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Good riddance, national daycare

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A national system of early learning and child care -- that shining idea on a hill -- has lost substantial ground this election campaign. Instead of constantly discussing a system, all parties are competing for ways to put more money into the hands of parents. This marks a major and welcome shift.

Think back to 2006. The idea of a national, universal, publicly-funded daycare scheme was everywhere. We needed more regulation to eradicate the "patchwork quilt of care," we were told. And if we had the new system, they said, your two-year-old would not only be loved and nurtured, but speaking Latin, too.

The dream began to unravel with the Liberals' now infamous "beer and popcorn" comment, which betrayed a lack of confidence in the abilities of Canadian parents to spend their own money. Today, it's fading into obscurity. Why? It's expensive, expansive and parents don't want it. It seems as though politicians of all stripes are finally seeing the poll numbers on the wall.

Sure, the Liberals and NDP still include "universal daycare" in their party platforms. But it is sandwiched between strategies to offer parents money. On tap from the Liberals is the addition of \$350 to the child benefit the Conservatives started. And there's a new supplement for low income families with children, at \$1,225 annually. Astonishingly, the NDP announced the "centrepiece" of their platform is a new child benefit -- one that consolidates existing benefits and could provide up to \$400 per child monthly.

Monthly cheques to parents? Not too long ago, these words were anathema to the left, particularly to Stephane Dion. He criticized the Conservative plan; child care is not delivered through the mailbox, he said.

Today, he's adding to those cheques -- they are moving from public slur to public policy. More to the point, how serious are the NDP and Liberals about a commitment to national daycare? Judging by the dollar values assigned -- not very. The Liberals promise to ramp funding up to \$1.25-billion annually, by the fourth year of a mandate. The NDP will "eventually climb to more than one billion annually." Yet modest estimates have universal daycare in one province alone -- Quebec -- costing \$2-billion annually.

The idea of a national daycare system is truly passe -- though the concept does seem to be making some inroads under a different guise. Two of Canada's most populous provinces, Ontario and British Columbia, are moving to full-day kindergarten. And the Conservatives have set aside \$1.1-billion for early learning and child care for 2008-2009. No matter who spends it, or what they call it, this funding is a waste. It's money parents could use better in hand.

Thankfully, for this campaign, at least, the rhetoric pays more attention to parents, not systems -- people, not institutions. All Canadians should push for more and hold politicians to this. For any move to give preference to parents by leaving them with more money in their pockets is a step in the right direction. - Andrea Mrozek is manager of research at the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada (www.imfcanada.org).