

The eReview provides analysis on public policy relating to Canadian families and marriage. Below please find information on the testimony of two child care experts before a senate committee.



Child care and the federal government

Parents reiterate they want to care for their kids. So why are Canada's child care experts pushing for the opposite?

By Andrea Mrozek, Manager of Research and Communications

Meet Mustard and McCain, two of the experts behind the push for a national daycare plan in Canada. On February 14, Dr. Fraser Mustard, founder of the Council for Early Child Development and Margaret Norrie McCain his co-author on the 2007 paper *Early Years Study 2* testified before the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology. [1] The Senate is currently examining "the state of early learning and childcare in Canada," after the release of a 2006 OECD report ranked Canada poorly on child care spending. [2]

If these witnesses are any indication, it just doesn't auger well for the Senate's final assessment. Mustard and McCain believe there is no stone the federal government should leave unturned to support universal daycare. Their plan? "Go big or do not go at all," says McCain. Federal child care, they estimate, should cost about 18.5 billion dollars annually. Because Dr. Mustard's research is in neurobiology, his concern begins with children in utero and in the very first months of life. How they hope to get federal bureaucrats into the womb remains a tactical mystery. But not to worry—they'll try.

It's not that they are completely off track. Yes, those early months, and mom's care even while the child is in the womb, are important. But from this they derive a pressing need for a universal daycare plan, for absolutely everyone. "It must be universal as opposed to targeted towards those we determine are at risk. If you do this, you will miss the largest number of Canadian children who are vulnerable—those in the middle class," says McCain.

This is reminiscent of the "beer and popcorn" fiasco when Liberal staffer Scott Reid said Canadian parents would squander child care cash given to parents. [3] Mustard and McCain are a variation on that theme: Instead of worrying you'll waste money on things other than child care—they are worried that you will use it for just that.

Mustard believes 18.5 billion is a small price to pay for a good child care plan because he explains; it will save billions more, 220 billion dollars annually to be precise—in money currently spent on mental health institutions and criminal justice. "These are massive societal and economic costs," says Mustard, "and I am tired of the Government of Canada not being able to cope with that."

Parents, on the other hand, when surveyed, are adamant they would like to stay home. There's a long list of surveys and polls that have been done clearly indicating a parental preference for one of them in the home, failing that, a family member. [4] And there is no evidence that for the majority of kids child care centres are better than parents or other forms of care. [5]

Both Mustard and McCain say they value parents. But a federally funded universal plan de facto says parents do not matter as much as these “early child development” programs do. A universal daycare plan does not make it easier for parents to stay home, should they want to.

Mustard is colourful: His AA-rated testimony includes everything from his love of kittens and Cuba, to outbursts decrying the second rate research of other academics, which he calls “chicken poop.” But beyond his flamboyant persona, what he is actually advocating is profoundly anti-parent. Yet Senator Munson replies to Dr. Mustard: “You used words like “chicken pooh-pooh” and “crappy” and so on. That is heavy stuff, and it seems to me that you have always thought outside the box.”

Heavy stuff indeed. And smelly too, chicken pooh-pooh is, especially when it’s not in the box. That pooh-pooh would hit the fan if the average Canadian parent had time to read Dr. Mustard’s testimony: He has an almost religious conviction the federal government should step up to the plate to parent the nation and that they will do a bang up job. In the end it sounds as though he is telling Canadian parents that they aren’t up to snuff. (That’s you and you, braving the Canadian winter not on taxpayer-funded junkets to Cuba but rather by schlepping the kids to swimming lessons in snow drifts eight feet high.)

Canadian families today are financially strained. [6] We ought to diminish that strain, either through family tax cuts or through money for parents to help with child care. With rare exceptions, Canadian parents raise their kids well—better than the professionals and with a love the government can’t muster. Or Mustard. Meet the experts. Meet ‘em and weep.

Endnotes:

[1] McCain, M.N., Mustard, J.F. & Shanker, S. Society for Research in Child Development (March 2007). *Early Years Study 2: Putting Science into Action*. Toronto: Council for Early Child Development. Retrieved from [http://www.councilecd.ca/cecd/home.nsf/7F1BCE63A330D017852572AA00625B79/\\$file/Early_Years_2_rev.pdf](http://www.councilecd.ca/cecd/home.nsf/7F1BCE63A330D017852572AA00625B79/$file/Early_Years_2_rev.pdf)

[2] The Senate Committee proceedings can be found online at http://www.parl.gc.ca/39/2/parlbus/commbus/senate/Com-e/soci-e/45189-e.htm?Language=E&Parl=39&Ses=2&comm_id=47
All subsequent citations from Mustard and McCain are found in this testimony.

[3] CTV News Staff. (December 11, 2005). Senior Grit staffer apologizes for 'beer' gaffe. Retrieved online at http://www.ctv.ca/servlet/ArticleNews/story/CTVNews/20051208/elxn_campaign_stops_051211/20051211?s_name=election2006

[4] GPC Research. Canadian attitudes on the family; Institute of Marriage and Family Canada. (April 1, 2006), Canadians Make Choices on Childcare. Canadian Family Views 1, 3. Retrieved from http://www.imfcanada.org/article_files/CanadiansMakeChoicesAboutChildcare.pdf

Ipsos Reid, Focus Groups on Issues Surrounding Child Care. (May 23, 2006) Final Report V9863-060001/001/CY, submitted to Human Resources and Social Development, May 23, 2006. “...It does not seem that people outside the major urban centers are looking for a National Day Care system...” Retrieved online at http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/cgi-bin/hrsdcrhdsc/print/print.asp?Page_Url=/en/cs/comm/reports/por/childcare/20060523.shtml

Bibby, R. (February 10, 2005). Press Release: Child Care Aspirations. University of Lethbridge. Retrieved from http://www.vifamily.ca/newsroom/press_feb_10_05_c.html

Compas, Inc. (2003, May). Ontario provincial election report for Global TV, National Post, Ottawa Citizen and Windsor Star. <http://www.compas.ca/data/030521-GlobalOnProvElection-E.pdf>

Michalski, J.H. (1999). Values and preferences for the “best policy mix” for Canadian children. Ottawa Canadian Policy Research Networks, Inc.

[5] There is evidence of benefits from centre-based child care for disadvantaged children. For the IMFC position in full see http://www.imfcanada.org/article_files/April_25_2007.pdf

[6] What’s at the heart of the Canadian family? (September 2007). Institute of Marriage and Family Canada. Retrieved online at [http://www.imfcanada.org/article_files/IMFC%20Report%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.imfcanada.org/article_files/IMFC%20Report%20(2).pdf)

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