

Funding and Framing Families

An Analysis of the Discursive Foundations of Family Allowance and the Universal Child Care Benefit

The Conservative government's Universal Child Care Benefit (UCCB) was introduced as an alternative to a universal child care plan. Despite the use of the term "universal," the benefit provided neither universal funding nor access for child care. The effect of UCCB was to move Canada from the path of collective responsibility for children first articulated in the Family Allowance program of 1945 to an era of individualization of child welfare—thereby limiting the government's role in supporting families. By contrasting the rationale of Family Allowance, found in Marsh's 1943 Report on Social Security for Canada with the rationale for the Universal Child Care Benefit, found in the 2006 Budget, the paper traces the evolution of child benefits from emphasizing "rights" to "choice." The evolution follows the trajectory of neo-liberalism in Canada.

The Universal Child Care Plan proposed by Stephen Harper's Conservative government in 2006 marked a sharp turn in the direction of Canadian family policy. Prior to their election in January 2006, the Conservatives opposed the Liberal idea of a publicly funded universal child care plan on the basis that it restricted parental choices and provided too great a role for the government in what they considered a private, family matter.¹ The Conservative government initiated a new system of child benefits—the Universal Child Care Benefit—which provides a \$1,200 per year taxable payment for each child aged five and younger.² The new program was designed to extend benefits to non-poor families who did not qualify for funds under the income-tested Canada Child Tax Benefit (Battle 2008: 1).

The discourse used by the government to promote its child care plan portrays it as a desirable alternative to universal child care based on the idea that it provides

“support” and “choice” for parents. A critical analysis of the discourse reveals a paradox in the Universal Child Care Benefit—the government claimed to offer “choice” to parents while downplaying its own role. By playing the role of “provider” of choice, the Conservatives essentially decreased public expectations and their own responsibility in the provision of social welfare.

The purpose of this paper is to contextualize the Universal Child Care Benefit and the shifting definition of responsibility for children in Canada. Two historical periods in particular will be analyzed. By contrasting the rationale of the Family Allowance program in 1943 with the introduction of the Universal Child Care Benefit in 2006, the paper seeks to understand the historical and discursive origins of the dependency-choice dichotomy inherent in neoliberal child benefits policy in Canada.

Neo-liberalism and Child-centric Discourse in Canadian Child Benefits Policy

In Canada, children have historically been considered a priority for federal funding. Child benefits (or cash payments to families with children) have been in place since 1944 with the introduction of Family Allowances. The period from 1945–75 has been described as the “golden age of welfare capitalism” which had one main objective: “protecting the income of the male breadwinner” (Bonoli 432). Generally speaking, families subsisted on the income of the male breadwinner and therefore the government needed only to supplement that income to ensure that larger families had a reasonable standard of living.

The rise in female labour market participation in the 1970s coupled with an economic downturn led to the prevalence of social risks—the externalization of child care and care of the frail and elderly, high unemployment, and stagnant wages. Rather than intervening directly in the market economy or supplementing wages as their predecessors did, neo-liberal governments began to characterize individuals as responsible for improving the welfare of their families. Where once Canadian family policy sought to ensure the welfare of the entire family, the neo-liberal era ushered in a period of child-centric family policy.

Wendy McKeen argues that changes to child benefits—in particular, the move away from a universal family allowance—signified the beginning of a child-centric policy focus that left low-income parents on the margins. Beginning in 1992, the income-tested child benefit significantly “altered the meaning of the program: it was no longer a ‘safety net’ for all families, but a means of addressing ‘child poverty’ and reinforcing work incentives for parents” (McKeen 73–74). The belief in our collective responsibility for children—first

articulated in the Marsh Report—has fallen out of favour in Canada. In fact, as Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon argue, the threat of “dependency” has come to dominate policy concerns all across post-industrial capitalist societies.

The debate is perhaps most relevant in the realm of family policy. While it was once understood that women and children were dependents on either a male breadwinner or the state, now mothers must attach themselves to the labour market. Children are still perceived as acceptable dependents of the state to some extent, but Canadian child benefits policy is beginning to reflect the American antipathy toward public interventions. As Martha Fineman illustrates, in the U.S. “it is the family, not the state or the market, that assumes responsibility for inevitable dependency. In this regard, the institution of the family frees the market to act without consideration or accommodation for dependency” (36–37). Inevitable dependency refers to the fact that in a neo-liberal society, a certain amount of unemployment and poverty is accepted as inevitable. “Inevitable dependency” is accompanied by “derivative dependency” (Fineman 36). For example, in a family with low or no income, the children experience poverty as a derivative of their parents’ economic position. Promoting self-sufficiency as a goal for all families is unrealistic in light of inevitable and derivative dependency.

Yet despite the prevalence of inevitable and derivative dependency, Canadian social policy is determined by liberal political thought. As Rianne Mahon argues, “Canadian social policy has never left the ‘liberal’ path” (Mahon 30). Mahon traces the development of liberalism in Canada, beginning with “classical liberalism” which was preoccupied with the maintenance of individual freedom. She argues that in Canada, “the role of the state was to be limited to protecting individual property and maintaining orderly relations of exchange. At most, social policy was to be limited to assisting the ‘deserving poor’ and clearly designed to reinforce the work ethic among the rest” (2–3). State involvement in social policy increased throughout the twentieth century in response to economic and political upheaval, leading to “a shift from classical to social liberalism” (Mahon 6) and eventually to inclusive liberalism. According to Mahon, “inclusive liberalism retains the liberal preference for targeted programs, while eschewing the ‘passive,’ consumption-oriented approach of the postwar period for “activation” (1). Inclusive liberalism differs from pure neo-liberalism in that it recognizes the benefits of social investment. Unlike neo-liberalism, however, it recognizes that social policy has an important “social investment” role to play (Mahon 1).

The values associated with Canada’s social liberal welfare regime³ on the eve of the Family Allowance in 1943 included a focus on economic efficiency, social equality, social inclusion and stability, and promoting autonomy (Jenson 2009). In this context, dependency of women and children on the state was

perceived as an inevitable outcome of capitalism; the logic and discourse of increased debt burdens for future generations began to prevail by the early 1980s. As Jenson points out, the public generosity extended to women, particularly mothers, did not relieve the gender inequalities in Canada (Jenson 2009: 472). In order to analyze the Canadian government's shifting perspective on its role in supporting care for children, the paper will contrast the rationales of the Family Allowance Program (1945) with the Universal Child Care Benefit (2006). The rationale for each policy will be gleaned using the method of *critical discourse analysis*.

Discourse and Public Policy

Discourse functions in a variety of ways in policymaking—it is evident at the most fundamental stage of articulating political ideals, the problem definition stage (Fischer 60). It can also “take the form of cultural and discursive frames that actors use to challenge or justify existing policy arrangements” (Béland 568). Or, in extreme cases, discourse can be used to create “moral panic” about a particular social issue, which serves to help politicians with “the job of selling, as well as telling” (Marston 1). Critical discourse analysis (CDA) offers a framework for analyzing political discourse, focusing on the question of how language is used to support unequal power relations. While social scientists have been preoccupied with probing the political discourse that reproduces the power of elites, as Norman Fairclough argues, “a variety of aims and objectives in social research could be further advanced through forms of detailed textual analysis” (Fairclough 60). The process of using language is “an ongoing act of choices that occurs in different cultural and social situations and cannot be isolated from these contexts” (Young 10). As such, political discourse can be viewed as a series of political choices that should be analyzed while keeping in mind the historical context in which they were made.

The discourse of choice and individualization of child benefits policy signals the Conservative Party of Canada's attempts to finalize the policy paradigm shift in Canada away from the social liberal values found in the Family Allowance program. According to Tom Burns and Marcus Carson, a policy paradigm gains support if it “more satisfactorily addresses urgent and currently unsolvable institutional problems and formulates this in a language—in terms and concepts—that resonate with or relate to core values of society: ‘equality,’ ‘democracy,’ ‘justice or fairness,’ ‘efficiency,’ ‘rationality,’ etc.” (30-31). The type of discourse used to introduce UCCB and defend its rationale in the 2006 Budget (Government of Canada) draws on the goal of fiscalization, namely liberty (as citizens have control over how funds are spent) and efficiency (as the bureaucratic “middle-men” are eliminated in the provision of child benefits). Also apparent in the discourse are the concepts

used by child poverty advocates and the apparent use of gender-neutral language when referring to child care arrangements. Both strategies appeal to the values of justice. Therefore, the discourse appeals to universally accepted values to promote a paradigmatic shift toward a smaller role of government and more limited welfare state.

Family Allowance and the Discourse of Workers' and Children's Rights

Raymond Blake argues that Family Allowance “has rarely been regarded as a major policy innovation” (2). Instead, historians have interpreted the introduction of Family Allowance as a calculated move by MacKenzie King to draw support from members of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) that was gaining popularity in 1943. In terms of its economic justifications, Blake points to the need for King's government to prevent inflation through wage control and to avoid a postwar depression through strong consumer spending and to encourage Canadian women who contributed to the war effort to return home and have families (Blake 2). Yet he argues that the main impetus came with the findings of Leonard Marsh in his 1943 report on social security. Therefore, a critical discourse analysis of the Marsh Report will be conducted to reveal the rationale of Family Allowance with a specific focus on the development of the government's perceived role in providing for child welfare.

The Marsh Report illustrates that in 1943, children in Canada were only considered dependants in special circumstances. For example, “The child of a man covered by Workmen's Compensation who is killed while at work may receive, if his mother is alive, income varying from \$7.50 to \$12 a month, depending on the province of residence” (Marsh 26). Rather than being legislated as dependents, the care of children was assumed to be ensured through the father's wage—“It is true that the wages of adult men are supposed in some rough kind of a way to be related to the budget required for the maintenance of a wife and possibly one or two children” (Marsh 28). Yet Marsh argues that this system is insufficient and unjust: “There is no reason why a man who has a large family should get a larger wage or salary than someone performing the same work who happens to be unmarried or to have no children at all” (28). While the bulk of financial responsibility for a family lies with the man/husband/father, according to Marsh, there is a sense of the need to respond to the problem of horizontal equity:

If on the other hand he does not marry, it is still reasonable to expect him to continue a somewhat larger contribution than it might otherwise have been, in his capacity as a citizen of the country making some contribution to the married members whose responsibilities are greater. (Marsh 29)

First, what is most notable about the discourse of Marsh's report is that it is highly gendered. Wages and income are attributed to men and the "family" is portrayed as a man's possession—the former is meant to ensure the existence of the latter. In terms of equality, it is the equality of *men* that is of primary concern to Marsh. Beginning with the logic that men without children benefit more from their labour than husband and fathers, Marsh's discourse evokes feelings of unfairness. Similarly, his emphasis on protecting a man's most important possession—his family—provides an acceptable rationale for public funding of families.

Second, the discourse of Marsh's Report evokes sympathy not only for the plight of men but for their dependents. The perpetrator of injustice is the market economy, according to Marsh, who identifies the hardships male breadwinners face as:

The first group comprises *interruptions of earning capacity*. These may be intermittent as in the case of unemployment or sickness; or prolonged as in the case of disablement. Every gainfully occupied man faces at some period in his later life the special interruption due to old age. (Marsh 15)

Marsh insists that the effect of interruptions in male earnings is compounded when the man has a family. Thus, he argues for a form of insurance for families—an allowance for children. Despite the gendered rationale and discourse of Family Allowance, it is clear that all members of families with children were intended to benefit from the government's protection against the ravages of capitalism. Children's allowances are proposed as a means to ensure proper health, nutrition, and shelter for children. According to Marsh, the needs of children should not be dealt with on a contingency basis or through a contingency fund because, he argues, the needs of children:

[are] a continuous requirement, at least for the period of infancy up to adolescence; changing in character and size, it is true, but continuous none the less in times of prosperity and times of depression, and whether the chief earner, if his occupation is irregular, is earning his full income or not. (87)

By first acknowledging the reality that wages were insufficient for many families, noting that it was of course only realistic to expect that fathers would continue to find the means to support their families, and then concluding that *all* men—with children or without—should contribute to the maintenance of children, Marsh effectively redefines children as dependents of society. Marsh's

proposed allowance did not come to fruition as it was deemed too costly. However, a more modest version was adopted which, according to Jane Jenson, "at \$5.95 per month for a family with two children, the allowance was about five percent of an average monthly income" (Jenson 1999: 3).

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the rationale for Family Allowance outlined by Marsh's Report is the notion that children are citizens and, as such, are entitled to the rights of citizenship. The rights-based discourse used in 1943 provides useful insights for child benefits policy at present. In particular, Marsh makes the contentious statement that: "quite irrespective of whether the right parents have the most children, children should have an unequivocal place in social security policy" (87). This excerpt illustrates that the effect of public policies should be of the utmost concern; in the case of child benefits, his statement points out that wealthier families are privileged in a society without a system of adequate child allowances. By basing his critique on protecting the "rights of children" from the exploitive nature of capitalism, Marsh's logic is a stark contrast to the "rights of parents" logic used to rationalize the Universal Child Care Benefit.

Mackenzie King introduced Family Allowances in the House of Commons in June of 1944. Soon after, opinions were divided, both politically and socially, on "whether reproduction work should take place primarily within the family and be supported through subsidies to a dependent spouse, or whether public policy should attempt to move part of reproduction work to the market or the public sector" (Montanari 308). Such divergent views combined with charges that Family Allowance was a subsidy for rich families led to a revised program of child benefits. In the 1970s, Family Allowance was made taxable and indexed to the cost of living. Payments to low-income families increased as well; the anti-poverty objective began to take precedence over horizontal equity as the needs of poor and working poor families increased (Battle 1998: 323).

With greater targeting came the neo-liberal emphasis on the autonomy of parents and the concurrent de-gendering and individualization of child benefits policy. According to Ulrich Beck, individualization theory can describe the prevailing social inequalities in post-capitalist society (Beck 680). Individualization takes place in discourse as it can be defined as "a process of the transformation of the *grammar* of social inequalities" (Beck 680). It involves the reframing of social problems as individual problems; both the cause and the remedy of inequality, therefore, are deemed intrinsic to individual citizens. According to Janine Brodie and Isabella Bakker individualization "places steeply rising demands on people to find personal causes and responses to what are, in effect, collective social problems" (81). The shift from collective responsibility inherent in the early welfare state to individualization was

first evident in the Reagan and Thatcher eras of the 1980s. Initially, such “blame the victim” approaches to social welfare were denounced as punitive and stigmatizing. Yet the majority of citizens—those not receiving social assistance—were relatively unaffected by the individualization of poverty. However, what is interesting about UCCB is that its “universal” nature extends individualization into the middle and upper classes, because all parents with children under the age of six are granted the “choice” of what to do with funds—and thus the responsibility to respond directly and individually to their own child care needs.

Critical Discourse Analysis of UCCB

The analysis will focus on the introduction of UCCB in the 2006 federal Budget and will pay particular attention to how the policy is framed 1) in contrast to the Liberal vision for universal child care and 2) as the only just and efficient form of support for families with children. Upon his election, Harper sought immediate buy-in and targeted his middle class support base through his five priorities—accountability, opportunity, security, families, and communities.⁴ The federal Budget is an example of a prepared government text. According to J. R. Martin all texts are structured to evoke affinity, i.e., solidarity with their readership/audience. Government texts such as the Budget provide information to support proposed policy choices (such as UCCB). But they also carry implicit evaluations of competing policy options. Therefore, according to the theory of critical discourse analysis, each government uses texts to institutionalize what it considers to be its appropriate role. As Martin argues, “the basic reason for advancing an opinion is to elicit a response of solidarity with the addressee” (143). Two methods are typically used to express an evaluation—“inscribed” or “evoked.” Inscribed appraisal is explicit in texts (e.g. an “evil” enemy) and evoked appraisal is similarly value-laden, although more indirectly so (e.g. referring to something as “prized” or “feared”). Inscribed evaluation “is harder to resist or ignore” and is more likely to be prescriptive than evoked evaluation which is more open to “accommodating a wider range of reading positions” (Martin 155). The 2006 Budget contains examples of both forms of appraisal.

The 2006 Budget provides the rationale for the Harper government’s decision to introduce UCCB and an overview of how the benefit will work. Government concerns over “choice” in child care arrangements and lower taxes were addressed by Budget 2006 that introduced the UCCB and promised more support to families in the form of tax relief. Families with children are clearly a priority in this budget.

Discussion of UCCB begins with the declaration: “One of the most important investments governments can make is to support families as they raise

their children. The statement is emphatic and uses inscribed appraisal (“most important”). It is also a form of comparison—the comparator is the Liberal universal childcare plan which is clearly deemed to be a less desirable investment. Again, comparison is used in the description of UCCB as “the kind of investments that will make a real difference to parents” which portrays previous attempts to fund families as flawed. The statement also evokes positive emotions and elicits feelings of solidarity (Martin, 2000) through the emphasis on alleviating longstanding struggles of parents. Preliminary details of UCCB are outlined in the budget as follows:

As a result of these budget measures, total direct federal support to families will be approximately \$11.7 billion for the 2006–07 benefit year, with the vast majority of benefits directed to low- and middle-income families. Budget 2006 proposes to introduce the new Universal Child Care Benefit (UCCB), to provide all families with \$100 per month for each child under age six, effective July 1, 2006. (Government of Canada 99)

The discourse illustrates the individualization of funding for families. Benefits will be in the form of “direct federal support to families” who will then have the choice of how to provide social welfare for their own families. The statement about “the vast majority of benefits” to be “directed to low- and middle-income families” is subjective. Assistance for the most needy is guaranteed but not quantified through this form of evaluative discourse. The intent of the policy is outlined as follows:

Through the proposed UCCB, parents will be able to choose the child care option that best suits their families’ needs—whether that means formal child care, informal care through neighbours or relatives, or a parent staying at home. (Government of Canada 99)

The above excerpt similarly illustrates the use of subjective statements—the “proposed UCCB” allows parents to “choose the child care option that best suits their families’ needs.” There is no certainty provided, simply choice. This form of appraisal is consistent with the broader theme of the government’s lack of involvement in determining outcomes for families with children. Along with the theme of choice, the excerpt illustrates the use and effect of gender-neutral language. One of the care options outlined is “a parent staying at home.” The fact that parental leave is still largely consumed by women, and that they continue to engage in a greater proportion of child care provision than men indicates that the “parent” involved is likely to be the mother (Marshall).

The fact that women, therefore, have a greater need for support in child care remains hidden in such a gender “neutral” proposal. Further details provided about UCCB also illustrate the evaluative discourse used:

With the creation of the UCCB, Budget 2006 proposes to phase out the existing CCTB under-7 supplement as of June 30, 2006, for children under the age of 6. The current under-7 supplement will remain in place until June 30, 2007, for children who turn 6 before that date. This two-stage phase-out will ensure that once the UCCB is in place, all families currently receiving the supplement will be at least as well off as they were under the current system, and that most families will receive significantly more benefits. (Government of Canada 100)

In the excerpt above, UCCB is compared to “the existing CCTB under-7 supplement.” The comparison suggests that the two programs are similar, and that UCCB is superior; therefore, CCTB is unnecessary. However, the information provided is condensed and therefore hides the fact that CCTB funds will be used to fund UCCB and that the families who would have received the under-7 supplement will not fare as well under the new system, despite claims to the contrary (Battle 2008).

Similar claims are made in the following statement:

The UCCB will substantially increase federal assistance for children by providing direct federal support to approximately 1.5 million families and over two million children. Direct federal benefits to families with children will be provided through the UCCB and two components of the CCTB: the base benefit, which is targeted to low- and middle-income families, and the National Child Benefit (NCB) supplement, which provides additional assistance to low-income families (Government of Canada 100).

Evaluation is apparent in the form of value-laden claims about the goals of UCCB and their feasibility. The statement that UCCB “will substantially increase federal assistance for children” is subjective and also condenses the policy objectives to render them more universally acceptable. The result of this form of condensation is that an increase in the amount of assistance available is linked to the outcome of greater prosperity for children. However, the nature of the benefit—a cash payment to parents—does not ensure that outcome. Not enough information is provided for the reader to determine whether “direct federal support” through UCCB will improve the lives of families with children, or in what ways.

Finally, the Budget seeks to address the issue of support for child care, the intended objective of the UCCB:

The availability of quality child care is a challenge for many working parents—a challenge the Government aims to address in cooperation with provinces and territories, employers and community non-profit organizations. To support the creation of child care spaces, this budget sets aside \$250 million per year, beginning in 2007–08. (Government of Canada 103)

Again, evaluative discourse is apparent in the subjective nature of the statement. Child care is described simply as “a challenge”; a challenge that is not quantified. Similarly, the causes of the “challenge” and potential solutions to it are undisclosed. The subjective discourse suggests that the government is distancing itself from the “challenge.” It is not named properly either—by calling “the availability of quality child care” “a challenge,” it ensures that the problem is not perceived as a “lack of availability,” simply an availability problem which is indirectly attributed to the providers of child care. Despite the fact that it takes no responsibility for the “challenge” the government will address it—yet it seeks to address it indirectly: “to support the creation of child care spaces.” It is clear that the federal government’s role will be simply as a provider of funds and how the funds are used to address the challenge is considered outside of their responsibility. Private responsibility for child care illustrates the trend toward the individualization of federal family policy and, ultimately, the dissolution of the Canadian welfare state.

The Problem with “Choice” and the Need to Focus on “Risk”

Rather than the dependency-choice dichotomy, child benefits policy should focus on limiting social risks. After decades of focusing on the financial welfare of children—often to the detriment of parents—contemporary Canadian family policy should recognize that the custodian of the child faces *new social risks*. As Giuliano Bonoli argues, new social risks (NSRs) include “reconciling work and family life, lone parenthood, long-term unemployment, being among the working poor, or having insufficient social security coverage” (431). In Canada as elsewhere, new social risks affect women disproportionately. Scholars such as Gøsta Esping-Andersen, Bonoli and Jenson (2004) point out that the emergence of new social risks require new forms and directions in social policy as the industrial welfare regime is no longer relevant to persistent poverty and social exclusion. Yet the starting point for reconceiving social policy remains the same as it was for Marsh in 1943—the family. Family Allowance was an

appropriate response to social risks in the post-war period. While it was based on the principles of justice and fairness for male breadwinners, it had the effect of extending citizenship rights to children and ensuring families were protected from undue economic and social hardship.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, the design of UCCB has the potential to create, rather than alleviate new social risks. The Conservative government sought to promote a future of neo-liberalism in Canada by using its authority to provide “choice in child care” to parents. The stated rationale of such an approach was that parents were entitled to choose the childcare option that fit their unique needs best. However, what is less clear is that by shifting the responsibility of how best to use public funds from governments to families, the Conservatives were attempting to cut bureaucratic expense and adhere to the neo-liberal principles of greater private responsibility. The Universal Child Care Benefit would increase demand for private child care and can therefore be seen as an investment in the market as much as an investment in the well-being of families. The plan is legitimized through the use of evaluative discourse and condensation, linguistic techniques used to promote an ardently neo-liberal ideology while distracting attention from the Conservative Party of Canada’s objective of a more limited role for government in supporting families with children. Yet, more importantly, these discursive strategies discredit alternative approaches to childcare provision, legitimize the authority of the government, and attempt to ensure continued support for the government and its neo-liberal ideology.

¹Conservative opposition member, Mrs. Carol Skelton (Saskatoon–Rosetown–Biggar) argues that UCCB is unfair, stating that “it is clear that we are getting two tier day care here. The Liberal program will not be available to all Canadians. The Liberal program will have winners and losers. Why can parents not have a fair financial choice when it comes to choosing how to raise their children?” (Hansard, 38th Parliament, 1st Session, Tuesday, May 31, 2005).

²The details of the policy—eligibility, amounts, and how to access funds—are available at “Universal Child Care Benefit,” Human Resources Skills Development Canada, <<http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/family/uccb/index.shtml>>.

³According to Esping-Andersen, a welfare regime is defined as “the combined, interdependent way in which welfare is produced and allocated between state, market, and family” (35).

⁴The five priorities of the Conservative Party of Canada’s minority government are first outlined in their election platform: *Stand Up for Canada, Conservative*

Party of Canada Federal Election Platform, 2006. These priorities are developed and prioritized in Budget 2006 (Government of Canada).

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