Unique Quebec Family Policy Model at Risk

November 26, 2003 – Quebec provides North America's only example of an integrated approach to family policy. It stands as proof that there is room in market-oriented countries for progressive public policies designed specifically for families.

A new study from CPRN's Family Network places Quebec's achievements in a comparative light and draws lessons applicable elsewhere in Canada and abroad. In ***Articulation travail-famille : Le contre-exemple des pays dits « libéraux » ?*** , authors Caroline Beauvais and Pascale Dufour compare approaches to balancing the demands of work and family in the United Kingdom, Canada and Quebec.

Beauvais and Dufour find Canada's federal government and that of the U.K. both exhibit a "hierarchy of help" when it comes to families. The first level of response is left to the labour market, the next to the family itself. Only when these two fail to meet the needs of families will the state step in, and then only in a limited and targeted way. Family policy, in this context, amounts to residual programs for the poor and marginalized.

Balancing work and family demands in the market-oriented discourse is seen more often in personal, rather than family, terms.

"The result is that the costs of an unbalanced relationship between work and family are seen in terms of their effect on children, employers, or society as a whole, but not in terms of families," says Dufour. "Responses are then haphazard, akin to social measures that affect families only incidentally."

Beauvais and Dufour use the example of child care to demonstrate the fundamental difference in the approach of Quebec compared to the rest of the country.

Outside Quebec, only 12 per cent of children under 12 years of age had a day care space in 2001. Federal talk of a national child care program has foundered on intergovernmental discord and deficit fighting. Canada's support to families has been delivered through the tax system, with the exception of maternity and parental leave (provided through Employment Insurance (EI)). Yet, contradictory policies tighten up EI and reduce access to parental leaves.

"The current child care situation in Canada is at the very least paradoxical," says Jane Jenson, Director of the Family Network, "especially in a country that sees participation in the labour market as the solution to the needs of parents."

Quebec presents a very different model, the authors argue, one that starts from the needs of the family.

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From the 1980s on, while the federal government and the other provinces adopted policies targeting low-income families, Quebec made a comprehensive family policy its explicit objective. This is in no small measure a result of the active role of the province's family and feminist movements.
By the time a new government took office this year, Quebec's policy was characterized by:

- A network of child care and after-school care centres accessible to all children for $5 per day, regardless of parental income.
- A new family allowance adjusted to family situation (single or two-parent), family income and number of children. Initially universal, it is now targeted.
- A parental insurance program, covering maternity and paternal leave more generously than federal provisions.
- A ministry devoted to Family and Childhood that recognizes the pre-eminent role of parents in child development and also the state's role in support of families.
- Family-oriented policies in the public sector that make the state a model employer.
- Doubling the days employees may be absent for family reasons, from 5 to 10 per year.

The Parti Québécois government's promises to expand these provisions by adding a reduced work week and parental leave for the self-employed have been set aside by the new Liberal government. The new government, while promising to increase the number of day care spaces, has also ended universality in the day care program, introducing differential payments and a larger role for private delivery.

"It remains to be seen whether the unique Quebec model can survive the change in government," says Dufour. "But one thing is clear, the Quebec model has demonstrated the viability of a more comprehensive approach to family policy than that in evidence elsewhere in the country today."

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