

MACLEAN'S

A bare minimum of care; A death at an illegal daycare revives calls for universal child care. But that's not most parents' first choice

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When a two-year-old girl was found dead last week in an illegal daycare in Vaughan, Ont., it was easy to see where the battle lines would fall. On one side: traditionalists who viewed the incident as the outcome of warped values placing work ahead of family—a society where children languish in inadequate care as parents chase the almighty dollar. On the other: proponents of national subsidized daycare, who believe an affordable, universal program is the only way to ensure families have access to adequate care.

About the only point of agreement was that the status quo can't hold. While the cause of the child's death wasn't immediately known, the home in question was by all accounts a child-care sweatshop, daytime home to 27 children in a province where the legal limit for unlicensed daycares is five. Three complaints had been lodged about overcrowding at the two-storey brick house over the last nine months, and provincial inspectors had followed up on one, ordering the owner to comply with regulations. Yet the families kept coming-willing, it seemed, to ignore jam-packed conditions in return for care they could afford.

It's been seven years since the Liberals' plan for a national, universal daycare program fell victim to a change in government, and still child care remains one of the country's great, unresolved issues. The plan, spearheaded by then-social development minister Ken Dryden, was less "one-size-fits-all" than "every-province-choose-its-size," and there's no telling if it would have prevented last week's tragedy. But its passing has been lamented by those who see it as collateral damage in the culture wars, noting Stephen Harper's Conservatives rescinded the \$5-billion federal funding commitment with great zeal—a mere five hours after being sworn in.

There's more than partisan gamesmanship keeping it from coming back. Canadians appear deeply conflicted about the issue on an individual level—to the point they aren't sure exactly what kind of daycare they want. While surveys routinely show a majority of working parents would take advantage of a universal program were it available, **a recent poll commissioned by the conservative Institute of Marriage and Family Canada suggests 76 per cent of Canadians believe it is best that children under six be home with a parent.** Another poll, conducted in 2004, found daycare centres to be a distant fifth choice as a child-care option among Canadians, behind a parent; a grandparent; a relative or a day home. The latter survey was commissioned by the Vanier Institute of the Family, a non-partisan think tank.

Dryden brushed aside these contradictions with tin-eared mockery, likening working parents who wish they could care for their kids to weight-watchers who "would like ice cream once a week and chocolate twice a day." But new parents are genuinely perplexed. Pamela Chan, a 39-year-old mother of two in Toronto, wants on one hand to set an example for her three-year-old daughter by showing her that she can be out in the work force. But Chan, a mobile-product manager, recently had a baby boy. When her maternity leave ends, she concedes, it will be financial necessity, not ambition, that has her checking them into a day home and heading back to work. "Goodness knows if I had my choice," she says, "it would be myself or my husband staying home to take care of the kids."

She's not alone. More and more families feel both parents must work because the cost of living is rising relative to income, notes Nora Spinks, chief executive of the Ottawa-based Vanier Institute. Some can't keep up, and while no one keeps tabs on the number of families who specifically resort to illegal daycares, one in three turn to what Statistics Canada categorizes as relatives, nannies or "similar private arrangements." Many, says Spinks, "are forced to make trade-offs."

Still, the fact that places like the house in Vaughan could fall between the regulatory cracks has stunned political leaders and the public. Two Ministry of Education staffers have been suspended over the incident, while Ontario's ombudsman, André Marin, is investigating whether the province does enough to protect children in unlicensed care. At a minimum, say advocates, those paid to care for groups of children on-site should be licensed and inspected. "We regulate dry cleaners, and we regulate restaurants," says Spinks. "We want to make sure families not only have access to services, but feel confident in making their choices."

That's a far cry from the egalitarian vision of universal child care. But at least it's doable. And with Canadians as ambivalent as ever on a highly divisive issue, settling for what's possible-as soon as possible-seems the obvious course of action.