

The eReview provides analysis on public policy relating to Canadian families and marriage. Below please find a review of a childcare report from the United Kingdom.

There's a new childcare report out in the United Kingdom that Canadian parents won't likely hear about—but they should.

Hakim, C., Bradley, K., Price, E., Mitchell, L. (April 2008). *Little Britons: Financing Childcare Choice*. Policy Exchange. Retrieved online at <http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/images/publications/little%20britons%20-%20jan%2008.pdf>

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Imagine child care offered by different jurisdictions in different ways—some tax cuts, some vouchers. Imagine that it's hard to understand the system (or lack thereof); it's inaccessible and excessively complicated. Add in some confusion over federal-provincial jurisdiction and you'd think this is a description of Canada. It's not.

Such is the childcare situation in the United Kingdom, as described in a recent report from the Policy Exchange, an independent London-based think tank [1]. Given this situation, what do you think a recent report called *Little Britons: Financing Childcare Choice* recommends?

Money for parents—and quite a lot of it—by scrapping some existing benefits and replacing them with a Parental Care Allowance. They begin by looking at what women actually want through an honest reflection of government surveys.

Parental desires are not homogeneous and this diversity provides the basis for their suggested childcare policy. The new allowance would pay the equivalent of about 100 Canadian dollars *weekly*, directly to parents of children aged zero to three. This would be payable immediately after birth or after maternity benefits end and would be the same amount irrespective of the number of children. Given the current unnecessary complexities, the authors say in spite of the greater sum of money, it would be far more efficient. What's more, it's what parents actually want.

Since the 1990s, the British government has only pretended to listen to families—women in particular. The authors cite a government report ironically entitled *Listening to Women*, yet the voices of one group—full-time parents—who “featured so strongly in the research results” are excluded because they contradicted the government's agenda to “promot[e] paid work as women's central life activity.” [2]

The reality of women's thinking in Britain is far more nuanced—and traditional, if we may yet use that word—than the government allows.

“[T]he studies found that one-third of women believed home and family were women's main focus in life and that women should not try to combine a career and children.” It goes on: “Even in the youngest age group of women who had not yet had children, one-fifth still believed women cannot combine a career and children.” [3] Fully 80 per cent of mothers prefer that their children remain in the home until they

turn one; this drops to 57 per cent when children turn three. [4]

The authors acknowledge if you ask whether women want “more and better childcare” the answer is “of course”. But this is a skewed question. Better are those that “invite people to prioritize several options or assign a financial value to policy options.” [5]

Current childcare policy in Britain involves funding for childcare institutions, (Sure Start and the Early Years Entitlement). [6] Then there’s a Working Tax Credit and a voucher program. All these programs have been ineffective, the authors argue, because they have been difficult to access, with irreconcilable work and income requirements.

Indeed, those targeted for help appeared not to want it. “[D]aycare was a long way down the list of priorities for parents in deprived families and Sure Start evaluations also show that formal childcare was actively rejected as inappropriate in most areas.” [7] Apparently you can lead parents to water, but you can’t make them drink.

Neither do the U.K. researchers gloss over the complexity of childcare research, as some activists here at home do. These outcomes show “mixed results” for children before age three in care outside the home—negative outcomes as often as positive. [8] Jay Belsky, a professor at Birkbeck University of London and one of the authors of an important study examining long term effects of child care says the fact that some interventions have worked is not evidence that all interventions always work. [9]

The false conclusion that small targeted interventions that have worked in the past will always work in society at large in the future is one often reached (and preached) by childcare activists in Canada. And that’s why you likely won’t hear about this report—it calls into question some of the long-cherished childcare truisms this side of the pond.

Questions about the proposed policy remain—what, for example, if the fertility rate were to revive itself from death’s door (UK’s is currently 1.8) and suddenly the government was charged with paying out high amounts for double or triple the children?

Would say, the French model for income splitting provide the same benefit? Still, this idea marks less of an intrusion than experts telling us that institutional child care is essential to prepare children for school and life.

Canada’s approach to child care has been stagnating alongside Bill C-303, still waiting for its day of infamy (a final vote in the House) where in a very political minority Parliament it would likely pass and usher in an era of institutional care for all. Parents can hope for much better, and point their Members of Parliament to this report from the United Kingdom to prove it.

Endnotes:

[1] Policy Exchange web site: <http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/>

Report retrieved online at <http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/images/publications/little%20britons%20-%20jan%2008.pdf>

[2] *Little Britons*, pg. 17

[3] *Little Britons*, pg. 14

[4] *Little Britons*, pg. 9

[5] *Little Britons*, pg. 18.

Incidentally, these are the types of non-leading questions the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada did ask when we polled Canadians about child care in 2005. See Canadians make Choices on Childcare, retrieved online at <http://www.imfcanada.org/issues/canadians-make-choices-about-childcare>

[6] *Little Britons*, pg. 8

[7] *Little Britons*, pg. 36

[8] *Little Britons*, pg. 45

[9] *ibid.*