

Trust Fund swells

Day care funding is long overdue

by John Kenney

Alberta's provincial government recently answered the pleas of parents for more quality day care with a 20-page "Proposal for Day Care Standards and Licensing." It suggests tighter regulations governing operations without suggesting how such standards would be enforced. If the new standards were to be enforced, costs in private day care centres will rise approximately 50 per cent. But private centres would also have five years to incorporate the new standards.

Alberta, land of the rich, secure, and the smug, is a modern-day paradox. More than \$1.5 billion in oil and gas revenues (with predictions of \$10 billion in ten years) sits in Loughheed's Heritage Trust Fund, all purportedly for Alberta's future. At the same time Alberta spends less per capita on day care, than does B.C., Sask., Man., or Ont.

Several weeks ago Edmonton's Mayor Terry Cavanaugh publicly criticized the provincial government for its spending restraints on day care. The University's Senate Task Force on the Status of Women revealed that the U of A Students' Union Day Care is oversubscribed by more than 100 children with those of academic staff having little opportunity to attend. "... the matter of daycare provision is one of the most serious and pressing at this university. It is a problem that has grown rather than diminished since the publication of the Task Force Report."

Ron Gaunce, a day care consultant with the provincial government, has declared that he is sympathetic with peoples' concerns but maintains that the public sets government spending priorities. Alberta's 'public,' however, has the highest percentage of women in the labour force — some 50,000 mothers are employed full-time.

Rhetoric and indignation

Behind the rhetoric and indignation are working mothers who can't both financially support a household and care for their children. Their predicament demands they pay for child care out of the low wages they invariably receive as women. There are mothers at home who would like to continue their education or take a job — to exercise a true choice. There are single parents — divorced, widowed, separated, or unmarried — who need day care facilities. Again, the problem is compounded if the parent happens to be a woman with the traditionally lower salary.

Listen. Day care is where children, three years to school age, go for the day and where there is a program of activities and a staff specially trained to deal with preschool children. (Nursery schools only offer a half day of care.) They have certain provincial licensing requirements, fire codes, maximum space and health regulations, sleeping facilities, diapering and toilet training, food preparation and feeding.

In Canada there are three types of day care. There are private or

commercial types that are operated by private individuals for profit (accounts for 85 per cent of day care in Ontario). Private, non-profit day care centres are operated by churches, United Appeal, and parents' groups. There are municipal day care centres operated by welfare departments of municipal governments (accounts for 2 per cent of Canada's day care).

So parents either have to be wealthy enough to afford the private day care centres or else they have to "prove" that they are needy enough to warrant government subsidization.

Day-care funding

Funding for day care comes from the Canada Assistance Plan (CAP), 1966. Through this cost-sharing scheme the federal government agrees to pay 50 per cent of the operating costs for day care, the province 30 per cent, and the municipality 20 per cent.

The federal funds allotted to the provinces can only be used to cover operating costs, not capital costs of day care. That is, there are no federal funds to cover the initial costs of buildings and equipment. Furthermore, CAP doesn't permit municipalities to enter into partnership with voluntary groups for new programs.

Thus far the most basic flaw of CAP (and Canada's welfare system) has been nimbly sidestepped — the federal government only matches the provincial contribution. It does not allocate funds according to need. Newfoundland, for example, can only secure a small federal share because of its meagre provincial contribution despite its obvious need.

Alberta licenses day care under the Welfare Homes Act, 1963 (revised 1969) and provincial funding is provided through the Preventive Social Services Act, 1966. The province had 2900 spaces for children in 1970 (845 government subsidized) and 10,000 spaces (3500 subsidized) in 1976. Even with the provincial expenditure of \$4.5 million, the private centres have been meeting the demand, not the government.

Diane Dalley, Director of Students' Union Day Care Centre in HUB, could tell you a story. You see, once upon a time, a day care centre opened in HUB with room for 60 children but a month later it was all full and there were still lots more children. Nobody bothered to build more day care space for the 138 children in the university community still waiting. People wrote letters and people made written submissions to "reports" but nothing happened. The flow of money only trickled and HUB day care couldn't expand.

Needless to say, there is no 'The End' to this story and similar ones, in Edmonton. Dalley isn't taking new applications for the HUB centre and especially not from the 'low-priority' (according to the provincial government) academic staff and two-parent families. The fortunate few with children in the centre are mostly single parent students and some low income families paying on a sliding scale from \$10 - \$120 per month against actual costs of \$200 per month.

What about the unfortunate few?

The unfortunate few who couldn't get into HUB pay approximately \$95 - \$140 per month to private day care centres or else, like those in Michener Park, they shell out \$8 a day for a babysitter.

Money. What are the financial alternatives available to day care?

There are parents' fees which are assessed on a sliding scale according to the parents' income. Those who can afford the day care are assessed accordingly and those who can't are subsidized accordingly. Coupled with the extreme shortage of day care in Alberta and the subsequent priorities given to single parents and low income families at present this often leads to a type of 'ghetto-ization' — children of lower socio-economic classes are forced into one day care centre while wealthier applicants crowd into more expensive centres, which tends to reinforce an already rigid class division.

And because Alberta, unlike other provinces, subsidizes the centre and not the parent, the parent is forced to go to an arbitrarily-chosen centre, even though it may be located some distance from home.

The sliding scale is impractical because it shifts the responsibility directly onto the taxpayer and the bureaucratic costs to constantly reevaluate the parents' changing incomes becomes prohibitive.

Generating funds through income tax exists as another possibility although an impractical one for the already overtaxed working people. Logically one should turn to the little-taxed corporations and/or those American corporations subsidized by the Canadian government. This points towards a restruc-

turing of the tax laws, not a shift in taxes.

Unions might also fund day care centres. But again, as with the sliding scale and the income taxes, it is the worker who pays for the centres while government and business abdicate their responsibility.

We are left to ponder the concept of "universal" day care which suggests that the revenue for the support of day care should come from the collective wealth of society and which suggests supplying day care free regardless of income. This would mean a plan where a capital gains tax is imposed on industry's profits to provide the province with funds. The plan's logic is that since industry is partially supported by women workers, it should act in turn.

It would also involve federal government safeguards, to ensure that industry doesn't pass off its tax load in the form of increased prices to the consumer.

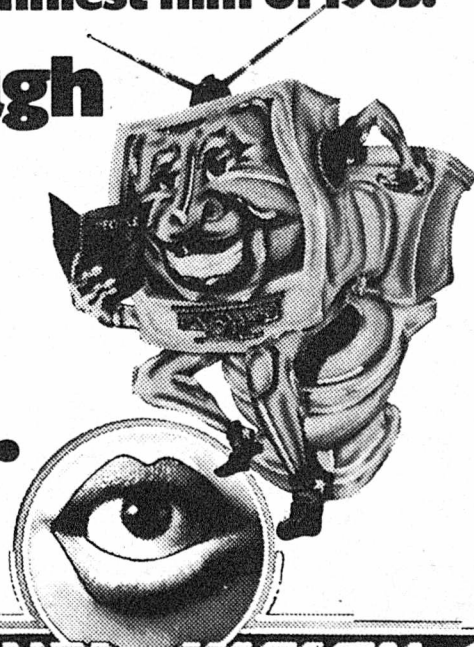
Universal day care is for the parents who tear across town through rush-hour traffic to deliver their children to a day care centre. It's an answer for those parents who leave their children with an aunt or grandparent or that 'good friend' who just might be stoned again. Rush to work and worry about the children, worry about whether they're doing the right thing. A warm lap is just not good enough when there's so much more we can offer.

Day care should be a right and not a privilege. The relative wealth of a country like Canada should mean that it's most valuable 'resource' is its children.

Since society continues to thrive on the labour of its women, it should also provide for quality care of the children left behind.

This kind of care means an environment that nourishes both the physical and mental growth of its tiny inhabitants.

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