

Imminent or Implausible? The (Im)possibilities of Universal Childcare within Canadian Federalism

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Research Question: To what extent do the structures of federalism contribute to a lack of progress in creating a universal childcare strategy?

ABSTRACT: Since the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada in 1967, universal childcare has been a topic of political debate and a central feature in feminist activism across Canada. One of the greatest obstacles faced by efforts to create a universal childcare strategy in Canada is federalism. Constitutional jurisdictions make childcare programs a provincial responsibility while the immense cost of daycare requires financial support from the federal government. Using the current National Child Benefit and Paul Martin's short-lived universal childcare strategy as a basis of analysis, this project assesses the limits and possibilities of universal childcare within Canada's political structure.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

Primary sources:

- 1) *Constitution Acts of 1867 and 1982*
- 2) Comparative analyses of Paul Martin's impermanent childcare strategy and Stephen Harper's National Childcare Benefit

Secondary sources:

- 1) Theoretical research from Political Science, Policy Studies, and Women's Studies disciplines
- 2) Policy reform proposals created by non-profit organizations and policy think-tanks.

FEDERALISM IN CANADA

- Canada is divided into two autonomous levels of government, provincial and federal.
- Provinces are responsible for social services and education (S.92 and 93, BNA Act)
- Federal government possesses spending powers; it can use its financial clout to influence public services in other jurisdictions.
- Federalism therefore creates a structural hurdle for universal childcare programs.

HARPER'S NATIONAL CHILD BENEFIT

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Canada's current strategy. Childcare programs are funded by the federal government and administered by provinces.

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Maintains provincial autonomy, gives Canadians a "choice" (Conservative marketing rhetoric)

C
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N
S

No national unity, creates divides in access to childcare among Canadians, monthly subsidies do not amount to childcare costs

MARTIN'S FOUNDATIONS PROGRAM

Only multilateral universal childcare strategy in Canadian history but was abandoned by Harper in 2006.

Promotes equality, mutually satisfying intergovernmental agreement, proven reinvestment for the government

Difficult to assess since the strategy was never enacted, arriving at a similar agreement today is challenging due to changes in political culture

MOTIVATION AND SIGNIFICANCE

Canada's lack of universal childcare creates gendered divisions in labour and places tremendous financial burdens on parents, to say the least. Contrastingly, many policy proposals that aim to address these issues directly fail to acknowledge Canada's complex institutions; therefore, seemingly effective approaches are often constitutionally unfeasible. Developing a critical understanding of Canada's political institutions leads to more informed voters and public servants, which ultimately fosters a healthier democracy.



FUTURE AREAS OF RESEARCH

- To what extent will the ideologies of Trudeau's government alter Harper's National Child Benefit legacy?
- How does federalism effect social policies under a more left-wing government?