



CBC Commentary

Sharon Gregson

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Introduction:

Will there ever be a national child-care program? Federal-provincial talks on the scheme broke down last week. Sharon Gregson is a longtime day-care activist and the mother of four children. She wonders if Canada is too fragmented now to ever make a national program.

Sharon Gregson:

So what happened last Friday in Vancouver? The whole country expected a historic announcement -- parents, politicians, advocates, media, absolutely everyone, except apparently Social Development Minister Ken Dryden. We expected to see the birth of the social program of our generation - a national child-care system.

Except when the provincial/territorial ministers met with Ken Dryden in Vancouver on Friday they came away empty-handed. Disappointment hardly begins to describe the reaction from parents and advocates across the country.

So, why is it so difficult for politicians to craft a national program and support it with legislation when we already know the feds are prepared to put billions of dollars on the table? Canadians elected Paul Martin on his promise to create a national system of early learning and child-care, but still our politicians are obviously struggling on moving forward.

Is it now almost impossible for our country, as huge and diverse as we are, to ever create a national program? Even when we have substantive agreement on the principles: that it's the right thing to do for Canadian children and families, millions of mothers are in the workforce and quality early childhood education is good for kids?

Alberta, of course, wants us to know it has its own agenda, Quebec already has a child-care system and the rest of the country struggles to find an agreement they can all live with - focusing perhaps only on their own jurisdictions.

Imagine if we were trying to launch medicare in 2005 - would it even be possible? Is any attempt at a national social program doomed to failure, or can we collectively apply pressure to make it a reality?

We know under the Social Union Framework Agreement (SUFA) that we only need a majority of provinces to agree to a plan to make it national in scope: child-care, Kyoto, any new program. We have to be more than a collection of individual provinces; we still have

to be Canada. And Canadian children in Vancouver need quality child-care just like children in Saskatoon and children in Montreal. We're not so different.

There is still hope that Ken Dryden, perhaps enlisting the support of the prime minister, can pull this one out of the tank. That he really can work some old hockey charisma and encourage those provinces to sign on to an agreement that will serve Canadians well. Parents and advocates like me from every region of this country are counting on this group of politicians to show leadership in 2005 and truly leave a Canadian legacy.

For Commentary, I'm Sharon Gregson in Vancouver.