A Curious Case of Negative Policy Diffusion? The Legacy of Quebec's '$5-a-day' Childcare

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Abstract

Since its inception in the fall of 1997, Quebec's "$5-a-day" childcare program has emerged as Canada's most visible and widely debated stand-alone provincial social program. However, while commendably stimulating a national conversation about universal childcare, the program presents a more problematic legacy for childcare advocates in other provinces and at the federal level. Firstly, documented shortcomings of the Quebec model have provided fodder for ideologically-tinged attacks that use the example of Quebec as an indictment of the general concept of universal childcare. Secondly, the branding of the program has motivated campaigners to emphasize attention-grabbing, and often unrealistic, flat price targets (e.g., British Columbia's "$10aDay" campaign) over the quality of care and the centrality of childcare to facilitate equal employment opportunities between women and men. This dynamic was especially prevalent in the coverage of the Baker et al. working paper "Non-Cognitive Deficits and Young Adult Outcomes: The Long-Run Impacts of a Universal Child Care Program" during the 2015 federal election campaign. I argue that the case of Quebec's childcare program challenges extant theoretical perspectives on Canadian federalism and interjurisdictional policy transfer by presenting an anomalous example of 'negative diffusion'.

Keywords: Social Policy, Social Economy, Childcare, Quebec, Federalism

Résumé

Depuis sa création à l'automne 1997, le programme de service de garde à 5 $ par jour du Québec est devenu le programme social provincial autonome le plus en vue et le plus controversé au Canada. Cependant, tout en stimulant à raison une conversation nationale sur les services de garde d'enfants universelle, le programme présente un héritage plus problématique pour les défenseurs de la garde d'enfants dans d'autres provinces et au niveau fédéral. D'abord, les lacunes documentées du modèle québécois ont alimenté des attaques à caractère idéologique qui utilisent l'exemple du Québec comme une mise en cause du concept général des services de garde d'enfant universelle. Ensuite, l'image de marque du programme a motivé les militants à mettre l'accent sur l'aspect accrocheur, mais souvent irréaliste, des objectifs de prix fixes (comme la campagne « $*10aDay* » de la Colombie-Britannique), plutôt que sur la qualité des soins et le rôle central des services de garde pour faciliter l'égalité des chances entre les femmes et les hommes. Lors de la campagne électorale fédérale de 2015, cette dynamique était particulièrement présente dans la couverture médiatique du document de travail de Baker et al. *« Non-Cognitive Deficits and Young Adult Outcomes : The Long-Run Impacts of a Universal Child Care Program »* (Déficits non cognitifs et conséquences chez les jeunes adultes : les impacts à long terme d'un programme universel de garde d'enfants). Je soutiens que le cas du programme de service de garde du Québec remet en question les perspectives théoriques existantes sur le fédéralisme canadien et le transfert interjuridictionnel de politiques en présentant un exemple anormal de « diffusion négative ».

Mots clés : politique sociale, économie sociale, service de garde, Québec, fédéralisme

Introduction

Since its inception in the fall of 1997, Quebec's "$5-a-day" childcare program has emerged as Canada's most visible and widely discussed stand-alone provincial social program. Given a conspicuous lack of public financial support for subsidized childcare elsewhere in the country (Arsenault et al., 2018a, 2018b), the Quebec program has emerged as a rallying point for childcare activists elsewhere in Canada, commonly presented as a model to be emulated by other provinces and championed by the federal government (Banerjee, 2018; Brassard, 2019). However, the program, now in its third decade of existence, has also been a frequent target of pro-nuclear family and fiscally conservative interest groups who have enthusiastically publicized its shortcomings in a concerted effort to prevent other provinces from setting up their own subsidized childcare programs. Moreover, given the program's high national profile, it has inevitably shaped childcare debates elsewhere in the country, and not necessarily in a way that has been advantageous to the proponents of progressive reform.

In fact, I argue here that the example of Quebec's provincial childcare program has, on balance, hamstrung reform efforts in other provinces and federally, constituting an anomalous case of *negative policy diffusion*.[1] This has happened for two principal reasons. Firstly, ideological opponents have been successful in highlighting flaws in the program's administration, presenting the program as a cautionary tale for other provinces and pre-empting a more productive discourse about Canada's underinvestment in childcare relative to other high-income countries. Secondly, the program's "x dollars-per-day" branding has been emulated by would-be reformers in other provinces, fostering a narrow policy focus on minimizing user fees, often to unrealistic levels given Canada's prevailing federal-provincial fiscal imbalance.[2] In developing this argument, I draw from both a close reading of relevant literature and a series of interviews I conducted with childcare advocates, researchers, and civil servants based in British Columbia, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, and Prince Edward Island between 2017 and 2018.

I begin with a review of the extant literature on interprovincial and bottom-up social policy transfer in Canada and then introduce a rudimentary model of negative policy diffusion, followed by an elaboration of my interview-based research methodology. After a brief description of the events that led to the creation of Quebec's childcare program in 1997, I examine some prominent criticisms of the Quebec model before turning to an exploration of how Quebec's experience has influenced policy discourse in other provinces. Most notably, I look at how provincial reform efforts have been hobbled by the countervailing efforts of ideological opponents, principally right-of-centre think tanks, which publicize shortcomings of the Quebec program and, more broadly, the advent of an interprovincial policy discourse that emphasizes low childcare fees over other considerations. I then show that the insular policy debate over the

[1] Following Graham et al. (2013, p. 675), I define policy diffusion here as a scenario wherein "one government's

[2] Quebec also set an unrealistic precedent for the speed at which a transition to a universal program could be expected to take place, attempting to cover every child in the province aged four and under within just three years of the program's start date (Cleveland et al., 2021).

relative strengths and weaknesses of Quebec's childcare program obscures a more constructive national conversation about Canada's general underinvestment in childcare.

Moving to the realm of federal politics, I address the centrality of the Quebec-inspired "$15-per-day" childcare put forward by the federal NDP in the 2015 election. I note that a mid-campaign release of an academic working paper tying the Quebec childcare program to negative long-run developmental outcomes (Baker et al., 2015) received substantial press coverage, constraining the NDP's ability to credibly campaign on its childcare plan. This marked the second time that a proposed national childcare framework, inspired by the Quebec model, headlined a failed federal election campaign.[3] I then look at the implications of the Quebec model on the Trudeau government's ongoing efforts to develop a Canada-wide system of subsidized childcare.[4] I conclude with a discussion of how the influence of Quebec's childcare program on provincial and federal policy discourse challenges established perspectives on policy diffusion in Canada.

Canadian Federalism and Social Policy Transfer

The Canadian literature on federalism and social policy transfer is notable for challenging the pervasive view that the policy decentralization inherent to federal systems necessarily leads to a 'race-to-the-bottom' paring down of social program generosity (Peterson, 1995). On the contrary, some Canadian social policy scholars have argued that, under the right circumstances, Canada's federal institutions can effectively facilitate policy transfer—both horizontally (province-to-province) and vertically (from the provincial level to the federal level in areas of shared competence).[5] This stems largely from the periodic success of left-of-centre provincial parties as well as the development, over time, of various consultative mechanisms that have enabled the parties of confederation to share ideas and work towards common objectives.[6] Some scholars have even identified the decentralization of social policymaking as one source of Canada's periodic deviation from its default liberal-residualist policy orientation (Mahon, 2008, p. 353).[7]

In her study on Canada's universal healthcare system, Antonia Maioni (1997) finds that Canada's decentralized policy landscape allowed the prairie-based CCF/NDP to establish a foothold at a regional level and hold power in Saskatchewan for much of the critical historical

[3] The then governing Liberal Party, led by Paul Martin, made a set of bilateral child care agreements concluded with the provinces a centrepiece of its failed 2006 campaign. A party surrogate's quip that parents would waste the Conservative Party's competing child benefit on "beer and popcorn" has been widely identified as a critical turning point in the campaign (Paré & Berger, 2008, p. 53).

[4] These efforts were ongoing at the time of writing (June 2021).

[5] See Noël (1999) for a review of the literature on Canadian federalism and policy transfer.

[6] Cameron and Simeon (2002) use the term "collaborative federalism" to characterize a trend, among the provinces, towards the negotiated co-determination of major economic and social policies—especially since the failure of the Meech Lake (1987) and Charlottetown (1992) constitutional reform efforts.

[7] Mahon (2008, p. 353) observes that the loosening of conditions placed on federal social policy transfers under the Social Union Framework Agreement (SUFA) (1999) enabled some provinces to "us[e] [federal] funds in a manner consistent with an inclusive liberal philosophy", heading off the broader national trend of neoliberal retrenchment.

juncture that followed the end of World War II. This gave the CCF government an opportunity to experiment with new forms of healthcare delivery, creating a model for other provinces to learn from and, ultimately, a template for the Liberal government of Lester B. Pearson to emulate. Maioni further demonstrates that, through a paired historical analysis of the coeval development of healthcare in the United States, such an entry point would not have existed in a more centralized policy ecosystem. Another example, provided by Mahon (2008, p. 352), is the policy learning and adaptation that took place among the Atlantic Provinces as they each experimented with various social activation policies in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Alain Noël (1999) saw this pattern of decentralized, province-to-province social policy learning and emulation, paradoxically, as a path to greater national harmony, writing: "Provincial welfare states emerged that gave a substantive content to social policy and, in the process, created strong provincial communities, able to emulate each other. If Canadians find their way to a new social contract, this is where they will find it." (p. 217).

Yet this interprovincial policy diffusion framework fails to account for circumstances where social policy innovation in one province, namely Quebec, actively impedes progress elsewhere in the country. As such, I offer an important case of *negative policy diffusion* here, showing that the existence of a stand-alone childcare program in Quebec has consistently been an obstacle for would-be reformers in other provinces and at the federal level. I offer a tangible contribution to the literature on Canadian federalism and social policy transfer by illustrating that the creation of a new social program in one province can actually diminish prospects for suitable reform elsewhere when (1) it provides an inappropriate policy template for other jurisdictions, and (2) the program's opponents are at least somewhat successful in shaping the way it is perceived by the public.

Negative Policy Diffusion

The theoretical literature on policy diffusion and transfer[8] has elaborated four distinct mechanisms of government-to-government policy adaptation: learning, imitation, competition, and coercion (Shipan & Volden, 2008; Volden et al., 2008; Obinger et al., 2013). I focus on the first two of these mechanisms, arguing that a conflation of negative learning and inappropriate imitation have combined to stymie prospects for suitable policy reform in other provinces and at the federal level. To be precise, a combination of (1) the dissemination of concerning empirical research findings that link Quebec's childcare program to negative developmental outcomes [learning] and (2) a propensity for progressive childcare campaigners elsewhere to reflexively imitate Quebec's "x-dollars-per-day" branding [imitation] have confounded efforts for provincial and federal government-led reform, leaving childcare outside of Quebec in a state of policy drift (White, 2020, p. 42). This helps to explain the continued

[8] As Obinger et al. (2013, p. 113) note, the concepts of "policy diffusion" and "policy transfer" are largely interchangeable, with the distinction between the two terms "mostly founded in their affiliation to different research traditions". "Policy diffusion" is used more frequently in large-N statistical studies, while "policy transfer" tends to appear in qualitative, case-based research.

failure of Canadian policymakers outside of Quebec to meaningfully address funding shortfalls and space shortages, despite Canada now lagging virtually all other high-income countries in the proportion of national income invested in childcare. Beyond its direct relevance to the Canadian social policy literature, this paper makes an important theoretical contribution to the study of social policy by showing that some of the mechanisms that have been found to facilitate policy transfer can also work in the opposite direction.

Methodology

This paper uses information gathered from twelve informants that I interviewed for my doctoral dissertation (Mohamed, 2018) between August 2017 and April 2018. My sample of informants consisted of childcare advocates, researchers, and former civil servants (both federal and provincial). Respondents from five separate provinces – British Columbia, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, and Prince Edward Island – are represented in the sample. The interviews were conducted remotely (by telephone or video conferencing platforms) and followed a semi-structured format.[9] I constructed the sample by asking two contacts (one based in Victoria, the other based in Toronto) to provide me with lists of Canadians to speak to about childcare. I was unable to reach seven of the people identified as potential informants.

I informed all participants beforehand that I would keep their identities confidential.[10] The informants that I have quoted below were each given an opportunity to review and approve the relevant quotations. None of my informants received any form of compensation for their participation. Following Gallagher (2013, p.194), I utilized a strategy of triangulation in my analysis and verification of interview data, cross-referencing information provided by my sources and checking such information against the historical record (i.e., relevant primary and secondary sources).

Quebec's Family Policy Breakthrough

Starting with the release of the landmark Castonguay-Nepveu report on health care and social services in 1967, the province of Quebec has long followed a quasi-autonomous course on health and social welfare policies (Jenson, 2002, p. 313). While Quebec's 'go-it-alone' approach has at times been largely symbolic, with provincial social programs bearing a close resemblance to the corresponding federally administered ones found in the other provinces (McRoberts, 1993, p. 141), family policy is one area where differences have generally been meaningful. Such deviations from the national current have alternatively reflected policy logics of pronatalism, feminism, and social solidarity at different points in time. They also speak to the continued

[9] Following the interview methodology described by Adams (2015), I came into each interview with a prepared set of questions but gave my informants space to elaborate on responses and take the conversation in different directions. I took written notes during each interview and reviewed/redrafted my notes immediately afterwards. For security/confidentiality purposes, all my notes relating to the interviews were handwritten.

[10] Each informant signed a consent form informing them of the purpose of the interviews, how their privacy would be protected, and possible risks associated with their participation. I obtained approval to conduct these interviews from the Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill in the summer of 2016 (IRB Study # 16-1453).

influence of French ideas surrounding the use of social policy to preserve an appropriate balance between work and family life.[11] This has resulted in an anomalous long-run policy trajectory that combines elements of the conservative, liberal, and social democratic paradigms (Jenson, 2002).

The most meaningful additions to Quebec's family policy came in 1997, through a comprehensive package of reforms implemented by the then governing Parti Québécois (PQ). The mid-1990s provided an opening for would-be reformers due, in part, to a dire need for the PQ to refurbish its political brand. A polarizing fall 1995 referendum on Quebec's independence saw the proposed motion to secede from Canada fail by a margin of just over one percent. The defeat of the sovereignty bid prompted the resignation of PQ Premier Jacques Parizeau, the de facto leader of the pro-secession camp. On his way out, Parizeau attributed the referendum result to "money and the ethnic vote" in his now notorious referendum night address (Farnsworth, 1995).

Parizeau's parting shot cemented already stirring perceptions of the PQ as hostile to Quebecois who were not ethnically French. The persistent characterization of the party as an ethno-nationalist vehicle was especially problematic given the ambiguous international law surrounding secession and the spate of ethnic violence that had accompanied early-1990s secessionist claims-making in the former Yugoslavian states and elsewhere in the world (Hébert, 2008, pp. 151-2). In short, any future claim to Quebec's political autonomy that could sway both domestic and international audiences would need to be built on more than just ethno-linguistic identity (Beland & Lecours, 2006, p. 82).

With sovereignty off the table for the time being, the PQ government looked to re-embrace its social democratic roots. Accordingly, the party convened a Summit on the Economy and Employment in October 1996. The Summit marked the first time in the province's history that the government opened formal 'quatripartite' policy consultations with representatives from labour, business, and civil society groups (Levesque & Mendell, 1999, p. 17). The parties ultimately endorsed the new policy paradigm of the social economy, which proposed a synergistic relationship between public, voluntary, and for-profit entities acting jointly in pursuit of the collective well-being (Arsenault, 2018). The model specified a critical role for cooperatives, mutual benefit societies, and civic associations (Mendell, 2006, p. 4).

One of the key substantive items to come out of the summit was a new blueprint for family policy as feminists, child development experts, and other participants were able to sell the initially hesitant premier, Lucien Bouchard, on the necessity and potential political upside of a complete overhaul of Quebec's family policy regime (Jenson, 2002; Hebert, 2007, p. 77). A more robust family policy would serve a dual purpose of anchoring the PQ's rebranding efforts and helping the government tackle structural challenges in the province's labor market, such as the inability of many single and low-income parents to work full-time hours (Jenson, 2002).

[11] As Maroney (1992) observes, many of the academics and civil servants who helped build Quebec's family policy regime were alumni of French postsecondary institutions like the Institute for Demographic Studies (INED).

A government white paper released two months after the summit's conclusion, titled *Les enfants au cœur de nos choix*, outlined the core priorities that would shape the government's new approach to family policy and unveiled a corresponding set of reforms. Placing a distinct—and, to this point in the province's history, unprecedented—emphasis on promoting employment and the equality of opportunity between men and women, the document proposed: a new targeted family allowance (available to all low-income parents with dependents under the age of eighteen); a new paid parental leave scheme (delinked from unemployment insurance); various child-friendly modifications of the provincial tax code, full and half-day kindergarten for five and four year-olds, respectively; and, most prominently, five dollar per day childcare for children aged four and under (Jenson, 2002, pp. 320-1).[12]

In keeping with the social economy concept, and in particular its emphasis on the inclusion of 'third sector' civil society actors, the new childcare program would be delivered through a network of non-profit Centres de la Petite Enfance (CPEs) and smaller home-based daycares.[13] Each CPE was to be governed by a board of directors composed of at least seven persons, with a requirement that at least two-thirds of board members be the parents of program enrollees (Friendly et al., 2007, p. 65). The CPEs were authorized to accommodate up to eighty children, subject to provincially established space requirements and staff-to-child ratios (Giguère et al., 2010, p. 2).

While the CPEs managed day-to-day administration, the provincial government's role would be to provide requisite financing to cover the gap between the mandated five dollar a day user fee and program operating costs, principally through direct grants to individual centres (Jenson, 2002, p. 323). The provincial government, which had placed a moratorium on new licenses for commercial childcare centres in 1995, initially envisioned that the remaining for-profit centres would be absorbed into the CPE structure. However, facing an unexpected level of organized resistance from commercial operators and a desperate need for the spaces they could contribute to the system, officials begrudgingly made the new subsidies available to select for-profit providers, although at a less generous level than what the non-profits received. The moratorium on new commercial licenses was lifted by the incoming Liberal government in 2003 leading to a steady increase in the number of for-profit childcare spaces as a percentage of the total (Japel and Welp, 2009, p. 60).

Even with the continued involvement of the for-profit sector, Quebec's new childcare program was transformative for Quebecois parents, toddlers, and infants. Starting from a baseline of around 54,000 total spaces in 1997 (Senkiw, 2003, p. 16), the program generated an average of 15,000 new subsidized spaces per year over the first eight years of its existence. Although the rate of growth slowed somewhat from there, Quebec accumulated a total stock of over 215,000 subsidized spaces by the early 2010s (Fortin et al., 2012, p. 3)—enough to serve

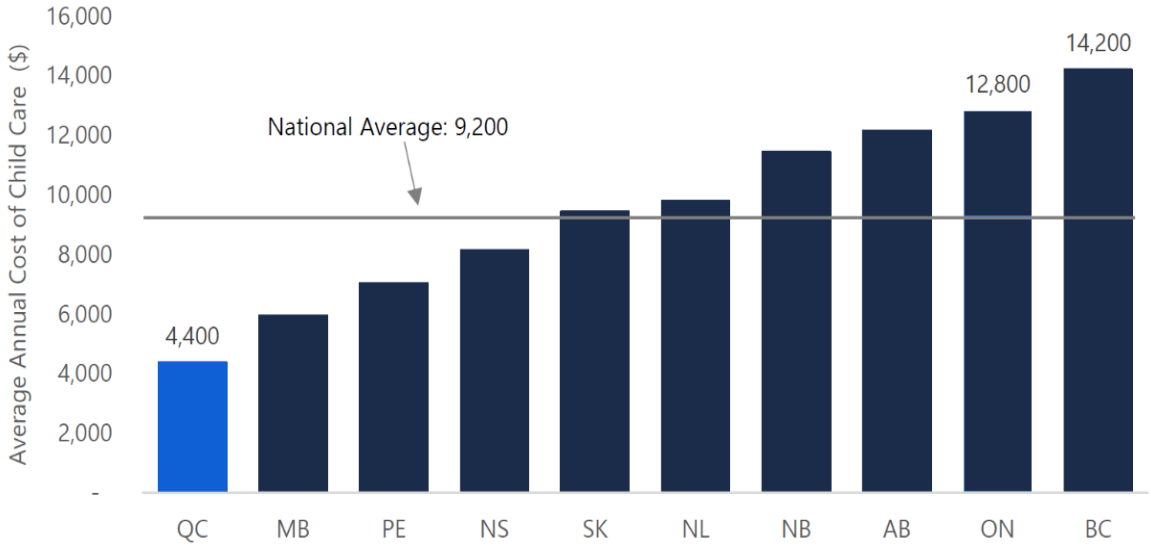
[12] The program was scheduled to begin, in September 1997, with four-year-olds and then incrementally expand to younger ages until all pre-primary school aged children were eligible by the fall of 2001 (Gouvernement du Québec, 1997, p. 21). This target was reached in September 2000, one year ahead of schedule (Jenson, 2002, p. 324).
[13] Home-based daycares in Quebec may only serve a maximum of six children (Friendly et al., 2018, p. 50).

roughly half of all children aged four and under.[14] The number has since surpassed 235,000 (Famille Québec, 2021).

While parent fees have increased over the years—starting, in 2018, at a baseline of $8.05 per day and rising incrementally for more well-off families, up to a maximum of $21.95 for a single child ("Quebec's daycare system at a glance", 2018)—Quebec still offers parents the most affordable childcare services in Canada.[15] As of 2018, the average annual cost of childcare was more than a thousand dollars higher in Manitoba, and nearly three times higher in neighboring Ontario (see Figure 1). The program is also relatively cost-effective with an annual budget of roughly $2.5 billion, approximately 0.7% of provincial GDP (Fortin, 2017) and much of this cost is recouped in economic gains from increased parental labour force participation (Fortin et al., 2012). This actually places Quebec below the average, among OECD members, of 0.9% of GDP spent on early childhood education and care (Arsenault et al., 2018b, p. 3).

Figure 1

Average Annual Childcare Costs in the Canadian Provinces (2018)



Note. Financial Accountability Office of Ontario (2019)

Just as their architects had hoped, Quebec's 1997 family policy reforms laid the groundwork for a new claim to cultural distinctiveness based on social solidarity and egalitarianism. The province's celebrated childcare program in particular has become a beacon of this self-styled solidarism (Beland & Lecours, 2010, p. 83-86). However, it would be a mistake to overstate the magnitude of the changes as Quebec's family policy regime has retained both neoliberal and familial elements. In addition to the growth of the for-profit child care sector and

[14] There were approximately 422,700 children aged four and under in Quebec at the time (2012 rounded estimate) (Friendly et al., 2013, p. 23)

[15] The Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) led provincial government announced, in late 2019, that daily parental user fees would return to a singular rate of $8.25, with the sliding scale for higher-income parents being rolled back incrementally. The changes were made retroactively, starting as of January 1st, 2019 (Luft, 2019).

the shift to income-targeted family benefits discussed above, Quebec has preserved Canada's only universal tax credit for families with children which aligns with the long-standing familial tradition of direct, flat-rate parental subsidies (Jenson, 2002, p. 311). Jenson (2002) classifies Quebec as a "mixed regime… falling more on the market performance side[.]" (p. 311).

Criticisms of the Quebec Model

Although lauded both within and outside of the province, Quebec's childcare program has not been immune from criticism. Detractors have been especially critical of the uneven distribution of spaces, leading to excess capacity in some parts of the province and multi-year wait times in other less well-served areas (Campbell, 2006, p. 210-11; Jenson, 2002). Moreover, serious concerns have been raised with regards to the fairness of the system, as higher-income parents have been shown to receive preferential access to in-demand CPE spaces, leaving less well-off families to settle disproportionally for lower quality for-profit and informal care for their children ("Quebec's unfair lottery", 2009; Cleveland et al., 2021). Quebec's childcare centres also have, on average, the highest staff-to-child ratios in the country, raising questions about the general quality of care provided through the system (Yakabuski, 2014). Perhaps most troublingly, recent empirical studies have produced evidence of negative developmental outcomes associated with the program (Baker et al., 2015; Haeck et al., 2015).

As the program's earlier cohorts enter adulthood, researchers have identified some concerning long-term trends. Most notably, a controversial 2015 working paper, co-authored by economists from the University of British Columbia, University of Toronto, and Massachusetts Institute of Technology, linked the introduction of Québec's subsidized childcare program in the fall of 1997 to a "sizeable negative shock in non-cognitive skills… with little impact on cognitive test scores", finding that "cohorts with increased child care access subsequently had worse health, lower life satisfaction, and [for boys] higher crime rates later in life," (Baker et al., 2015, abstract). Although the authors utilized a contentious methodology that grouped program enrollees and non-enrollees together (see Gordon, 2015), the study nevertheless received substantial media attention due to the proximity of its release to Canada's fall 2015 general election (discussed in more detail later in the paper). Another 2015 study, published in the journal *Labor Economics*, found evidence of a negative effect on school readiness for childcare attendees from low-income households, although such effects diminished over time (Haeck et al., 2015).

These issues will likely persist, or worsen, over time as for-profit commercial childcare centres, which have been shown to provide a consistently inferior quality of care versus CPEs and family daycare (Japel et al., 2005), continue to expand. Commercial childcare centres now generate over one-fifth of all subsidized spaces (see Figure 2). Moreover, non-reduced contribution centres, for which parents pay full fees offset by a provincial tax credit, have grown ten-fold since 2009, now comprising over 70,000 childcare spaces outside of the subsidized system (Cleveland et al., 2021; Famille Québec, 2021). At present, for-profit operators administer roughly 38% of all childcare spaces in Quebec (Famille Québec, 2021).

For-profit childcare centres have proliferated disproportionately in poorer areas of the province where fewer parents have the time to sit on CPE boards (Interviewee #7, March 29, 2018). This may be exacerbating the province's wealth gap in school readiness. An assessment conducted in 2014 by the Institut de la Statistique du Québec found that only 10% of children enrolled in the province's for-profit childcare centres received a "good" or "excellent" level of care, compared to 45% of children enrolled in non-profit CPEs (Fortin, 2018).

Figure 2

Growth in regulated childcare spaces (for 0-4 year-olds), Quebec

Note. Friendly et al., 2007; 2018

The program's effects have been more positive for maternal employment. At the program's outset, Quebec had the country's second-lowest labour market participation rate for mothers of preschool-aged children with just 67% of women with children aged between three and five engaged in work outside of the home in 1998. By 2014, this figure was the second highest among the Canadian provinces at 82% (Arsenault et al., 2018a, p. 8). Over the same period of time, there was an 11.8% increase in the percentage of women with children under the age of three who were active in the provincial workforce, versus an increase of just 4.4% in neighboring Ontario (Moyser & Milan, 2018, Chart 6.1).

Notwithstanding this successful aspect of the program, mainstream media coverage of childcare outside of Quebec, reflected in major Canadian newspapers, has largely neglected gendered dimensions of the issue, including women's employment (Wallace, 2016; Wallace and Goodyear-Grant, 2020a, 2020b).[16] This speaks to a longer-term reframing of children's issues towards development and child poverty in English-speaking Canada, itself a product of the strategic decisions made by activists and a dealignment of organized feminism outside of Quebec

[16] Wallace and Goodyear-Grant (2020) find that the COVID-19 pandemic has "not shifted the [Canadian] conversation on child care", as reflected in print media coverage of the issue, and that spring 2020 coverage (March 1 to May 31) "principally reflect[ed] long-standing trends in child care framing", foregrounding health, the economy, and the availability of childcare spaces (p. 1123).

(Jenson and Dobrowolsky, 2009; Amoroso, 2010; Collier, 2015).[17] Moreover, Canada's labour force participation rate for mothers with children aged five and under is among the highest in the OECD (OECD, 2015, Figure 3.7), indicating that working mothers have managed to make do in spite of a lack of affordable childcare options.[18]

The Quebec Program and Interprovincial Policy Discourses

Opponents of childcare, most prominently right-of-centre think tanks,[19] have seized on the perceived shortcomings of Quebec's program in attempt to dampen appetites for reform in other provinces. For instance, The Canadian Taxpayers' Federation and Fraser Institute have both recently published reports condemning Quebec's childcare program and cautioning other provinces against adopting similar policies (Geloso, 2015; Geloso & Eisen, 2017). These organizations have also placed unfavourable opinion pieces in various regional outlets, leading with headlines like "Alberta shouldn't copy Quebec's failed government daycare plan" (MacPherson and Vallee, 2016) and "Ontario is poised to repeat Quebec's daycare mistakes" (Mrozek, 2018). In lieu of publicly subsidized childcare, these groups call for market-based mechanisms such as childcare vouchers for parents (MacPherson and Vallee, 2016).

Following Quebec's example, would-be reformers at the provincial level have often led with flat price targets for parent user fees—this despite the fact that Quebec itself moved to a sliding scale fee structure for several years. For instance, the Coalition of Child Care Advocates of B.C. launched the $10aDay website in the run up to British Columbia's 2017 provincial election. Similarly, Alberta's NDP government unveiled a plan for universal $25-per-day childcare going into its unsuccessful spring 2019 re-election campaign.[20] In both cases, the branding placed low parent fees ahead of considerations like program quality, gender equity, and work-life balance for parents. Moreover, flat provincial price targets often lack credibility given Canada's prevailing fiscal imbalance—a typical province devotes two-thirds of its annual budget to health care and education alone (Arsenault et al., 2018a, p. 11)—and successive federal governments have failed to provide adequate financial support to provinces seeking to bolster the availability of subsidized childcare to their residents.

For instance, British Columbia's NDP government, which came to power in the summer of 2017 with a promise to gradually phase in $10-a-day childcare,[21] managed to create only

[17] In response to the child poverty framing, several provinces have set up robust child care subsidy programs for children from low-income households. The targeting approach is arguably less socially stratifying than Quebec's flat-fee, but space scarce, model.

[18] As of 2014, 69.6% of Canadian mothers with children aged two and under and 72.5% with children between the ages of three and five were engaged in work outside of the home. These figures were well above the OECD-wide averages of 55.3% and 68.8%, respectively (OECD, 2015, Figure 3.7).

[19] See Tapp (2015) for a social media-based scale of Canadian think tank ideology.

[20] Before losing power, Alberta's NDP government launched a $25per-day pilot program involving 122 centres and roughly 6,000 spaces. The program ended on April 1, 2021 and was not renewed by the province's UCP government (Stillger, 2021).

[21] The British Columbia government has been reticent about articulating formal targets for the daycare phase-in but has set a general timeline of ten years for implementing the program (Kesselman and Richards, 2017).

5,000 spaces priced at $10 per day or less in its first two-and-a-half years in office—a figure that represents only 4% of the province's total number of subsidized spaces.[22] The median daily rate for a childcare space in Vancouver, as of early 2020, was over $60, among the highest in any Canadian city ("B.C. NDP government is still a long way", 2020).

The NDP government's failure to deliver on $10-a-day childcare provided British Columbia's snap fall 2020 election with one of its early storylines. Just days into the campaign, Premier John Horgan publicly blamed the B.C. Greens, which had supported the NDP during its three-and-a-half-year minority term, for the slow growth of $10-a-day spaces (Shaw, 2020). However, despite emerging from that election with a gain of sixteen seats and twenty-seven seat majority, British Columbia's NDP government has continued to underwhelm observers with its performance on childcare. The NDP allocated just $233 million over three years for childcare in its first post-election budget in April 2021, barely over one-tenth the amount it promised during the campaign—a sum that provincial childcare advocates dismissed as "lackluster" and "tinker[ing] at the margins" (Gregson et al, 2021; Ellis, 2021).

The case of British Columbia is critical to my argument because it challenges one line of prior research which attributes the meagreness of childcare programs in provinces outside of Quebec to the "persistence of strongly competitive right-wing part[ies]" in provincial party systems (Arsenault et al., 2018b).[23] While British Columbia has historically been home to two strong right-wing parties, Social Credit and the BC Liberals,[24] the latter has taken a more moderate turn since losing power in 2017. Notably, BC Liberal leader Andrew Wilkinson introduced his own subsidized childcare plan during the fall 2020 election campaign, promising families $10, $20, or $30-a-day childcare based on their income level (DeRosa, 2020). The B.C. Liberals will likely need to stay on this moderate course if they wish to remain competitive in the province's socially progressive, and seat-rich, Lower Mainland and Island regions.[25] The recent leftward shift in British Columbia's party system means that partisanship will likely not be to blame for any further provincial underperformance on childcare.

Experiences like British Columbia's are likely to be the norm across the country.[26] Constrained by the visibility of the Quebec program on one end and a dearth of financial

[22] There are around 119,000 subsidized daycare spaces in British Columbia ("B.C. NDP government is still a long way", 2020) and, as of 2016, 253,000 children in the province aged five and under (Friendly et al., 2018, p. 108).
[23] A separate line of argument ties the underprovision of childcare in provinces outside of Quebec to the persistence of a residualist liberal welfare regime in the English-speaking parts of Canada (Friendly and Prentice, 2012; McLaren and McIntyre, 2013). However, as Mahon and Phillips (2002) observe, the provision of childcare varies among liberal welfare states, indicating that "politics can matter" in such systems (p. 192).
[24] While maintaining the Liberal brand, the BC Liberals are an electoral coalition of Federal Liberals and Federal Conservatives who favor a low personal tax burden and pro-business policies.
[25] British Columbia's interior, an electoral stronghold of the BC Liberals, is likely to lose representation in the next round of electoral redistricting, scheduled to take place prior to next provincial election (McElroy, 2021).
[26] One exception is Prince Edward Island, Canada's smallest province. Prince Edward Island's highly regarded childcare system is built around a network of 49 cost controlled Early Years Centres (EYCs) and a Child Care Subsidy Program (CCSP) for low-income families (Friendly et al., 2021, pp. 17, 23), resulting in the third-lowest childcare fees in Canada (behind Quebec and Manitoba) (Yarr, 2019). The Prince Edward Island program is notable

resources on the other, progressive governments in the other provinces are bound to continue to overpromise and underdeliver on childcare.

Several of the provincial advocates I interviewed expressed exasperation with the shadow cast by Quebec's program. One interviewee, a childcare activist and former civil servant based in Victoria, British Columbia, remarked, "The issues with the Quebec program [in terms of quality] are longstanding," lamenting how Quebec's experience has shaped the branding of childcare across the country: "I don't think that '$7-a-day' is the best frame. It immediately puts advocates for quality childcare on the wrong side of the argument." (Interviewee #2, August 27, 2017). Another informant quipped, "The Quebec program sure gets a lot of hype." They singled out influential Université du Québec à Montréal economist Pierre Fortin, who has penned myriad opinion pieces on childcare, for promoting the 'return on investment' to the economy delivered via Quebec's program (Interviewee #8, March 29, 2018).

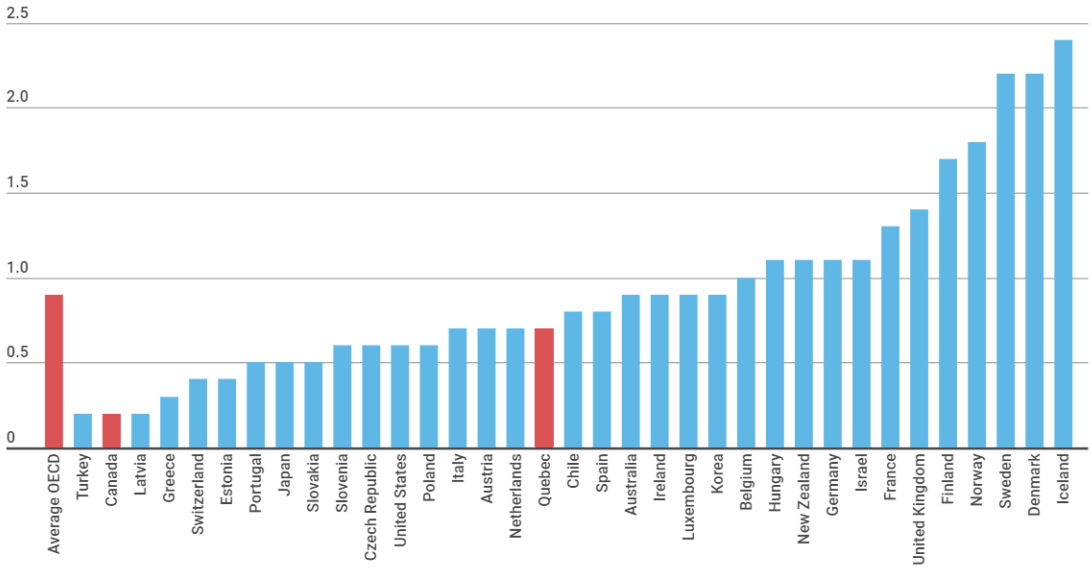
The insular national focus on Quebec has also obscured just how far Canada lags other high-income countries in public spending on early childhood education and care (ECEC). Canada is, in fact, tied for last among Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries in ECEC spending as a percentage of GDP (0.2%),[27] falling well behind even the United States (0.6%) (see Figure #2). Even the 0.7% of provincial GDP that Quebec devotes to its childcare program falls below the OECD average of 0.9%, a fact that has not stopped opponents from framing the program as unreasonably costly and financially unsustainable (Geloso, 2015; Yabuski, 2017).

Figure 3

Public Spending on Childcare - OECD Countries and Quebec

for its rejection of Quebec-style flat daily parental fees—EYC fees are higher for infants (1 – 22 months) than toddlers (Friendly et al., 2021, p. 23)—and its embeddedness in a comprehensive early childhood education (ECE) framework (Anderssen, 2013). The scalability of Prince Edward Island's program, which serves a total provincial population of just 7,500 target-aged children (Friendly et al., 2021, p. 18), remains an open question.

[27] Starting in the early 2000s, childcare advocates have frequently attempted to use the OECD standings to galvanize Canadian policymakers into action (White 2011).



Note. The OECD uses total public spending on in-kind benefits as a measure for childcare. From Arsenault et al., 2018.

Childcare in the 2015 Federal Election Campaign

Heading into the 2015 federal election, the then governing Conservative Party set out to make childcare a central campaign issue. The Conservatives' final major policy initiative prior to calling the election was to increase the monthly payout of its Universal Child Care Benefit (UCCB) for children six and under and enable parents to claim a smaller monthly benefit for each child aged seven to seventeen. The UCCB expansion brought total federal spending on children's benefits to $18 billion per year, a $4 billion increase from the previous fiscal year, comprising approximately 1% of national GDP (Department of Finance Canada, 2015, Table 5.2.6; Malanik, 2016, p. 6).

While the notion of the child benefit, a monthly cash allowance that parents could spend on anything they wished, had always strained credibility as a childcare policy, the expansion nonetheless gave the opposition parties a cue to introduce their own big-ticket family policy items. The federal NDP, led by the Outremont-based Thomas Mulcair, responded by proposing a Quebec-inspired national childcare system.[28] The multistage plan proposed to incrementally increase federal financial support for childcare, culminating in $5 billion of annual spending to fund a million childcare spaces by the end of the NDP's second term in office (Armstrong, 2015), contingent on $3.3 billion of additional spending from the provinces (Bryden, 2015). Following provincial campaigners, Mulcair led with a flat price figure, $15-per-day, which was prominent in the NDP's campaign branding. On top of the proposed national childcare

[28] While Mulcair promised to steer clear of a one-size-fits all daycare program for the entire country, he nevertheless made numerous efforts to tie the NDP's plan with Quebec's model. For instance, he was flanked by the aforementioned Pierre Fortin at the fall 2014 unveiling of the NDP childcare plank in Ottawa (Geddes, 2014).

framework, Mulcair pledged to preserve the Harper government's expanded child benefit (Press, 2015), all while maintaining balanced budgets throughout his first term in office ("NDP Promises", 2015).

The plan met with immediate skepticism as its feasibility was called into question by the other parties, members of the press, and provincial officials (Bryden, 2015; Dehaas, 2015). This tepid response gave way to calamity at the midpoint of the campaign, with the release of a bombshell academic working paper which linked non-cognitive behavioural deficits to Quebec's childcare program. Despite not having passed the threshold of peer review at the time,[29] the study, co-authored by economists Michael Baker (University of Toronto), Jonathan Gruber (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), and Kevin Milligan (University of British Columbia) was quickly incorporated into the campaign narrative, generating headlines like "Study links Quebec's universal child-care system to crime rates" (*Montreal Gazette*) and "Study raises questions about NDP's proposed universal child-care system" (*Globe and Mail*).

While Mulcair's childcare plan was already unlikely to be a substantial vote winner, the negative coverage surrounding the study killed whatever momentum it might have given the NDP campaign. Despite early polling that indicated Mulcair had a good chance of leading the NDP to its first ever federal government (Anderson and Coletto 2015; EKOS Politics 2015), the party ultimately lost 51 seats, finishing in a disappointing third place. To be clear, the NDP's underwhelming election result cannot be pinned on its childcare plank alone. It is nevertheless noteworthy that the proposal drew so much negative media coverage and attention.

The NDP's ill-fated push for Canada-wide childcare coincided with a dip in public enthusiasm for the idea. The 2015 Canadian National Election Study, taken over the course of that year's federal election campaign, shows a 10% drop in support for publicly funded daycare compared to the levels of support recorded over the two previous election cycles, although a majority of respondents (53.4%) still favoured the idea (see Table 1). The percentage of respondents who preferred "giv[ing] money directly to parents" increased by over three points over the same period of time, reaching 32.8%.[30]

Table 1

"What Should Government Do?" (Canadian National Election Study)

	2008	2011	2015
Fund public daycare	63.4%	63.2%	53.4%
Give money directly to parents	29.5%	29%	32.8%
Don't know/no response	7.1%	7.8%	13.6%
Respondents (#)	2,451	3,362	7,288

[29] A revised version of the working paper was published in 2019 in *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, under the title "The Long-Run Impacts of a Universal Child Care Program".

[30] The publicity surrounding the Baker et al. paper does not appear to have affected national public opinion. CNES respondents polled after the study's release (September 21st, 2015) were slightly more likely to support publicly funded daycare than those who had been surveyed beforehand.

The 2021 Childcare Budget and Beyond

More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic, and its adverse impact on working parents, created an opening for the Trudeau government to revisit the idea of a national childcare program. The government's first pandemic-era budget, unveiled in April 2021, committed $27.2 billion over five years to the creation of a "Canada-wide, community-based system of quality childcare", targeting an average $10-a-day parent fee for all regulated spaces by 2025-26 (Childcare Resource and Research Unit 2021).

At the time of writing it is too early to tell how Trudeau's childcare initiative will fare. However, it is worth noting that some of the immediate pushback against the plan has tied it to Quebec. For instance, a critique of the budget written by influential national columnist Andrew Coyne for *The Globe and Mail* was titled "Is Quebec's daycare program really the model to be followed by the rest of Canada?". This suggests that, whatever the outcome might be, Quebec's experience is likely to once again set the terms of Canada's forthcoming national childcare debate.

Conclusion

Faced with tight budget constraints in the mid-1990s, Quebec's provincial government succeeded in building a viable childcare program cost-effectively and within an impressively short time frame. However, as the program enters its third decade, evidence is beginning to mount that the program's architects may have sacrificed too greatly on quality in order to keep baseline daily parent fees in the single digits.

As this paper has shown, the ramifications of these decisions go beyond Quebec. With the shadow of Quebec's program invariably cast over family policy debates in other provinces, and at the federal level, hostile ideological interests emerged and have had some success in amplifying the program's shortcomings. Moreover, following Quebec's lead, progressive actors in other provinces and federally, have latched onto unrealistic and unhelpful flat price figures to anchor their own campaigns for subsidized childcare, allowing meaningful discourse on program quality, gender equity, and work-life balance to fall by the wayside.

The non-diffusion of Quebec's childcare program has troubling implications for the prospects of further interjurisdictional social policy transfer in Canada. The continued influence of right-of-centre think tanks in the national policy discourse means that all new provincial social programs will come under a microscope and have their shortcomings widely publicized. It is unclear if the process of province-to-province social policy experimentation and emulation described above by Noël (1999) can persist in the prevailing political landscape.

One remaining question, which cannot be directly addressed here due to spatial and scope limitations, is whether the program's identity as a Quebec innovation has made it uniquely resistant to diffusion. The program was, after all, conceived as part of a concerted effort to brand Quebec as a culturally distinct society with collective values that differ from those of the other

provinces—especially as they pertain to family, community, and gender relations. From this perspective, it is perhaps unsurprising that the idea of a large-scale public childcare program has not caught on to the same extent in the other provinces where religiosity and social conservatism may still hold more sway over attitudes towards parenting and the appropriateness of childcare centres as sites for the early socialization of children.[31]

Moreover, anti-Quebec sentiment has long been a fixture of conservative rhetoric in the rest of Canada, especially since the rise of the Reform Party in the 1990s. To give one example, the notion of Quebec's 'freeloading' has been central to the conservative framing of Canada's equalization program, a cause currently championed by Alberta premier Jason Kenney (Yakabuski, 2019). Furthermore, cultural tropes associating Quebec with corruption and licentiousness were perceptible in the media coverage of the sponsorship (2004) and SNC-Lavalin (2019) scandals. Future research, in the form of content analysis, might gauge the extent to which such tropes and negative associations have been infused in criticisms of Quebec's universal childcare program. For now, its non-diffusion remains an anomalous and important departure from the norm.

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[31] See Morgan (2006) for a view of the impact of religion on the politics of work-family policy.

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