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Rolling out or back tracking on Quebec's child care system? Ideology matters

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In 1997 Quebec launched a child care policy that pushed against the current that other North American jurisdictions were following. The “Quebec system” of affordable early childhood education and care (ECEC) quickly became the norm to be achieved for advocates pressuring Canadian governments for the elusive national child care system. Indeed when the October 2004 Throne Speech of the federal Liberals promised “a truly national system of early learning and care,” the Quebec model was the preferred one, although the subsequent child care accords negotiated with the provinces and territories allowed for local and therefore different policy mixes.

In 2004-05 it appeared that Canada was finally moving toward the realisation of one of the key promises of the LEGO™ paradigm for after neoliberalism (Jenson and Saint-Martin, 2006).¹ By then there was an international consensus around the position which had been innovative when Quebec adopted it in 1997: publicly funded and publicly delivered ECEC programmes are one

¹ While the discourse of social investment, including a commitment to investing in the future by investing in early childhood, had predominated in federal political discourse since the late 1990s, concrete implementation of the basic principles, and especially widely available ECEC, was not forthcoming. In large part the hindrance came from resistance on the part of several provincial governments that remained staunchly in the neo-liberal camp. With the election of Ontario's Liberal government in 2003 and after being shamed by the experts' reports of the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (one of the major proponents of the social investment perspective) the log-jam on child care broke and Canada finally seemed poised to swing into what is now the mainstream of thinking about ECEC.

useful – indeed key – tool in the processes of modernising social policy so as to by-pass the impasses of neo-liberalism and address new social risks.² Quebec’s reform of family policy in 1997 was a precocious example of this post-neoliberal stance, explicitly recognising the multidimensionality of protecting against new social risks. As Prime Minister Lucien Bouchard put it when releasing the White Paper on family policy (*Les enfants au coeur de nos choix*) that provided the policy blueprint (MEQ, 1997):

Les nouvelles dispositions de la politique familiale du gouvernement du Québec s'arriment à plusieurs des grands objectifs de l'État que sont la lutte à la pauvreté, l'égalité des chances, le développement de l'économie sociale, l'intégration au marché du travail des bénéficiaires de l'aide sociale et le support accru aux parents déjà en emploi.

Yet, even as the experts from the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2005) were touring Canada and developing their high praise for the Quebec model, the Liberal government of Jean Charest was trying, by stealth as well as by policy pronouncements, to undermine it. In summer 2003 the government tried to redesign the system, but in the face of wide-spread opposition it was able only to increase fees from \$5 per day to \$7. At the end of 2005 the government pushed through a major change that has the potential to reduce significantly the educational dimension of the ECEC system. Supervision of family daycare providers was shifted from locally-based early childhood centres (*CPE – centres de la petite enfance*) to regionally-based agencies. For all three years the government has consistently provided new access and greater encouragement to for-profit providers. The government has dragged its feet on meeting the demands of the child care workers – most of whom are women – for wage increases and pay equity, forcing the unionised workers into strikes, work slowdowns and so on.

How might we understand this strategy with respect to ECEC? Is the Quebec story simply one of *rolling out* neo-liberalism, in which the Liberals are designing a better form of neoliberalism than the Parti Québécois government could because it was under pressure from women’s groups and other progressive forces? To pose the question counterfactually, would (and will) the PQ have done the same? Or, are these, in contrast, efforts to push back on what had been designed

² International organisations such as the OECD (Mahon, 2005) and the European Union as well as national governments, policy wonks (for example, Esping-Andersen *et al.*, 2002) and feminists concurred that achieving the goal of higher rates of female labour force participation and greater economic autonomy for women necessarily depended on provision of child care services. Added to this, however, was an additional claim that had not been always been part of the discourse about reconciling work and family. This was that all non-parental child care is not created equal. By the 1990s the educational content of child care was front and centre, as was its role as a support for post-Keynesian full employment policies. The arguments can be summarised in this way: (1) that in a knowledge-based economy “education” involves not only “life-long learning” but also reaches well back into the pre-school years; (2) that the negative effects of poverty in childhood can be limited by providing access to ECEC; (3) that “making work pay” for low-income parents requires access to affordable and reliable child care; (4) that macro-economic growth as well as controlling social spending depend on increased female labour force participation rates; and (5) parents without reliable access to ECEC will choose to reconcile work and family life by accepting a lower-income over labour force participation. On the last point see the analysis of women’s labour force participation reduction in Alberta (the only province in which there has been a *decline* in women working, despite the much discussed shortage of personnel) (Brethour, 2006).

in 1997 as Quebec's response to the impasse of neo-liberalism? Are they better understood as efforts inspired by the ideology of classic neo-liberalism to which the Charest government subscribes and which therefore finds the Quebec model a weight to be cast off, bit by bit if one heave can not do it? In other words, are these efforts to *back track* on what in 1997 was a significant innovation in the direction of both a modernised and a progressive social politics?

These questions are of theoretical interest, as this paper argues. But they are also of political interest right now, as the Harper Conservative government in Ottawa dismantles the policies that had been constructed in the first half of this decade by the Liberals working with the multiple advocates for improved ECEC and social reform. Progressive forces face the choice of opposing the Harper strategy by advocating a return to the design worked out by the Liberals, or of opposing that design as well, because it itself was simply a neoliberal one, in perhaps a more palatable form.

This paper seeks to answer these questions with a detailed examination of Quebec's ECEC story. It will argue that this policy story is best told as one of an ideological clash fought by particular interests within the political institutions of Quebec, and therefore as backtracking.

Thinking about neo-liberalism

There is now consensus that neoliberalism profoundly challenged and destabilised post-1945 political projects, policy arrangements and practices of governing. One summary of the many available describes it this way (Campbell and Pedersen, 2001: 1):

... neoliberalism has been a political project that has attempted to transform some of the most basic political and economic settlements of the postwar era, including labor market accords, industrial relations systems, redistributive tax structures, and social welfare programs. Integral to these changes has been a shift away from Keynesian economic ideas, which emphasized the political management of aggregate demand, to more conservative discourse based on monetarist, supply-side, and rational expectations theories.

Agreement breaks down, however, about whether "after neoliberalism" is a meaningful category (Larner, 2003; Graefe, 2005). Two principal positions exist.

One stance is that neoliberalism is still hegemonic, reflecting major structural shifts in global capitalism. Political projects that claim to offer something "after neoliberalism" are little more than a slightly adjusted version of the basic form itself, perhaps a new or different phase (Peck and Tickell, 2002; Keil, 2002: 580-81). These analyses treat neoliberalism as an overarching set of power relations shaping everything from international financial markets to gender relations, social citizenship and public administrations, in the global South as well as the OECD world. Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell (2002: 380) summarise it this way:

Neoliberalism seems to be everywhere. This mode of free-market economic theory, manufactured in Chicago and vigorously marketed through principal sales offices in Washington, DC, New York, and London, has become the dominant

ideological rationalization for globalization and contemporary state “reform.” What began as a starkly utopian intellectual movement was aggressively politicized by Reagan and Thatcher in the 1980s before acquiring a more technocratic form in the self-styled “Washington consensus” of the 1990s. Neoliberalism has provided a kind of operating framework or “ideological software” for competitive globalization, inspiring and imposing far-reaching programs of state restructuring and rescaling across a wide range of national and local contexts. ... The new religion of neoliberalism combines a commitment to the extension of markets and logics of competitiveness with a profound antipathy to all kinds of Keynesian and/or collectivist strategies. The constitution and extension of competitive forces is married with aggressive forms of state downsizing, austerity financing, and public service “reform.”

Policy analysis within this framework seeks to document *similarities* across various policies and programmes. For example, despite identifying differences between human capital and labour force attachment approaches to employment strategies, Theodore and Peck (2000: 88-89) work to conclude that they are *both* examples of social policy complements to neoliberal labour market policies. Bob Jessop groups them together as policies simply “flanking” neoliberalism (2002). A recent empirical examination of Canadian policy changes similarly lumps all change – whether rapid and incremental, whether passive and active – together as part of a neoliberal thrust (Burke *et al.*, 2000).

A good deal of policy analysis about Canada claims the country has been living through a classically neoliberal moment and therefore that policies are being straight-forwardly designed in accordance with that ideology (Smith, 2005: Chapter 1 provides an overview). For example, Stephen McBride wrote recently (2005: 95): “The Keynesian post-war consensus was in its heyday from 1945 until about 1975. Thereafter its decline began, but some attachment to the Keynesian approach lingered until the defeat of the Trudeau government in 1984. ... Since then, neo-liberalism has been the dominant policy paradigm” For her part, Janine Brodie writes (2006 forthcoming):

For almost a generation now, the welfare states of most advanced capitalist countries and the politics that it inspired have been progressively transformed by retrenchment and restructuring. The assault on the logics and institutions of the postwar welfare state in recent decades has been most intense in Anglo-American welfare regimes that have embraced the imperatives of neoliberal governance.

Forms of representation are also described as having been designed by neoliberalism. Janine Brodie (2006) describes “a process of invisibilization [that] began with the *delegitimization* of women’s groups, indeed of virtually all equality seeking groups as relevant voices in the social policy. ... this phase was followed by the *dismantling* of much of the gender-based policy capacity within the federal government. Finally, women largely *disappeared* from social policy debates”

In many ways, such formulations take us back to the all-encompassing structuralism, whether Marxist or sociological, of earlier decades. They demonstrate little concern for comparative

analysis and therefore variation across time and space. For Marxists, all institutions, no matter their appearance, provided similar supports for capitalist social relations and even resistance was in serious danger of being motivated by nothing but false consciousness.³ Sociology also has a long tradition of analysing modernisation, and treating macro social changes as the drivers of policy design, especially changes in family structures and practices, labour force restructuring and modification of the demographic structure of society. John Myles and Jill Quadagno (2002: 36) recently summarised this tradition: “The first generation of welfare state studies typically turned to theories of industrialism to account for the common trajectory of rising welfare state expenditures throughout the developed world The main themes ... were echoed, albeit in different language, in early marxist accounts....”

In the *marxisant* perspectives, political projects to “modernize” social policy are usually described as nothing more than recalibration within the neoliberal project. Of course, such analyses rarely discuss child care as a policy, preferring to craft their critiques in terms of “gender orders” and “structural shifts.”⁴ In the case of ECEC in Quebec one might assume that the parts of the 1997 reform that appeared to break with neoliberalism would be interpreted as little more than a version of the hegemonic project while adjustments since the Liberals came to office would be described as simply a clearer expression of it. For these analysts, there would be little analytical interest in accounting for the differences.

A second position is that neoliberalism hit an impasse in the mid-1990s as social problems multiplied across OECD countries as well in countries subjected to the structural adjustment imperatives of the Washington consensus. Therefore, after two decades of hegemony, enthusiasm for neoliberalism waned and policy communities began to search for alternatives, albeit without a return to past practices of Keynesianism and post-1945 ideas and policies. This position considers as interesting, and worthy of attention, the differences, for example, between: the marriage-centred welfare reform of the United States and the policy stances protecting lone parents’ autonomy; between employability (supply-side) policies and activation (both supply and demand); between tax cuts as a policy instrument and service provision, especially creation of new services.

The detailed analysis of policy that such studies carry out, in order to observe what is actually occurring, reveal that this notion of a single neoliberal moment is too blunt an instrument for understanding what is actually happening in social and employment policy, and for appreciating the variations across policy designs which provide more or less progressive responses to gender, class and other structural inequalities. There are several reasons for this lack of analytical capacity.

First, empirical evidence about the past as well as the present is in short supply. For example, on one key dimension of state activity – levels of social spending – two things are clear: (1) the

³ Indeed, Jamie Peck recently and enthusiastically quoted Stuart Hall who depicted New Labour in Britain as “... what Lenin might have called ‘the best shell’ for global capitalism” (2004: 393). Keil (2002) provides a useful summary of the roots of these analyses in regulation theory and Foucaultian structuralism.

⁴ For example, Brodie (2006) mentions the words child care only twice in a long chapter on “Women and social policy reform.”

three post-1945 decades were hardly a “golden age” of universal and generous spending and (2) spending did not decrease during the 1980s, despite the election of neoliberals such as Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan and Brian Mulroney (Huber and Stephens, 2001: 2; Hicks, 1999: 195-200; Myles and Quadagno, 2002: 42-43).⁵ In Canada per capita spending on income maintenance programmes and social services rose steadily through the 1980s and into the 1990s, far out-stripping levels of the so-called “golden age” (Boychuk, 2004: 23).⁶ Moreover, between 1980 and 2000, working-age families received a growing portion of their income from government transfers.⁷ As in the 1960s and 1970s, of course, many of these families were among the “working poor,” that is they did not earn enough in the market to raise the family above a poverty or low-income line.⁸ The years from 1945 to 1975 did not, in other words, provide either universal access to social citizenship nor adequate levels of support.

Second, understandings of social risk that provided the rationale for post-1945 social protection (that is, the risks to the male breadwinner and his dependents as well as families without a male breadwinner) have changed. There is now a better appreciation of the “new social risks,” including low market wages, the challenges faced by single-earner families, new forms of poverty, the care needs of ageing populations and so on. Indeed, some of the new social risks are themselves identified as the product of the politics of neoliberalism that made access to social supports more difficult. Therefore protection against them constitutes efforts to un-do harm as well as to provide protection (for example, Taylor-Gooby *et al.*, 2004; Esping-Andersen *et al.*, 2002). Such distinctions are invisible in the structuralist accounts.

Third, governments *say* that they are doing things differently than their neoliberal predecessors. In Canada as in many other countries, Keynesianism lost legitimacy. But the late 1990s brought the election of political parties at the federal level and in some provinces pledged to move away from neoliberalism towards “social investment.” Over the last decade the federal and some

⁵ The lack of spending decline can be understood in part as the result of locked-in expenditures for social benefits, such that high levels of unemployment meant climbing social insurance spending in many regimes while rising poverty meant swelling social assistance rolls in liberal welfare states.

⁶ Spending on income maintenance and social services spending did not cross the \$1,000 per capita line until 1968, and by 1993 it was almost at \$4,000 per capita (Boychuk, 2004). Between 1976 and the mid-1980s, the largest increase in percentage terms was on the spousal allowance in the retirement income system (69%), followed by social assistance (45%) and then Unemployment Insurance (32%) and Old Age Security (31%) (Banting, 1987: 193).

⁷ For those in the second lowest decile, 30 percent of their before-tax income came from government transfers in 2000, up from 20 percent in 1980. The share for families in the third lowest decile rose from 11 percent to 17 percent (Jenson, 2004: 13).

⁸ In his overview of several decades of income security policies Keith Banting writes (1987: 15): “With the re-emergence of poverty as a political issue in the 1960s and 1970s, the studies of the Economic Council of Canada and other bodies revealed that at least two-thirds of the heads of poor families were in the labour force and over three-quarters of poor families had at least one wage earner. Similar findings emerged in other Western nations, and welfare reformers increasingly focused on the need to help these ‘working poor’....” The first effort to supplement low family wages was in 1970, when the federal government proposed to replace Family Allowances with a Family Income Security Plan. This initiative was not implemented, however.

provincial governments have continued to elaborate this notion. There are policy consequences to this talk of social investment. Labour market policies and social assistance have been significantly changed. Social knowledge about new social risks and talk of social investment have generated new ways of spending, such as using tax credits for families with children and supporting services such as early childhood education and care, not only in Canada but in several other countries (Myles and Quadagno, 2000; Lister, 2003; Jenson and Saint-Martin, 2006).

Those considering the possibility of “after neoliberalism” usually work at a different level of analysis than the structuralists described above. Their analysis is at the institutional level, and they seek to provide empirical comparisons of the – actual – present to the – real – past, thereby detailing differences in design and their consequences. They work, in other words, in the long-standing tradition of comparative policy analysis. Because, however, the *raison d’être* of much historical institutionalism to document difference,⁹ it is important to have some clear indicators of what would constitute evidence of difference.

Three indicators will be used.¹⁰ Ideas, including discursive re-constructions of the role of the state, can provide a first indicator of difference. However, simply documenting the texts and sayings of various actors is not sufficient. In order to conclude that a meaningful shift is taking place it is necessary to go further in the demonstration, and seek two other indicators. One involves demonstrating coherence in thinking, such that there is a different modelling of state-society relations, and in particular there must be an observable shift in the elements of the citizenship regime. This is the second indicator of difference. And third, there must be consequences in the actions of states, that is in the policies pursued by states.

Quebec’s story of ECEC will be read through these three indicators, in order to demonstrate that the 1997 reform was a precocious move towards a post-neoliberal policy stance and that since the election of the Liberals in 2003 there has been a concerted effort to return to the basic principles of classical neo-liberalism, including re-legitimizing market regulation and reducing the legitimacy of the community sector and the social economy.

Precocious “after neoliberalism”

Quebec was in the lead in bringing neoliberalism into the reform of social programmes. Beginning in the mid-1980s, the Liberal government injected some principles of “workfare” into its reform of social assistance, even before the word was well known in English (Bouchard, Labrie, Noël, 1996: 94). Coupled with this coercion there were, however, market-performance features that rewarded efforts to enter and stay in the labour force (Boychuk, 1998: 88). The combination generated a social assistance regime that included both sticks and carrots. One of the earliest programmes was the Parental Wage Assistance programme, known by its French

⁹ In work the institutional level of analysis, the concern is primarily to identify and understand the reasons for differences in policy outcomes. Where grand theories underline similarities and convergence in trends and processes, new institutionalism seeks to provide a new window through which better to understand “policy variations across countries” and the institutional configurations that account for them (Steimo *et al.*, 1992: 13; Jenson and Saint-Martin, 2006: 432-33).

¹⁰ Jenson and Saint-Martin (2003: 82ff.) use these three indicators used to document a shift towards a social investment perspective in Canada as well as elsewhere.

acronym, APPORT (*Aide aux parents pour leurs revenus de travail*) and instituted in 1988. It provided a wage supplement to families with a small amount (\$100 per month) of earned income and extra support for child care expenses, in order to encourage them to stay in the labour force. Family policy was also being redesigned in these years, and APPORT was linked to that redesign, which stood on four principles: providing public support for the costs of child-rearing; fighting poverty; encouraging parents to seek employment; and supporting a higher birth rate (Lefebvre, 1998: 221). In a decade, neoliberalism had brought a transformed social assistance regime, one based on both income support and “employability” (Noël, 1996).

Then, however, because of the limited results obtained by training and other programmes and because of rising rates of unemployment and social assistance, there was mounting dissatisfaction within policy communities as well as among citizens, about the high levels of poverty and joblessness. The debate about social solidarity was reopened in the mid-1990s, and this time one major focus was on children and families as well as women and poverty.

From the beginning, child benefits were part of the discussion, as was expanding child care, because of the reading of new social risks that placed single mothers and other poor families clearly in Quebec policy-makers’ sights. A child and investment focused anti-poverty discourse was being constructed in Quebec as in Europe.

In 1995 the PQ government asked a group of experts to make proposals for redesigning the system. Eventually, majority (headed by psychologist Camil Bouchard, and therefore called the *Bouchard Report*) and minority (headed by economist Pierre Fournier) reports were written, because the experts could not agree (Noël, 1996). Nonetheless, despite their disagreements on a range of other matters, both groups agreed that “children should be removed from social assistance” and both recommended the creation of an integrated family allowance as well as new services (Lefebvre, 1998: 215-16). The Estates-General of Education, also reported in 1996 and recommended more ECEC for the youngest children and extended pre-school education services, in order to combat high drop-out rates and school failure in general. The Conseil supérieur de l’éducation did the same (Jenson, 2002).

Ideas about post-neoliberalism – or what was described by progressives as reforms in the name of social justice – were constructed from several elements. One was the idea set about social citizenship and social risk that informed the Bouchard Report. It included a focus on poverty that called not only for redistribution of income but also redistribution of political power (Bouchard, 1995; Noël, 1996). Moreover, the idea of relying on the social economy to empower the poor as well as to provide a source of income was an element of this thinking. Indeed, at Quebec’s Summit on the Economy and Employment in October 1996 the representatives of the social economy and non-profit daycare centres presented a proposal for a pilot project for ECEC, a proposal that eventually was folded into the White Paper (Guindi, 2002).

The 2002 anti-poverty law (Bill 112) was another expression of this critical perspective promoted by both social policy experts and social movements, including the women’s movement which was a leader in the development of both Bill 112 alongside the anti-poverty movement

with its roots in the Catholic Church (Dufour, 2005: 173-74).¹¹ Both focused on support for families and on child care as tools for fighting poverty.

Added to this understanding of social solidarity were two additional discursive elements. One was the expertise of child development experts. Again Camil Bouchard played a key role, publishing in 1991, *Un Québec fou de ses enfants* [*Quebec, crazy about its children*] (MSSS, 1991). This analysis made the case that early childhood education was crucial to proper development and that poverty and disadvantage were the factors most likely to place children at risk for negative developmental outcomes. In the preparations of the 1997 White Paper on Family Policy he helped to make the links across domains such as social assistance, early childhood education, and anti-poverty and employment strategies. The second important discursive element came from the women's movement and especially the Fédération des femmes de Québec (FFQ), which undertook a major reorientation of strategic focus, putting the accent on anti-poverty struggles (Dufour, 2005: 173). The 1995 March for Bread and Roses clearly signalled this shift towards struggles against poverty and violence against women, and was carried over into the first World March for Women (Giraud, 2001: 146-47).¹²

These ideas had an influence within the policy community in large part because of the Quebec's structures of representation that had long included a role for "social partners" (labour and business) and that by the mid-1990s had been forced to include other social movements, such as women, students and the anti-poverty movement (Dufour, 2005). Quebec's Summit on the Economy and Employment in October 1996 brought together employers, unions and a broad selection of popular sector groups for what developed into a tumultuous discussion of plans for the medium-term future of the province. At the end of the Summit, Premier Lucien Bouchard announced a fundamental revision of family policy. Maligned by students over tuition fees, under pressure from anti-poverty activists to embrace the goal of "*appauvrissement zéro*" [zero poverty] rather than striving to achieve a "zero deficit", Mr. Bouchard might be accused of searching for a theme that would unite rather than divide.¹³ But the decision to announce a major reform of family policy was much more than an effort to get out of a sticky political situation. It represented the victory of a coalition of activists and officials seeking to address the needs of women, families and children within Quebec's societal strategy (*projet de société*). The FFQ and its president, Françoise David, played a key role at the summit, as did femocrats within the government when the new family policy was being written into law.

These ideas helped to underpin struggles within Quebec's citizenship regime over democracy and participation as well as against poverty. As Camil Bouchard summarised the position of the majority report on reforming social assistance:

¹¹ « Amorcée par le Carrefour de pastorale en monde ouvrier (CAPMO), l'histoire du Collectif est aussi intrinsèquement liée au mouvement des femmes et, en particulier, à la collaboration étroite de deux leaders, Françoise David de la Fédération des femmes du Québec, très engagée dans la lutte contre la pauvreté, et Vivian Labrie, du CAPMO. Dès l'automne 1996, le milieu communautaire dans son ensemble se rallie à la proposition du CAPMO de 'pauvreté zéro', pendant progressiste du 'déficit zéro' cher à Lucien Bouchard » (Dufour, 2005 : 173).

¹² The strategic decision was made in 1993 (FFQ, 1997).

¹³ The press at the time made such arguments. See, for example, Cloutier (1996) and Charrette (1996).

Certes, la prévention et la diminution de la pauvreté passent par une meilleure redistribution des revenus et par la création d'emplois, notamment pour les jeunes et au niveau local. Mais elles passent aussi par un enrichissement du rôle de citoyen et par une participation plus grande à l'exercice individuel et collectif de la démocratie. Les possibilités de se développer dépendent non pas exclusivement de la motivation des individus mais aussi, et surtout, du fait d'une reconnaissance collective et sociale du problème de la pauvreté et de ses effets.

The FFQ which organised the first World March of Women (Giraud, 2001) also promoted a new vision of social citizenship, global as well as local, with a clear emphasis on democracy. In addition, the FFQ's critiques of the government's plans for reforming social assistance called for a multidimensional strategy for fighting poverty and advancing gender equality, one focused, among other things on activation (that is emphasising job creation as well labour force participation) and on access to services, including good quality child care and pay equity (FFQ, 1997).

Such notions of citizenship were echoed in the 1997 reform, always presented as part of a re-commitment to universality. For example, the highest ranking civil servant responsible for Quebec's family policy listed its first goal as "to ensure fairness by offering universal support to families".¹⁴ Affordable childcare services, as well as a range of universal tax credits and the implementation of full-day kindergarten for five-year olds, all expressed this commitment to maintaining solidarity via universality. By promising that middle-class families could, at a reasonable price, access quality services, the province was rejecting the liberal welfare state's long-standing form of targeting, which subsidised licensed care for poor families, while in the name of "choice", sent middle-income families into a market in which they confront hard decisions about trading off quality and dependability against affordability.¹⁵

At the same time, however, it was presented as social citizenship for confronting new social risks and not just old ones. As the same high-ranking civil servant said: "We decided that we had to increase our support to families. ... As a result we put in place a number of structural measures for the society of the year 2000, the harmonious functioning of which centres on employment" (quoted in Jenson, 2002). And, as the Ministry of Child and Family Welfare straightforwardly said: "Poverty is less present in families with full-time jobs. This is why the government has chosen to fight against it not only through providing financial support to the poorest families but also in the field of employment by offering parents conditions making it easier to balance family and job responsibilities" (quoted in Jenson, 2002). Even the educational emphasis in childcare and the extension of school to younger children is justified as much in terms of avoiding costly school failures by promoting school readiness, as it is in terms of the development of the child.

¹⁴ See the June 26, 2000 speech by the highest ranking civil servant of the Ministry of Family and Child Welfare, which lists four goals, of which this is the first (Jenson, 2002).

¹⁵ This is the Headstart model used in the USA and Aboriginal communities in Canada by the federal government, as well as the practice in all Canadian provinces as a legacy of the Canada Assistance Plan (CAP) in place since 1965 (Jenson, 2004).

We see, then, that the design of the 1997 policy reflects these ideas for “after neoliberalism.” It promised to provide:

- An integrated Family Allowance, targeted to low-income parents, covering the estimated costs of raising a child 0 to 18.
- Universality in the tax regime, including a tax exemption for dependent children’s basic needs and a non-refundable tax credit for dependent children.
- Paid parental leaves to virtually all new parents with earned income, at near replacement rates.
- Educational and developmental child care services organised by Early Childhood Centres (CPE), including both centre-based and family daycare.
- Affordable child care services, via fees of \$5 per day. Reduced cost childcare for low-income working parents and 23.5 hours per week free childcare for social assistance recipients, in order to ensure that children at-risk use the developmental service.
- Full-day kindergarten for 5-year olds. Half-day kindergarten coupled with childcare for four-year-olds in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Montreal.

The focus on equal opportunity, equity and solidarity across classes was expressed in the integrated Family Allowance, available to all low-income families with dependent children under 18. It replaced three family allowances and those parts of the social assistance regime that had been paid with respect to children. The amount varied according to the birth order of the child as well as according to family income. Rates for lone-parent families were higher.

The overall assessment of the effects of this unification of programs was that they kept low-income parents’ income more or less where it was, as long as they stayed on social assistance (Rose, 1998). However, because the benefits were neutral as to employment, there was a gain for those working in a low-paying job. Moreover, children of parents living on social assistance could access a child care space for 23.5 hours a week, with the cost covered by the state.¹⁶

Equally important was what the new policy did not provide. Gone were the “birth allowances” which provided substantial financial benefits to large families, and the Universal Family Allowance. Their elimination was a clear signal that the government no longer compensated families who provided their own child care. Gone were incentives to provide black-market, informal child care. And initially, gone was the recognition of commercially provided child care as part of the Quebec system.

The messages of this design were clear. First, family policy was meant to support parental employment and children’s development. Second, both goals required provision of public services; markets were providing neither sufficient income nor sufficient quality child care. Third, ECEC was a good in and of itself; it was not simply daycare to allow parents to balance work and family.

Despite the coherence of the programme, with its design matching its goals, there were a number of pressure points in the system. After 2003, these helped the Liberal government to make its case for “redesign” when it sought to push back the system.

¹⁶ Parents eligible for the APPORT programme had even lower fees to pay - \$10 per week.

First, there were never enough child care spaces. While the 1997 plan promised – and produced – a massive increase in spaces, there was never an intention to provide one for every child. Therefore, parents still had to scramble. There were major differences across regions, moreover, with rural and peripheral regions benefiting the most. Parents with “atypical needs,” such as weekend and evening work, still had difficulty finding a space. There was, therefore, constant pressure to do something about waiting lists.

Second, there are many critics both inside and outside the state. The Auditor-General issued a damning report in 1999, criticising the Ministry for mismanagement as well as a lack of evaluation criteria of the central objective of child development and school-readiness. Beyond these somewhat accountant-like criticisms the report went to the heart of the matter. The Auditor-General found an increased use of family daycare – from 26% of spaces in 1996 to 34% in 1999 but with only minimal oversight by the Early Childhood Centres (Vérificateur Général, 1999: para 4.53). The report also pointed out that Quebec still lacked the administrative capacity to license drop-in centres and private kindergartens, although this type of service was providing a significant amount of child care.

Pressuring the government were three main groups. One was the parents who were losers under the new programme. Some had seen their tax deductions disappear. Parents employing nannies and in-home babysitters or using unregulated but receipted care sometimes could no longer deduct those expenses from their Quebec taxes (of course they retained the federal deduction). Parents also complained that, in this competitive market for spaces, providers were charging additional fees, for registration for example, or hiding higher costs in “programme fees.” Therefore, the promise of affordability was in some cases illusory.

A second, vociferous and long-standing group of critics were the other major losers under the new regime. These were for-profit provider, who the Minister made no bones about preferring to see play a more diminished role. The original White Paper had suggested that commercial providers would be phased out, but after a major mobilisation and a rising recognition that without them there would not be enough spaces available, a compromise was eventually struck and commercial operators were permitted to receive public subsidies under certain conditions.

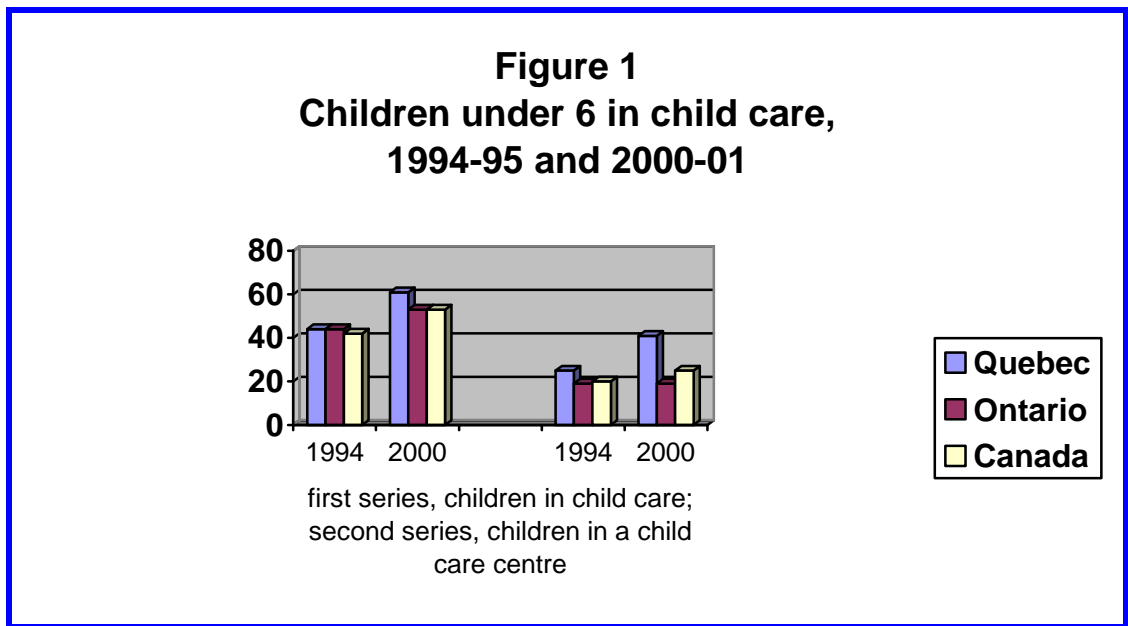
The third type of criticism came from the family movement. The movement supports state spending on children and families, but would prefer to see the generosity that Quebec directs toward child care diverted to a universal family allowance recognising the contributions of all parents to society. For example, the Institute for Research on Public Policy (IRPP, 2000) reissued a report written by researchers close to the family movement. The authors were critical of targeting low-income parents. They recommended, inspired by the traditional French system, a return to generous and universal family allowances for all parents, in the name of horizontal redistribution across families, rather than vertical redistribution from better-off to low-income families. However, their recommendation with respect to child care was exactly the reverse, that it be market driven, allowing parents to chose whether to pay for care or provide it themselves, as well as to select the type they preferred.

The starting point of this criticism was that “parents know best” about the quality of care, and governments should not be in the business of establishing standards for credentials or programme (IRPP, 2000: 28-29). A second difference between this position and that of those supporting the 1997 reform was in the attention to matters of equality, especially gender equality. Even if there has been a discernible decline in the rhetoric of gender equality in the post-1997 Family Policy as compared to its predecessors, it was still present. Therefore, the design of parental insurance, childcare and family allowances reflected *inter alia* attention to gender inequalities in the labour market, for all women, whether low-income lone mothers or professionals living in two-parent families. The IRPP report, in contrast, was virtually silent on matters of gender equality – never the strong suit of the family movement.

In the rest of this paper, I will follow the story only of the child care system, leaving aside the equally important matters of income supports and parental leaves.

Pushing Back – The Charest Liberals come to power

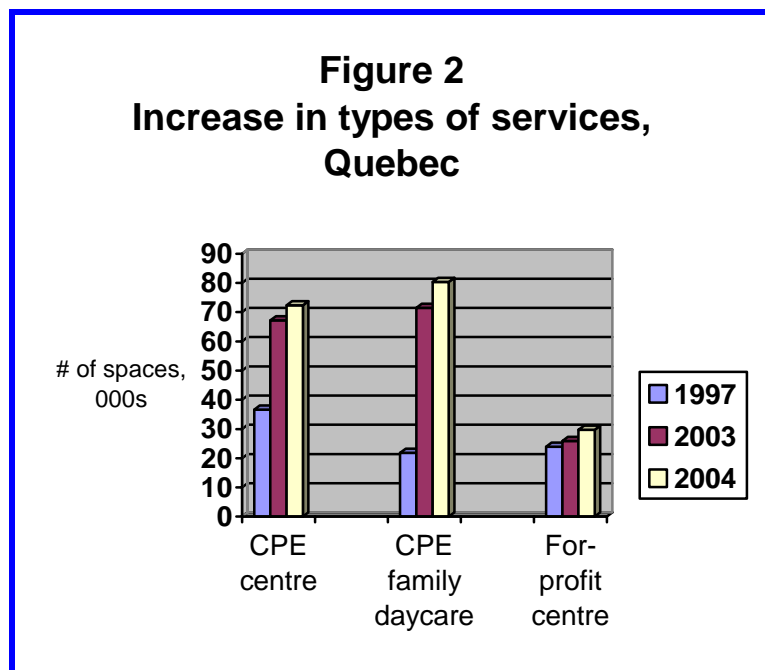
The new system was immediately popular with parents; by 2000-01, Statistics Canada was reporting a huge jump from the mid-1990s in children using some form of child care as well as a major increase in the number attending a child care centre.¹⁷ Quebec accounted for only about one in five Canadian children but over two of every five child care spaces.



However, the greatest increase, once the new system was in place, was actually in family daycare. The goal set in 1997 was to create 100,000 spaces, half in family daycare and half in a centre (Grégoire, 2002: 32), but as Figure 2 shows, the increase in family day care has been both

¹⁷ *The Daily*, 7 February 2005.

fast and large.¹⁸ The other pattern of note is the increase in reliance on for-profit centres, an increase which took off after a moratorium on creation of new spaces in the commercial sector was lifted in 2002. Once the Liberals entered government, the increase was faster, going up almost 30% between 2003 and 2005 (Chouinard, 2005b).



Despite the popularity of the reform outside as well as inside Quebec, both opposition parties targeted child care for significant reforms in the run-up to the 2002 election. Some of the political space for doing so came from the fact that the waiting lists for spaces were still long, despite the creation of many new places each year, that there was not consensus that any child, whether her parents were employed or not, should have access to the system, and that parents providing their own child care full-time were still angry about not having any recognition.

The right-wing, conservative Action démocratique du Québec (ADQ) promised to give parents vouchers, good for either non-parental child care (any type, including informal care) or parental care. The Liberals focused on increasing family allowances, thereby recognising parental care, and raising the share of the costs paid by parents, on a sliding scale according to income (Grégoire, 2002: 30-31).

A major source of pressure in the system also came from the for-profit sector. The commercial operators refused to give up. It was the rapid expansion of that sector that had led Pauline Marois, then responsible for the family ministry, to impose a moratorium on new spaces immediately after the 1995 election and to begin the development of what became the new family policy. The White Paper envisaged the elimination of the for-profit sector. Nonetheless, the powerful Association des garderies privées du Québec (AGPQ) continued to push for concessions. After the initial legislation was passed in 1997, hard negotiations by the

¹⁸ For the 1997 and 2003 data see Japel *et al.* (2006: 9). For 2004 see www.mfacf.gouv.qc.ca/statistiques/services-de-garde/profil-utilisateurs.asp, consulted 26 March 2006.

representatives of the for-profits forced the Minister to accept that existing private daycare centres become eligible for subsidies.¹⁹

Liberals were supportive of the AGPQ's position, claiming that for-profit centres could create new spaces more quickly because they did not have to take into account the democratic board of directors that all Early Childhood Centres had. For example, before the elections, the Liberal critic for family policy in opposition, Russell Copeman, is worth quoting at length because the themes were still present throughout the Liberals' years in office: "Le privé est capable de fournir des places beaucoup plus rapidement. Ça prend deux ans avant de pouvoir ouvrir un CPE, en raison de lenteurs dues au conseil d'administration, composé de parents et de bénévoles. Mais seulement un an pour ouvrir une garderie privée" (quoted in Grégoire, 2002 : 34).

The Parti québécois government had held the line, defending the original vision of the system despite complaints about the waiting lists and demands from the for-profit sector. For example, Minister Linda Goupil defended the notion that ECEC was not just about balancing work and family and that all children needed access to ECEC. Therefore spaces should not be reserved for those whose parents were working or studying. She also defended the clear preference for non-profit forms of care. Despite the moratorium being lifted in 2002, new centres were not eligible for subsidies, and therefore their fees were \$35 per day on average, putting them *above* the Canadian average (Grégoire, 2002: 34; Brethour, 2006). In addition, the government raised the wages of early childhood workers by 38% in 1999, in part to improve quality, and in part because of the threat of strike (Jenson, 2002; Tougas, nd).

The lines of battle were drawn. The PQ argued in terms of social justice, child development, and increasing employment while both neo-liberal opposition parties continued to argue for "choice," by which they meant both parental care and access to for-profit services. In addition, the neoliberals argued that the "role of the state" should be limited.

As we will see below, the only claim which has actually been realised is that of more "access" to for-profit services. The net result has been a significant reduction in the notion that Quebec's citizenship regime involves a shared responsibility for children, in which communities, the state and families are involved both in education and financing. Now, the state still shares some of the cost, but families are left on their own to identify the kind of care they can find and afford for their children. There is a clear preference for restricting the development of ECEC centres, and therefore their philosophy, bringing a de-emphasis on the developmental and educational content of child care.

The Liberal government's push back came in two waves: 2003, which brought favouritism for for-profit care, and 2005, which reduced the emphasis on ECEC for all children and marked a return to daycare, as well as an even greater emphasis on for-profit provision.

This push back to a classic neo-liberal position was not easy to achieve. Resistance came not only from parents and progressive forces, but within the Liberal party where the minister responsible, Carole Théberge and others, such as Claude Béchar, found themselves facing off

¹⁹ The subsidies were significantly lower than those going to the CPE. Most private daycare centres, therefore, charged parents additional fees for services (Grégoire, 2002: 35-36).

against and sometimes simply bypassed by hard-line neoliberals such Premier Charest, the President of the Treasury Board, Monique Jérôme-Forget, and the Minister of Finance, Yves Séquin. The hard-liners prevailed.²⁰

The first push-back – more than a price hike

The 2003 change in policy is usually remembered for the efforts to increase the share of costs paid by parents. Although the Liberals had promised in the election campaign not to increase fees, in the first six months of coming to power they announced that fees “must” and, therefore, would increase. A major debate broke out pitting parents and providers against the government. Eventually, between the hard-line position of sliding scales as well as a higher base rate and those wanting to hold the line, the compromise of \$7 per day for both pre-school and out-of-school care was settled on (Breton and Bérubé, 2003).

But behind this much publicised increase were two other issues which received much less public attention and yet were as important if not more so: the decision to support for-profit daycare centres and to institute a new allowance for parents. The first in particular reflects the fact that the Liberals could not – as the Harper government has done – announce that they would go back on existing commitments and dismantle the system completely. The government had to proceed in less transparent steps. Each time there was one “big issue” on which compromise was possible and less visible ones which actually altered the principles of the system.

The Charest government was elected in March 2003 and by May it had already announced that the future of the 5,000 spaces in a CPE centre that had been approved by the previous government but which had not yet been begun (land or buildings not yet acquired) was in danger. This announcement, causing consternation among non-profit providers and mobilisation of parents, eventually resulted in a “compromise” (Pontoreau, 2003). Always insisting on the need to create the promised spaces quickly so as to reduce waiting lists, in June Minister Béchard finally announced that of the 13,900 spaces to be created in 2003-04, 6,500 would be in CPE centres, 4,400 in family daycare and ... 3,000 in for-profit daycare centres (MFACF, 2003a).

After consultations in summer 2003, when most of the focus was on the proposals to alter parental fees,²¹ the government announced that the rules would be changed so that new for-profit centres would be permitted to receive subsidies for the \$7 per-day spaces, something which the previous government had refused to do (MFACF, 2003b).

²⁰ As was the case when Ottawa was completely under the influence of the Department of Finance, arguments for reducing spending tended to win, even if it meant simply ignoring the other ministers, as happened, for example to Carole Théberge in December 2005. See Breton and Bérubé (2003) for the situation in 2003 and Dutrisac and Robitaille (2005) for the second.

²¹ As Tremblay *et al.* (2003) wrote: “le débat lancé le printemps dernier ... s’est largement centré sur la question suivante: « Qui va payer pour “garder” les jeunes enfants de Québec? » On a parfois l’impression d’entendre le bon M. Séquin [minister of finance] se demander comment donc garder ses chèvres!” To be fair, however, the coalition of opposition to the reform also focused almost exclusively on this part of the government’s proposals.

These were, in other words, clear policy changes underpinning the reassertion of neoliberal principles. Within the first few months of its election, the Liberal government of Quebec was using a set of ideas to justify its return to a neoliberal vision – that the two most important factors to consider with respect to child care were costs to government and flexibility, with the latter supposedly necessitating a “rapid” creation of spaces. As the AGPQ constantly announced, spaces could be created more cheaply in the private sector. Its president Sylvain Lévesque explained, for example, in May 2003 the saving was 25%: “Le privé arrive à donner le même service à moindre coût tout en dégageant des profits, en économisant essentiellement sur les frais de gestion et les salaires” (quoted in Pontereau, 2003).

Gone from this idea set was much real attention to quality, despite the continued use of the terminology. During the consultations of the parliamentary committee, the highly respected child development expert, Richard Tremblay, and his team reported on the real differences in quality of care that existed in Quebec between CPE centres, family daycare and for-profit centres. While issues of educational quality existed for all types of services, in more than one-third (34%) of the for-profit centres the quality was judged inadequate, compared to 7% in CPE centres and only 8% in family daycare supervised by a CPE. Even licensed family daycare not supervised by a CPE did better (27%) than did the for-profit centres (Tremblay *et al.*, 2003).²²

The Liberals were determined to alter the responsibility mix of the citizenship regime, however. While the state retained a significant responsibility for financing child care, families would also have to pick up a greater share of the costs of fees. Alterations in the responsibility mix were perhaps even more important for the longer-term. The 2003 reforms opened significant new space to the market and limited, even if it did not yet reduce, the role of the community sector. Sidelining the community sector would come next.

The second wave – pushing back the community sector

The next set of policy changes involved a frontal assault on one of the most cherished elements of the “Quebec social model,” the role of the community sector. Early Childhood Centres in Quebec were in part, as we have mentioned, based on the idea that the social economy would play a major role in “after neoliberalism,” providing work for those excluded from the market economy and empowering them not only with respect to the labour market (by providing earned income) but also politically by means of the organisation of workplace relations and political participation more generally (for an overview see Graefe, 1999 and Shragge *et al.* in Jenson, 2001). Child care is one of the major areas in which experiments in the social economy have occurred (Graefe, 2005). The 2005 reform reduced the role of community sector in the citizenship regime, at the same time as it again reinforced the position of for-profit providers and de-emphasised the educational and developmental content of child care. All of this was justified in classic neoliberal terms: there would be \$50 million in savings, less administration, and greater flexibility.

This rebalancing of the responsibility mix in favour of the market and away from the community involved several significant changes consecrated in the *Loi 124* hurriedly passed at the end of the 2005 legislative session:

²² This important study was eventually published as Japel *et al.* (2005).

- The new law promised *des services de garde éducatifs* (educational daycare) rather than *services éducatifs aux enfants* (educational services for children). For many this shift in terminology marked a return to daycare only intended to help employed parents and a reduction of the emphasis on ECEC (AQCPE, 2005, but also Neamtan, 2005).
- The legislation's name was changed, thereby signalling that for-profit daycare was now a full participant in the system. The *Loi sur les centres de la petite enfance et autres services de garde à l'enfance* became the *Loi sur les services de garde éducatifs à l'enfance*. As the AQGP said happily in its brief to the parliamentary commission, this name change marked the "L'élimination du parti-pris idéologique en faveur des CPE" (AQGP, 2005). The for-profit daycare centres are now always presented by the ministry as full participants in the system.
- A new system for over-seeing family daycare providers was created. Instead of being part of a local CPE, family daycare providers will be overseen by one of 163 coordinating agencies. They will obviously cover a territory substantially larger than any of the 884 CPE coordinating the family daycare providers in fall 2005.²³ After much debate, the government allowed that a CPE or a group of CPEs might apply to become such an agency, which would employ on average five people. So too, however, might other local non-profit associations. Of the 163 approved to begin operating on June 1, 2006, by far the largest number are CPEs. However, the work they will do is significantly different. Their task is primarily oversight of the regulations, and serving as a clearing house for spaces available. The educational tasks are much further down the list.²⁴
- More flexibility in the programming which would allow drop-in centres and for-profit daycares as well as CPE to develop programming for part-day, evening and weekends. By the time the 2006 budget was announced, the only increase in funding for the system went to drop-in centres, whose development would be encouraged.

When proposed in October 2005, when debated in parliamentary committee, and when suddenly rammed through in December 2005 (to the surprise of the Minister, Carole Théberge, who was involved in negotiating with the opponents at the time), the legislation has been tremendously controversial. It received the full support of the Quebec Chamber of Commerce and other representatives of business, as well as the AQGP and a small break-away group representing about 100 CPEs. It was opposed, however, by the main organisation representing the CPEs, the unions, the PQ, the social economy sector and so on. The coordinating agencies were the main focus of criticism, although there was also concern about the composition of the board of directors of both CPEs and coordinating agencies.²⁵

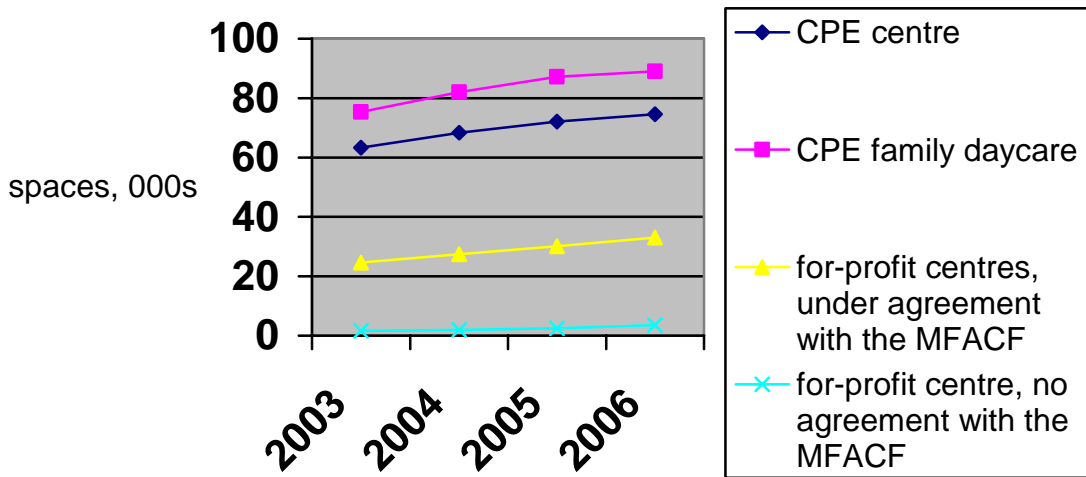
²³ In the interest of saving money by cutting jobs from the system, the Charest Liberal government's White Paper proposed creating 126 coordinating agencies, but under pressure from the association of Early Childhood Centres providers, the Association québécoise des centres de la petite enfance (AQCPE), the number was slightly increased, but not to the 253 the Association had wanted.

²⁴ Of the eight responsibilities of such an agency, providing training to family daycare providers and supporting them in programming is number six.

²⁵ In spring 2005 the government floated the idea of putting a civil servant on the board of CPEs, an idea that was vehemently opposed by the milieu (Chouinard, 2005a). One of the concessions Théberge had to make in November was to reaffirm that parents would have a significant place; the civil servants had disappeared from the proposal.

Again, as in 2003, the Liberal government had to make some concessions to the opponents, in particular by agreeing that CPE could become coordinating agencies and reaffirming the community nature of their board of directors. However, it made no concessions on the key point, which was to diminish the emphasis on ECEC in the family daycare part of the system.²⁶ Nor was there either much attention in the controversy to one aspect of the law that could have long-term consequences, coupled with the Liberals' enthusiasm of commercial provision. The legislation allows several daycare centres to be opened with a single license, which some commentators saw opening the way to chains of daycare centres.²⁷

Figure 3
Changing structure of the Child Care System in Quebec since 2003



The consequences of the Liberals preference for the for-profit sector are seen in Figure 3.²⁸ There has been a levelling off of spaces in the ECEC portion, that is the CPE centres, and a

²⁶ On average, each of the 163 agencies was expected to have five employees, overseeing 90 providers with about 540 spaces, with an upper limit of 1,200 places (Doray, 2006). Even at 90 and 540, however, the capacity of the five to engage family daycare providers around issues of ECEC would be severely strained.

²⁷ The previous law required a new license for each new daycare centre. Tommy Chouinard, journalist at *La Presse* raised this issue, the Minister responded by saying that the private sector should have the same right to several locations that a CPE did under the 1997 law, and the legislation passed left the possibility in place (Chouinard, 2005b; 2005c).

²⁸ The data for Figure 3 come from the MFACF at http://www.mfacf.gouv.qc.ca/statistiques/services-de-garde/index_en.asp, consulted on 30 May 2006.

significant increase in the private sector, which both academic studies and the Ministry’s own research find be of lowest quality.²⁹ As Table 1 shows, the Ministry’s research found for-profit care to be of lowest quality, just as the study released by the IRPP had found. The failing grade on educational programming in the private daycare centre was due both to an absence of physical infrastructure supporting educational programming and the programming itself.

Table 1
Quality scores for types of childcare – Quebec 2003

	Unsatisfactory	Fair	Good / Very good	Mean
	%	%	%	Range 0 – 4
Early Childhood Centre (CPE)	3.4	36.0	60.6	3.05
Family Daycare, affiliated with a CPE	20.9	60.0	19.1	2.75
Private daycare centre	28.5	62.1	9.5	2.62

Source: *Grandir en qualité 2003, Enquête québécoise sur la qualité des services de garde éducatifs, 2004*. Available at www.grandirenqualite.gouv.qc.ca/publications_an.htm

Conclusion

The complete lack of attention to the findings of evidence-based policy research provides yet another indicator that the Liberals are committed to a return to classic neoliberalism and are engaged in a steady push back of the vision of “after liberalism” that had been built from 1997 on with respect to ECEC. This lack of attention to the evidence of the most respected policy research follows in the tradition of other classic neoliberals. Mike Harris had similarly shelved the important 1999 study by the Honourable Margaret McCain and Fraser Mustard, *Reversing the Real Brain Drain* and went on to set up a system based on family resource centres that bore little if any relation to their recommendations (McCain and Mustard, 2002). The post-neoliberal position on evidence-based research on child development is quite different, as we saw above with respect to the reliance on research by, among others, Camil Bouchard, and as the reliance on the McCain-Mustard research in Canadian policy discussions testifies.

The Liberal government exhibited another classic neoliberal trait. It claimed that having won the election was a sufficient mandate, and it did not have to consider opposition to its proposals from stakeholders or civil society more generally.³⁰ When the proposals for child care reform in both

²⁹ The key academic study is Japel *et al.* (2005). The Ministry began its own study when the PQ was in office but the final report was not available until after the elections. The new Minister did not hurry to make it public, and it was only under pressure that the \$3 million study, *Grandir en qualité* was leaked and then finally released in June 2004 (Richer, 2004).

³⁰ The approval ratings of the Liberals and of Jean Charest have been very low virtually since the beginning.

2003 and 2005 provoked large and mobilised opposition, some concessions were made, but compromise on the essentials – that would remake the system as whole – was not entertained. Thus the new legislation was forced through at the end of the 2005 session, despite representatives of the Ministry being engaged in negotiations with representatives of the child care sector. Such negotiations respected Quebec’s long-standing structure of representation but those democratic forms were not respected any more than was the National Assembly’s right to consider the legislation clause by clause.

It is the content of its reforms that we recognise the fundamentally different vision of the Liberals, one that pays no heed to the new social risks and the impasse of neoliberal strategies. Gone is any emphasis on the needs of all children for ECEC and the even greater needs of some children.³¹ The principal goals are to keep costs down, to ensure a supply of spaces, to level the playing field for commercial providers, and to provide parents with flexible forms of services. This is, in other words, a publicly funded child care system emptied of much of its ECEC content, increasingly responsive to market signals rather than social justice concerns and notion of being part of a societal project.

This push back in the ECEC is not, of course, surprising. The Liberals have not hidden their sources of inspiration, whether it is the Thatcherist view of TINA (there is no alternative) (Boismenu, Dufour and Saint-Martin, 2004) or Monique Jérôme-Forget’s fondness for the Milton Friedman quote, “less government is better government” (quoted in Cornellier, 2004). In such a society, the role of the state is limited: “a supportive resource rather than a legislator of centralized solutions.” Nor have the Liberals concealed their vision of Quebec not as a society but as a “Québec of 7 million ambitions,” that is a collection of individuals³² Nothing in their platform or their recent history, including that of their leader, would have led to an expectation of anything but neoliberalism.

There are, then, two lessons that can be drawn from this roll back to neoliberalism. One is that when neoliberalism returns even the limits of “after neoliberalism” politics begin to look pretty good. The second is that mobilisation in opposition can contain some of the worst effects. Canadians take heed.

³¹ In discussing the 2005 reform representatives of the government always mentioned that it would include educational objectives, and some are found in the legislation. They are, however, quite general.

³² See Premier Jean Charest’s message at: http://www.briller.gouv.qc.ca/messages/message_pm_en.htm
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