**New Socialist Webzine - Canada**

**Can Ontario Get Childcare?**

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At the recent Conservative convention in Calgary, Stephen Harper referred back to one of his first acts as Prime Minister, which was to demolish the national childcare framework. Harper referred to the child care program as "lobbyists, academics and bureaucrats" and suggested that now the money (in the form of a small tax credit) was in the hands of "Mom and Dad."

Child Care Worker & Early Childhood Educator Appreciation Day (2012). Credit: www.cupe.on.ca

     

Harper seemed fairly confident that the popular publicly-funded child care program in Quebec could be contained to that province, and that the federal government wouldn't play much of a role in child care policy for the foreseeable future.

Despite Harper's confidence, there's a real opportunity for the labour movement, the women's movement and other justice-oriented social movements - especially in my own province of Ontario - to push forward on child care and build an affordable non-profit model that meets people's needs.

**A Short History**

It has been about eight years since Liberal Minister Ken Dryden signed an accord with the provinces that funded a national child care system. This accord was many years in the making: The Liberals had promised a childcare program in their 1993 Red Book platform. The Progressive Conservatives had even promised such a program in their 1988 majority-winning platform. The Liberals abandoned their pledge after Paul Martin set a course for deep cuts to social spending.

When Martin became Prime Minister, he tapped Dryden to herd the provinces towards a deal to build a national system. As noted above, Harper took power in 2006 and promptly killed the entire project, converting the funding into a small tax credit. Soon afterward, the economic crisis hit. The prospects seemed dim that Ontario would fund anything major. Premier McGuinty phased in his prized all-day Kindergarten, but the cost of child care overall rose and the number of public spaces remained low.

The political situation in Ontario is such that the relatively weak provincial Liberals have been leaning on the NDP to make their budget votes work. The NDP hasn't asked for much in return. They've convinced the Liberals to include a number of concessions on things like youth employment and taxes on the rich. Conspicuously absent has been any real demand for new social programs. The NDP's demands have been mostly one-offs, on the assumption that the government is unprepared to do any heavy lifting on social issues.

**The Money is There**

The NDP's own fiscal plans are confusing to anyone interested in addressing Ontario's many social struggles. In their 2011 platform, the NDP committed to large tax cuts to gasoline, fuel and electricity. These cuts combined dwarfed the proposed spending. There was an increase to the corporate tax rate, but the money was mostly funneled back into generic job creation tax credits rather than addressing specific social issues. Childcare received little mention and no real commitment to build a funded program within the first mandate.

The problems with the 2011 NDP platform might paradoxically present a big opportunity. Improving on the platform would be fairly easy: Take the money that was slated for tax cuts and point it towards social programs. In particular, build a real provincial child care program based on affordability and non-profit delivery. Sure, it will take time, but the resources are there, and isn't child care a better priority for the left than writing a cheque to lower the price of gasoline?

Even if revenue were somehow a serious problem, child care is pretty cheap, as far as programs go. Many economists believe it pays for itself by allowing more women to work. The government already spends a fair bit on a patchwork child care system, too. Those costs would go down if there were a provincial model. The Quebec program costs roughly $1.6 billion a year and Ontario only has 60 percent more people. Raising taxes on upper-income earners by a few percentage points would cover that cost easily. If it has to be a broad-based tax, even ratcheting up the HST a point or two (as Quebec and Nova Scotia have done) wouldn't be too hard to sell.

**Driving a Bargain**

Liberal Premier Kathleen Wynne may well find herself back in a minority position after a possible Spring 2014 election. What will the NDP demand in return for the budget vote? The question becomes more important if NDP leader Andrea Horwath decides to look towards a real coalition for the long haul - perhaps even as Premier herself. Could she really commit to four years of propping up the Liberals based on one-off deals and small gains, or offer her supporters simply a range of minor tax cuts?

The logic of the 2011 Ontario NDP platform probably goes something like this: They need to reach out to people in the suburbs, especially the key 905 region, to avoid being an exclusively urban party (with the notable exception of bits of rural Ontario). Middle-class people in the suburbs drive. Therefore, why not offer tax cuts that benefit drivers? This sort of logic plays into the tendency to position the NDP as a middle-class party that offers modest "affordability" measures, without offering much to marginalized groups.

The problem for the NDP is that there are already at least two other major parties that have opportunism or narrow self-interest on lock. The NDP, and the movements it often attempts to relate to, can only win when they tap into a much broader public, and with a platform that reflects the real needs of the people. Otherwise, what's the point?

The NDP might not currently present much in itself as a long-term solution to our social struggles. Neither the NDP nor any other political party will do much good without social movements pressuring them from below. That said, there is an opening for progressive social movements in Ontario society to push for this specific reform in this period.

Forcing a concession of this nature might have positive effects on other struggles. It might also give more families the time and money to organize better for themselves, and to meet their own challenges. Childcare is only one plank in a desperately needed anti-poverty and social agenda, but I hope it returns to prominence as one of the more likely measures to be adopted.

*Donald Hughes lives in Cobourg, Ontario and is proud uncle to a new niece who will need child care soon enough.*