, then, for a national plan? Internationally, the impetus comes from the Paris-based Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which bemoans the lack of "regulated" care in Canada. A 2004 report, written in part by Toronto-based childcare advocate Martha Friendly, ranked Canada's child care access as "low" and made the call for "significant energies and funding ... to be invested in the field to create a universal system." The same report states: "In several countries, a majority of under-threes are in unregulated family daycare for at least part of the day."

By "unregulated family daycare," the report's authors are referring to what others quaintly call "family members." This choice of terminology reflects the unconscious bias of those seeking to force state-run daycare down our throats: They see the state as being better at raising children than a child's own flesh and blood.

In fact, centre-based care can pose risks for children. The U.S.-based NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, the largest, most expensive childcare study ever undertaken, is examining the long-term effects of all types of child care on kids. The researchers have found that high quality non-maternal care -- this includes fathers and grandparents -- improves cognitive outcomes, things like a child's vocabulary and memory; but that too much time in centre-based care -- even high quality centre-based care -- was related to poor behaviours, including "hitting others" and "arguing a lot."

It is also notable that the OECD has praise for Quebec, which implemented a "universal childcare system" in 1997. But even putting aside the difficulties parents have had in enrolling their children in the heavily subsidized program, the quality of care is mediocre, according to the Longitudinal Study of Child Development in Quebec.

Quebec's program also produces perverse economic results. Lower income families are subsidizing higher-income families, who have accessed the system with greater ease, at the same time as other social benefits were cancelled to fund the expensive new system. "Children from low-income or less-educated families may be triply disadvantaged by being less likely to receive stimulating care at home, less likely to be enrolled in educationally oriented care outside the home and more likely to be receiving low-quality service when they are in child care," concludes University of Quebec at Montreal economics professor Pierre Lefebvre.

Meanwhile, thousands of parents have come together in Sweden, a country the OECD ranks as best in child care, to form the Parental Rebellion. They are fighting for the simple ability to stay home with their children. Jonas Himmelstrand, one rebelling parent, says staying home is hard, because Sweden's "taxes are high and there [are]

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no economic subsidies whatsoever after our generous 13-16 month parental leave." In September, the ruling Social Democratic Party lost an election, and Himmelstrand believes the Parental Rebellion played a role in that. (At the last minute, the opposition offered a "caring allowance" for parents who want to stay home.)

When Canada's Conservatives made the child care allowance one of their five main policy planks, its success came as a surprise. The Conservative idea of giving parents money for them to spend themselves may not be perfect. But Dion and his Liberal party have chosen a plan that is undoubtedly much worse. It's hard for anyone, no matter their political stripe, to see state-run daycare as a form of "social justice," "sound economics" or, most importantly, being in the best interests of children.

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