Abstract

This paper reviews Canada’s market-based childcare ‘system’ and considers its capacity to deliver universal services. Canada mainly relies on parent-controlled centres for delivery, in the near absence of publicly-provided services. Canadian childcare is characterized by frustrated national and provincial policy capacity, a high degree of commercial childcare, inequities in service distribution, and the burdening of parent-users (particularly mothers). This form of co-production poses considerable problems for the federal government, which has recently declared its intention to build a national system of early learning and care. The policy architecture makes a national system of early learning and childcare structurally unobtainable. This gap between political vision and local feasibility is explained through an analysis of service delivery, management and policy development. The paper concludes that co-production must shift if Canada is to implement a universal early learning and childcare program, but warns such change does not appear to be forthcoming.

Key words
Mothers, public policy, social movement, voluntary sector, welfare state
The history of childcare in Canada is largely a story of bad timing. Childcare had the misfortune of coming to the policy table late in the post-war period, well after the main features of social service provision in Canada had been laid down. Called ‘daycare’, ‘nurseries’ or ‘creches’ in its day, the service grew out of charitable philanthropy, and this history of residualism meant that childcare entered public policy as a welfare matter, rather than as a rights-based service like education. Worse, it became featured on the national agenda during an era of major retrenchment and restructuring. Despite this timing, all has not been hopeless. Even though national childcare policy progressed little throughout the 1980s and early 1990s – one observer called the period ‘a lost two decades for childcare in Canada’ (Lauziere 2004: 3) – movement stepped up rapidly after 2000.

In 2003, federal, provincial and territorial governments signed a Multilateral Framework Agreement on Early Learning and Care, following on the heels of an Early Childhood Development Agreement approved in 2000. In 2004, the Throne Speech acknowledged it was time for a ‘truly national system of early learning and child care.’ The federal government committed to a national childcare programme and in 2005, the first beginnings were laid down through a $5 billion/five-year initiative consisting of bilateral agreements with provinces and territories. The Throne Speech observed that there was an ‘urgent need to accelerate development of quality early learning and child care across the country’ and it proposed to address that need through a funding programme that met the principles of quality, universally inclusive, accessible and developmental care (Govt. of Canada 2004: 8).

These intentions, however, are quixotic. Canadian childcare is organized as a market-based service provided almost exclusively by commercial and third-sector entrepreneurs, a familiar pattern in liberal and residual welfare states (O’Connor et al. 1999). As a result, there is a significant disconnect between the newly announced national political vision for childcare and existing mechanisms for local implementation. Outside Quebec, a completed circuit for childcare from the national, through the provincial, to the local level has yet to be constructed. In consequence, a national system of early learning and childcare currently is structurally unobtainable. As the OECD (2004: 69) noted in its recent review of Canadian childcare, national and provincial policy is ‘divided and incoherent’.

Most of Canada’s centre-based childcare spaces are privately provided by the voluntary or commercial sectors. About four out of five childcare centre spaces in Canada are delivered by parents for parents, who both pay for the service as well as control it. The remaining 20 per cent of spaces are operated as commercial for-profit businesses where fee-paying parents are clients (Friendly and Beach 2005: 206). Childcare services provided directly by government make up less than one-tenth of the country’s spaces, and are found in just two of Canada’s ten provinces.1 While the ratio of voluntary to for-profit care has shifted over time, the publicly operated sector has remained miniscule.

Childcare is a form of co-production, wherein services are initiated, delivered and maintained by parent-users and governments depend upon such non-state action for
policy implementation. Such co-production, however, takes on a particular inflection.

While it fits the general understanding of ‘involvement by users in the production of the services they use’, it sits more awkwardly with the assumption that co-production involves complementary relations with public services provided by the state. Unlike in more family-friendly and redistributive welfare states (such as the Nordic countries), co-production in childcare is neither a supplement to public provision nor involves government-to-citizen relations. Co-production in Canadian childcare, instead, is the result of the absence of public provision and government involvement. Further, despite the state’s reliance on private agents to deliver childcare services, there are few-to-no mechanisms to integrate the sector into policy development, governance or service co-ordination. By the criteria developed by Brandsen and Pestoff (this issue), both co-governance and co-management are absent. Such is the context for a consideration of co-production and the third sector in Canadian childcare.

This contribution reviews the current configuration of market-based services that constitutes Canada’s current childcare regime and considers its prospects. I conclude that the present architecture is unlikely to deliver universally accessible, high-quality childcare. Thus, there are some cautionary lessons from a review of childcare, co-production and the third sector. These lessons are drawn from Canadian experience, yet they also bear directly on other liberal states where instead of public provision and entitlement, childcare is provided by markets – whether informal, third-sector or for-profit.

**CHILDCARE SERVICES IN CANADA**

Despite robust evidence that ‘childcare is smart social policy, smart economic policy and smart health policy’ (Battle and Torjman 2002: 1) actual service belies this. Canada has just 745,254 licensed childcare spaces to serve 4.8 million children aged 0–12 years, providing coverage to 15.5 per cent of the country’s youngsters (Friendly and Beach 2005). Like other social services, childcare falls under provincial and territorial jurisdiction. At the service delivery level, ‘the bulk of the supply of regulated childcare is initiated and maintained by parent and/or voluntary boards of directors’ (Friendly and Beach 2005: xviii). About 80 per cent of Canada’s centre spaces are non-profit, delivered through the third sector. Only a very small portion of Canada’s non-profit centre spaces are publicly operated, generally by municipalities (primarily in Ontario) or school boards (such as Quebec’s school-age programmes) (Doherty et al. 2003: 28).

Childcare in Canada is a patchwork of services characterized by inadequacy, fragmentation and incoherence. The Mayor of Toronto recently despaired that ‘choice in child care does not exist for most Canadian families who want access to early learning in a regulated program’ (Miller 2006: A-21).

Childcare is a market-based, user-pay service in Canada, financed through a mix of parent fees, subsidies paid on behalf of low-income families and some direct funding to programmes. Childcare is financed primarily through parent fees, which make up over
half the annual budget of centres in 6 of 10 provinces, contributing 49.2 per cent of revenues for the country as a whole. Fees vary considerably by province and by the age of the child, often reaching well over $10,000 per child. The second major source of funding is fee subsidies paid by the provincial government on behalf of low-income families. Fee subsidies are severely limited, and families must generally be well under the poverty line to qualify. Parent fees and fee subsidies together make up 79.7 per cent of centre revenues. The remaining one-fifth of centre budgets is derived from direct funding. Government allocations per regulated space range from a low of $816/yr in Alberta to a high of $4,849/yr in Quebec, making up about 17.5 per cent of centre revenues nationally (Doherty et al. 2000: ch. 10; Friendly and Beach 2005: 188, Table 12). This national average masks dramatic inter-provincial differences: parent fees and subsidies make up 100 per cent of centre revenues in Newfoundland, for example, and 98 per cent in New Brunswick. Nationally, parent fees and fee subsidies make up $5 out of every $6 spent on regulated childcare in Canada, compelling evidence of the degree to which childcare is conceived of and delivered as a private service.

Outside of its minor funding role, state involvement is mainly regulatory. In most of Canada, childcare is delivered by citizens to citizens, as parents control the boards of facilities they initiate. In most centres, parents pay high fees as well as make voluntary contributions by serving on the board of directors, fundraising, donating materials or special skills and participating in pedagogical activities such as field trips and special celebrations (Prentice and Ferguson 2000). A very limited number of non-profit programmes also function as parent co-operatives, with formal expectations of parent involvement ‘on the floor’ (Killian 1972; Atkin 1998). Despite near-absolute reliance on the third sector to deliver childcare, few provinces have developed formal mechanisms to integrate the sector into policy development or service co-ordination (Prentice 2004).

If the link between local service delivery and provincial policy and practice is tenuous, the interaction between sub-national and federal levels is even less developed. An institutional legacy of privatization and third-sector reliance poses distinct limits to federal policy capacity. For example, over 2005 the federal government of Liberal Prime Minister Paul Martin announced its intention to build a national system of early learning and care. Yet, in practical terms, the federal government has no capacity to deliver on this clarion call. Ottawa has no significant policy instrument to deploy because the provinces and territories have jurisdiction and pay the lion’s share of government costs, leaving Ottawa with no direct policy or operational role (Battle and Torjman 2002).

**THIRD-SECTOR TROUBLES**

The Canadian practice of meeting public policy goals by delivering childcare services through the voluntary sector generates some advantages and greater disadvantages. As Smith and Lipsky (1993) have aptly observed, for conservatives the appeal of privatization is the promise of smaller government and more reliance on private
initiative. To liberals, reliance on non-profit agencies can meet social problems previously borne by the affected individuals and their families without implying either wholesale public responsibility or full public cost. Moreover, non-profit and community-based organizations are seen as ways to protect and promote individual and family choices. There is an appeal to partnerships from the left, as well. Community-based services can offer ‘bottom-up’ local control that builds community capacity, combats bureaucracy and promotes social cohesion. Certainly, community-governed childcare services provide for significant user involvement and control (Prentice 2000b).

However, there is an associated set of disadvantages with the current privatized configuration in the context of near-exclusive private provision. In the following, I review those that most shape childcare policy and provision in Canada. Such a review is necessarily schematic and flattens important intra-provincial differences and historical developments. Despite these risks, an overview allows the foregrounding of important patterns and illuminates some of the little-studied issues raised by partnerships between the public and not-for-profit private sector.

FRUSTRATED NATIONAL AND PROVINCIAL POLICY CAPACITY

When the Canadian government announced its interest in establishing a national system of early learning and care in 2005, it ran straight into the limitations of social services under federalism. Constitutionally established divisions of power give authority over education and welfare to the provinces. In addition, what little capacity central government does have to establish programmes with national standards and portability rights has been severely diminished over recent years through decentralization. Under the 1999 Social Union Framework Agreement (SUFA), the federal government voluntarily formalized limits on the use of its spending power. SUFA was designed as a vehicle to finance cost-shared social programmes, promising renewal and national equity. Yet it also constrains the federal government from implementing any new social programme that does garner support from a majority of the country’s ten provinces. In practice, what this has meant is that ‘the federally dominated cooperative federalism of the past has given way to the partnership federalism of today in areas of provincial/territorial jurisdiction’ (Battle and Torjman 2002: 13). SUFA expresses a new paradigm of federalism that minimizes the role of federal government, moving towards a co-ordination rather than a leadership role for Ottawa.

This political history explains why Canada does not now have, and is unlikely to implement, national childcare legislation – despite calls going back at least as far as the ground-breaking 1970 Royal Commission on the Status of Women. Instead, each of Canada’s ten provinces and three territories, as well as the federal government, has its own approach to early childhood care and education. As a result, ‘the range, quality and access to early childhood education and care services and access to them vary
enormously by region and circumstances’ (Friendly and Beach 2005: xv). The ‘province-centred governance structure’ has failed to create universally accessible, comprehensive, high-quality childcare for Canadians (Mahon 2004).

The logic of private-sector reliance leads to less, rather than more, public involvement. Such government inaction has the effect of locating childcare as something outside of public accountability (Bacchi 1999). Recent evidence of such positioning is the federal government’s minimal conditions for provincial spending on childcare under the 2005 bilateral childcare agreements, and the even more extreme silence on auspice (who owns and operates the service). While two western provinces (Manitoba and Saskatchewan) voluntarily committed themselves to deploying their bilateral funds only on non-profit care, other provinces’ agreements with the federal government contain no such intention. One province (Alberta) even negotiated the right to spend its childcare dollars on services other than regulated early learning and care.

Across Canada, childcare services are mainly provided by independent, stand-alone centres. Since it is not a ‘system’, there is no co-ordination within or between provinces on childcare policy development or service innovation. Unlike either the health or education fields, there is literally no infrastructure at local, provincial, regional or pan-Canadian scales. Yet, all organized social service systems (such as education and health) require a resourced infrastructure. Infrastructure (in the form of personnel, resources and authority) enables a sector to partake in policy development, to collaborate with sister organizations, to communicate effectively with members, to provide professional development and in-service opportunities, to conduct research and development projects, to monitor research findings for best practices, to scrutinize public programmes and spending and to launch public education campaigns. SUFA, for example, authorizes a vague ‘public’ to monitor federal and provincial spending – and yet there is no institutionalized vehicle to undertake this work on behalf of childcare.

The lack of infrastructure is consequential. For example, an absence of organized infrastructure marginalized the childcare sector in negotiations over the distribution of 2000 federal Early Childhood Development funds, which were designed as a cafeteria of programmes from which provinces could select options:

Only ten percent of the over $300 million in federal funds was used for childcare. Only six of the 13 governments invested any of the money in childcare, and none of the biggest – Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia – did so.

(Mahon 2004: 9)

The disbursement of Early Childhood Development funds reveals the lack of co-management and the ‘disorganized’ character of the voluntary sector.

A final element of frustrated policy capacity relates to the longstanding practice of prioritizing demand-side subsidies over supply-side investments. The current national
Conservative government is proposing a ‘choice in childcare allowance’ of $1,200 per child under age 6 years in lieu of direct funding to provinces under the bilateral agreements, at a total cost of $10.9 billion over 5 years. This is the most marked initiative in this direction, but its policy logic perfectly corresponds to privatized market delivery and governance. A long-established demand-side subsidy is the federal Child Care Expense Deduction, the regressive tax measure for forms of receipted children’s caring expenses (regulated childcare as well as sports camps, childminding, etc.). In 2003, Finance Canada estimated the tax expenditure on this income tax measure to be $545 million (Government of Canada 2005: ch. 4). In its 2004 review of childcare, experts from the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD 2004) devoted considerable attention to critiquing Canada’s reliance on demand-side subsidies over direct funding of services.

COMMERCIAL CHILDCARE

For-profit childcare facilities provide one in every five childcare centre spaces in Canada – a national total that has been diminishing for some years, but one that shows real potential to grow if federal funding becomes available (Cleveland and Krashinsky 2005). Each of Canada’s provinces permits for-profit childcare services to be licensed and eligible to varying degrees for public funds. The net result is that while most of Canada’s centres are non-profit, in some jurisdictions there is also a sizeable for-profit sector. The proportion of for-profit care ranges from a high of 73 per cent in Newfoundland and Labrador to a low of zero in Saskatchewan, the North West Territories and Nunavut (Friendly and Beach 2005).

A growing research literature documents the clear trend of higher quality in non-profit childcare, in large part because of the tendency of for-profit programmes to ‘skimp’ on a wide range of quality indicators, including those associated with staff. For-profit childcare has a negative impact on staff qualifications and wage levels, training opportunities and staff/child ratios and in combination with other features of organizational behaviour, the empirical evidence of poorer quality is definitive (Child Care Resource and Research Unit n.d.; Schom-Moffat 1984, 1992; Kagan 1991; Phillips et al. 1992; Canadian Day Care Advocacy Association & Canadian Child Day Care Federation 1993; Doherty 1995; Whitebrook et al. 1998; Morris and Helburn 2000; Prentice 2000a; Mitchell 2002; Cleveland 2005).

Empirical concerns about quality in for-profit childcare are borne out in Canada by numerous studies. One such analysis was undertaken by Gordon Cleveland and Michael Krashinsky, who used the national 1998 You Bet I Care! dataset to examine quality differences between for-profit and non-profit programmes. They determined that non-profit centres score about 10 per cent higher in quality. They found, moreover, that for-profit centres are disproportionately represented among the lower-quality centres. Non-profit centres tend to have better ratios of children to...
staff and are more likely than for-profit centres to exceed minimum ratios. Lead teachers in non-profit classrooms have more training and experience. Staff wages are lower overall in commercial centres (about 25 per cent lower among lead teachers). Non-profit programmes serve a wider age of children (in particular, more infants) and more children from diverse economic backgrounds (including more children receiving a fee subsidy and more children with special needs). Cleveland and Krashinsky (2004: 13) conclude that ‘the positive impact of non-profit status on quality is persistent, even when a wide range of variables is held constant’.

Similar findings about quality differentials between for-profit and not-for-profit programmes have been found even in Quebec’s highly regarded system (Fournier and Drouin 2004a, 2004b; Japel et al. 2005). In Quebec, as elsewhere, although there are good and poor-quality programmes in both auspice categories, the pattern of distribution is remarkable. Non-profit infant programmes were six times more likely than for-profit programmes to offer high-quality care (providing good or very good care). Non-profit pre-school programmes were four times more likely than for-profit centres to be among the best programmes. For-profit centres were vastly over-represented among programmes that provided unsatisfactory care. For-profit infant centres were more than eight times more likely than non-profit centres to provide unsatisfactory quality. For-profit pre-school programmes were six times more likely than non-profits to provide unsatisfactory care (Prentice 2005: 8 – 10).

Empirical Canadian evidence demonstrates that where public policy and financing discourages for-profit childcare, the proportion of for-profit care is lower and the quality of care is higher; conversely, where legislation and funding supports for-profit childcare, the proportion of for-profit care is higher and the quality is lower. In environments sympathetic to for-profit care, the for-profit sector both finds and makes opportunities to entrench further its interests. Regulations play only a small role in tempering these associations: licensing and regulatory regimes set generally minimal floors, and even these are regularly breached. Policing and compelling minimum standards is costly to jurisdictions, and diverts funds from more proactive quality improvements. As the international trade climate changes, even this modicum of public involvement may become more difficult – corporations are likely to find themselves succeeding with legal arguments that public regulations and funding regimes impair their private profits. Yet all provinces license proprietary childcare, and the federal government entirely disregarded for-profit auspice in its bilateral agreements.

Persistent poor quality in the commercial private sector ought to have generated changes to the privatization architecture, but it has not. As Vaillaincourt Rosenau (2000: 223) points out, ‘many vulnerable populations are not able to meet the skilled, critical purchaser requirement of the buyer-beware market’. This creates the conditions that lead some observers to argue that personal social services ought not to be open to for-profit delivery (Smith and Lipsky 1993).
GEOGRAPHIC INEQUITY

The degree of geographic inequity in childcare services in Canada is known mainly in broad, rather than specific, terms. Across provinces, the level of service access varies widely – from a high of serving 29.9 per cent of Quebec’s children to a low of just 4.9 per cent of children in Saskatchewan (Friendly and Beach 2005: 205, Table 26). Moreover, even within provinces, there is denser childcare in urban centres than in rural, northern or remote communities. Nationally, in 2002–3, 30 per cent of preschool-aged children in an urban centre were likely to be in a childcare centre, compared to 22 per cent of rural children (Bushnik 2006: 17). This pattern of distribution within and between provinces is not accidental, however, being a built-in feature of a system that relies on the spontaneous self-organization of community organizations or the ‘invisible hand’ of the market to deliver childcare service. Under the Canadian version of co-production, the role of government is mainly to license childcare facilities and provide fee subsidies to low-income parents, not to plan, start-up or deliver services. Save Ontario’s municipally operated childcare programmes and Quebec’s public planning, all of Canada’s services are reactive responses to private-sector initiatives.

Detailed analyses of the spatial dimensions of childcare in Canada are uncommon, although they exist elsewhere (England 1996; Van Ham and Mulder 2005) As urban geographer Marie Truelove (1996: 93) has argued, geographical access to a service must be regarded as ‘an important component of the effectiveness of that service’. Geographical access to childcare shapes the spatial choice set of parents and children. In 2003, a close study of Winnipeg found the distribution of childcare spaces was linked to neighbourhood affluence (Prentice and McCracken 2004). Winnipeg had a capacity of 16,749 spaces provided by 251 full-day childcare centres, 74 part-day nurseries and 295 family homes. Childcare services are not evenly distributed in Winnipeg. Some neighbourhoods have many more facilities than others – for example, relatively affluent and suburban wards have the largest number of facilities, while inner-city and more impoverished neighbourhoods are near the bottom. Some wards have many times more childcare spaces and types of care than others. The number of family daycare homes, for example, is three times higher in suburban Elmwood than it is in other wards.

Geographic inequity characterizes the distribution of childcare spaces in Winnipeg. The particular shape of this maldistribution results in less access for Winnipeg’s poorer and inner-city children and better access for its more affluent children. The absence and distorted distribution of services in Winnipeg reveals the ineffectiveness of the current childcare regime. In his discussion of territorial justice, David Harvey (1973) emphasizes that social justice requires a just distribution, justly achieved. The childcare policy architecture in Winnipeg – like all of Canada, save Quebec – is indicted by its failure to achieve a just distribution, a consequence of privatized co-production.

Reliance on the private sector, mainly non-profits, to provide childcare services means that neighbourhoods high in social and other capital are at an advantage. Highly
disadvantaged communities, which do not enjoy the same degree of social and other capital, are at a disadvantage. Where the not-for-profit private sector is poorly organized or where social capital is insufficient, self-initiated community-based services are scarce. Absent public planning mandates to ensure access, however, these communities will likely remain under served.

The under-servicing of marginalized communities is particularly troubling, since it results in vulnerable children having lesser access to childcare, despite its documented capacity to mitigate some of the disadvantages of family poverty. ‘High-quality daycare centres increase children’s linguistic, cognitive and social competencies, and has long-lasting benefits for children from low-income families. Investments in daycare for vulnerable children have large returns over time’ (Kohen et al. 2002: 273). This does not imply a preference for targeted services, however, since quality childcare creates benefits for all children. It is, instead, the argument that childcare is at least as necessary in poorer communities as it is in more affluent ones, despite a spatial distribution, which works in the opposite direction.

Geographic inequity is a built-in feature of the privatized delivery of childcare services in Canada – and there is little apparent will to modify this delivery model. The bilateral accords signed in 2005 entirely fail to consider public-sector delivery or public planning, deferring to the established architecture, wherein provinces rely on the third sector for implementation.

The reality of geographic inequity also goes unrecognized in the current federal government’s alternative plan to provide a cash ‘choice in childcare allowance’ to parents, by-passing what the Conservative Party regularly calls ‘institutionalized childcare’. Among other concerns, cash allowances presume a market of services that scarcely yet exist. The Caledon Institute points out that providing cash or tax breaks to parents goes only so far, since, at the end of the day, there must be something for parents to purchase. If there is little or no investment in the supply of high quality childcare while at the same time the cash-for-care approach results in more parents looking for good childcare, then this service becomes increasingly scarce relative to the demand.

(Battle and Torjman 2002: 11)

COMPULSORY ALTRUISM, GENDER AND THE TIME CRUNCH

The final dysfunction of the privatized market of childcare is experienced by parents at the point of local delivery. About 80 per cent of Canada’s licensed childcare is delivered by the non-profit sector, where organizations are governed by independent boards of directors. Full legal and financial authority is vested in the boards of directors of these non-profit organizations, and boards are nearly wholly made up of parent-users. In addition to paying to use childcare services, parents are also required
to manage them – and it is at this point that the challenges of co-production become stark.

Parent involvement and control in the childcare centre is a complex issue. Undeniably, parent control and management provides important opportunities for local and participatory democracy. Client-controlled services are responsive and accountable to users, by-passing many of the well-known dysfunctions of large bureaucracies (Ferguson 1985; Pestoff 1998). At the same time, there are distinct limits to parent control as it is currently practised, namely the coercive and gendered dimensions of requiring extensive voluntary commitments from the highly time-crunched community of working parents.

Nominally sex-neutral ‘parent’ volunteerism and involvement is disproportionately enacted by women, who participate in childcare at much greater rates than do men. Moreover, there also is a classed and raced dimension to women’s volunteerism, as they attempt to mediate the contradictions of a ‘motherhood mandate’ that prescribes constant maternal presence (Finch 1984; Prentice and Ferguson 1997). Under a commendable commitment to ‘parent involvement’ in theory, voluntary-sector co-production requires parents to assume what in other jurisdictions are public responsibilities.

Parental involvement is widely presumed to improve the quality of care of services offered to children, although the exact mechanism for this is rarely explained (Mayfield 1990; Shimoni and Ferguson 1992). Whatever effect parent involvement may have on the quality of care, it is certainly true that parent involvement requirements are a disincentive to commercial daycare operators, who are generally unwilling to concede control or authority to parents. Provinces with strong requirements for parent volunteerism, therefore, tend to have a smaller supply of commercial daycare than provinces that are silent on this aspect of delivery. Despite the many benefits of limiting the proprietary sector, childcare is one of the few social services in which client participation regularly is made mandatory by provincial regulations. Although client involvement may be encouraged or desired in fields such as mental health, eldercare and health, the insistence that (some) parents must volunteer in childcare is inextricably linked to the long western history of seeing the parent/child relationship as one of private property, in which parents (read mothers) must assume responsibility.

The expectations of parent volunteers in childcare are enormous: they are called upon to run agencies and centres, to develop policies, to manage and supervise staff, to assume fiduciary control over sizeable annual budgets, to participate in daily care, to fundraise to make up for fiscal shortfalls and to show in myriad ways that they care, and are taking responsibility. Moreover, since most mothers use childcare because of labour force participation or education/training, the time demands of compulsory altruism are extracted from perhaps the most time-crunched members of society (Hoschild 1989, 1997). Thus, parental volunteerism in childcare cannot be considered freely offered. To the contrary, it is largely the ‘discharging of duty, both overt and covert’ (Prentice and...
Ferguson 2000: 119). Under these circumstances, mothers’ volunteerism in childcare is hardly to be held up as an example of the moral superiority and excellence of the third sector. What mothers (like all parents) lack is a publicly managed or delivered system in which volunteerism could be freely offered or withheld.

**CONCLUSION**

In Canada, most parents who use regulated childcare have direct influence as well as control over their childcare services. As members of boards of directors, they operate and manage just under four-fifths of Canada’s stock of childcare programmes and their fees represent over four-fifths of total childcare spending. Beyond mere ‘voice’ (Hirschman 1970), parents have the authority to initiate, manage and even terminate their childcare programmes. Governments directly operate much less than one-tenth of the country’s spaces, and fund just 17.5 per cent of the cost. Yet, political pronouncements and public policy largely fail to recognize this reality, with the recent round of promises to build a national ‘early learning and childcare system for the 21st century’ (Liberal Party of Canada 2004: 29) being just the latest example. Moreover, despite profound reliance on the third sector to start up and deliver services, there is little-to-no provision for involving the voluntary sector in policy development or system governance. As a ‘system’ of individual stand-alone facilities governed directly by users, childcare lacks effective intermediate scales of neighbourhood, municipal, regional or provincial infrastructure.

Canada’s current childcare regime is characterized by frustrated national and provincial policy capacity, a high degree of commercial childcare, inequities in service distribution and the burdening of parent-users, particularly mothers. There is a childcare space for just 15.5 per cent of the country’s youngsters under the age of 12 years. Childcare suffers from a number of absolute shortfalls: Canadian childcare, as the OECD (2004: 69) experts observed, is best characterized as a fragile patchwork of fragmented services, severely stressed on the financing, access, equity and quality fronts. This overview demonstrates that Canada’s history of looking to the third sector, in the absence of public delivery, has fundamentally failed Canadian children and their parents.

What would be the best way to ensure that Canada has a high-quality, universally accessible system of inclusive and developmental childcare? The political, inter-governmental, fiscal, policy, delivery and governance answers to this question are still open. What seems certain, however, is that the current form of third-sector co-production has little chance of succeeding.

In recent political and media controversies over childcare, opponents have objected to ‘institutionalized’ childcare, sometimes even calling it ‘soviet style day care’ (Piatkowski 2006: 38). Yet the paradox is that childcare in Canada is not ‘institutionalized’ at all, at least not in the sense usually implied by the term. To the contrary, childcare
services exist in Canada mainly due to the extraordinary efforts of parents in the voluntary sector. Despite enormous challenges – summed up by government practices premised on the assumption that childcare is essentially a private- or voluntary-sector responsibility – third-sector initiatives have built what stands as Canada’s childcare system.

This third-sector reliance is unstable and increasingly untenable. As more women enter the labour force and more parents seek out the benefits of early childhood care for their young children, childcare services are under increasing pressure for expansion. Yet the establishment of new services only occurs when communities self-organize to deliver non-profit care or when entrepreneurs open new commercial operations. Neither is a reliable basis for anticipating a national system of high-quality early learning and care, and neither is likely to lead to the acceleration of services called for in recent Throne Speeches.

Childcare advocates have long called for childcare to be reconceived as a public good, supported by public funding (Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada 2004). The movement of parents and allies is struggling to re-frame childcare as an entitlement. At a time when calls for public service are decried as ‘etatist’, childcare advocates are actively working to claim space on the public agenda. Such social movement activism for childcare contests deeply entrenched political, fiscal and social Canadian norms and welfare state practices. Despite the many troubles with third-sector reliance and the absence of public provision, the campaign to reform Canadian childcare faces steep odds.

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NOTES

1 It is estimated that about 10–15 per cent of the stock of non-profit spaces are publicly operated. In Ontario, childcare may be delivered by a municipality. In Quebec, school boards may operate school-age care (Doherty et al. 2003: 28).
2 The zenith of the co-op daycare movement was the 1970s, and has declined steadily since then.
3 Pestoff (1998) notes that even social democratic and family-friendly Sweden saw ‘a three-fold growth’ in commercial childcare after its 1992 decision to register private for-profit or commercial childcare. It should be noted that in the same period, co-operative and non-profit care also expanded, complementing well-established public-sector provision to positive effect (see Pestoff 1998).
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