

**Baby Talk: How gender issues affected media coverage of the  
child-care debate in the last federal election**

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**ABSTRACT**

Child-care issues have traditionally been covered by female social affairs journalists in Canada, not political beat reporters – who are overwhelmingly male. This paper looks at what happened when a child-care platform became the main issue in the 2006 federal election campaign, and how and why the media failed to analyse its shortcomings.

**Introduction:**

Like the Virginia Slims cigarette ad: “You’ve Come a Long Way Baby,” that successfully tapped into a feminist desire for women’s freedom in the late ’60s – even as it enslaved them to tobacco – the Conservative government’s \$10.9 billion child care platform in the January 2006 federal election campaign, initially appeared women-friendly, even feminist.

Primarily, it promised to give women “choice” – a word closely associated with the feminist pro-choice movement – in child-care options, and, secondly, to recognize the contribution of stay-at-home mums by paying them, a long sought-after goal of the women’s rights movement.

For a party that consistently polled lower with female voters during the campaign than men,<sup>1</sup> it seemed a smart sales strategy: the Conservatives were not only seemingly listening to women and responding to their needs – they appreciated their work!

But did the promise of the plan live up to the reality? And, more importantly to the thesis of this paper, did provide critical reporting and analysis of the platform?

Not by a long shot – until the ballots were cast and the Conservatives rose to power on a marquee platform that even their analysts would later deem a failure.

### **Argument:**

Based on an analysis from Canada's two national newspapers, *The Globe and Mail* and *National Post*, taken from Dec. 5, 2005 when the Tory program was announced and election day, Jan. 23, 2006 this paper will argue that the Conservative party got an easy ride from the media on their so-called "pro-choice" child-care plan because of differences between the ways the media report and edit "hard" news stories, such as those on crime, wars, the economy, and elections – journalism that is dominated by men – and how they cover "soft" news issues, such as child care, historically of more interest to female reporters and editors because they are more affected by them, and more willing to cover these issues than their male counterparts.

In short, once a "soft" news issue, child care, became an election platform, it was covered not by the reporters and editors who were expert at analysing day care issues, but by "hard news" reporters and editors tasked to cover the election campaign, who were unfamiliar with the issues and economics surrounding day care -- and women's rights issues, in general.

This paper will explain, then, how the media failed to accurately report on the childcare platform – and why.

### The Competing Child Care Plans:

On Dec. 5<sup>th</sup>, 2005 the Conservative's promised \$10.9 billion over five years for child care, including "\$1.4 billion to honour the Liberal government's agreements with the provinces until the end of the 2006-07 fiscal year and \$1.25 billion in grants or tax credits to encourage businesses and community groups to create 125,000 new daycare spots over five years."<sup>2</sup> the *Globe and Mail* reported. But the heart of the plan was a pledge to give parents \$1,200 a year for every preschool child to spend on daycare – however they wanted to. The plan would benefit about two million children under six, "but because some is taxed back, would cost about \$1.6 billion a year, or \$8.25 billion over five years," the *Globe* reported.

That plan was double the \$5 billion over five years that the Liberals had earlier announced to create 625,000 new child-care spaces, and the Liberals responded that day, announcing a new, richer plan that would provide \$11 billion – over 10 years. Upping the ante still further, on Jan. 11<sup>th</sup>, the NDP announced their largest "single spending proposal is \$16 billion over four years to boost the Child Tax Benefit by \$1,000 per child, finance 200,000 more child-care spaces and create a children's commissioner," the *Globe* reported.<sup>3</sup>

The Conservative party seemed to have designed an entire election campaign around an issue traditionally more of concern to women than men – and the other parties followed suit.

*National Post* columnist Andrew Coyne told readers in his Dec. 7 column<sup>4</sup> it was the "decisive" issue of the campaign, and *Ottawa Citizen* reporter Norma Greenaway later noted in an interview: "It was an issue that did get quite a bit of ink, and did stir

enough debate that I can remember saying, only half jokingly, that I had never imagined a day would come when I would be witnessing a child care election.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Criticism:**

But despite the enormous money being committed and the amount of newspaper ink devoted to covering the options, child care advocates, such as Martha Friendly,<sup>6</sup> co-coordinator of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit at the University of Toronto, and Don Giesbrecht,<sup>7</sup> president of the Winnipeg-based Canadian Child Care Federation, claim the media coverage of the program was shallow and lacking in critical analysis of whether it could actually deliver what it promised: choice, child care spaces, and money. “We were quick to respond to draw attention to what was at stake here,” says Giesbrecht, who realized the Liberal plan – that had already negotiated five-years of financing with the provinces to create a national early childhood education and child care program – would be dismantled if the Conservatives were elected. “But [our press releases] were like tumbleweeds going across the valley, because there was so little uptake on it. We were waiting for the controversy to begin, for [reporters] to let us tell them our side,” he says.

It never happened.

Friendly was similarly frustrated. Why, she wondered, were reporters failing to “audit” it to make sure it could deliver? Further her efforts to garner attention to the shortcomings and misinformation about the plan, as well as the importance of a national early childhood education program, were ignored. A commentary piece she sent to the *Globe and Mail* “kicked around” for so long, she gave up trying to gain a national audience and sent it to the *Toronto Star*, which immediately published it. <sup>8</sup> Similarly,

Giesbrecht says letters to the editor written by his organization were never published in Western papers. <sup>9</sup>

As NDP MP Denise Savoie, <sup>10</sup> who is fighting for the creation of more child care spaces, says, coverage of the Conservative program was further hampered by a media obsession with a 30-second sound bite from Scott Reid, the communications aide to then Prime Minister Paul Martin, who -- referring to the Conservative promise to pay parents \$100 a month for every child under six -- said: "Don't give people 25 bucks a week to blow on beer and popcorn. Give them child-care spaces that work." <sup>11</sup>

So were the critics right? According to an analysis of articles written in the *Globe and Mail* and *National Post* during and after the election campaign: Yes.

### **Methodology:**

This paper is based on the following research:

1. Analysis of more than 80 articles, columns, and select letters to the editor from Canadian Newsstands data base site about the child-care program that appeared in the *National Post* (53) and *Globe and Mail* (27) from Dec. 5<sup>th</sup>, 2005 to Jan. 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2006, as well as an examination of another 43 major pieces from Canadian news sources in general on child care from that data base and from the Childcare Resource and Research Unit website during both the lead up and the aftermath of the election and the lead up and aftermath of the March 2007 budget adjustment of the Conservative child-care program.
2. A literature review of papers available online from Communications Abstracts, Social Sciences Full Text, Gender Studies Abstracts, and University of New Brunswick, Department of Sociology site and the Carleton Library Catalogue for books on media and women.

3. Interviews with: Martha Friendly, coordinator, Childcare Resource and Research Unit, Catherine Swift, president of the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, Don Giesbrecht, president of the Canadian Child care Federation, Victoria NDP MP Denise Savoie, and her assistant Ed Gillis, Angela Hilland, a Winnipeg accountant and mother of two children who are in child care, Norma Greenaway, a political correspondent for the *Ottawa Citizen* who covered the election campaign and whose stories often run in the *National Post*, Gloria Galloway, an Ottawa correspondent for the *Globe and Mail* who covered the election and is specifically assigned to report on child care policies, *Toronto Star* writer Laurie Monsebraaten, who used to be the social affairs reporter – when that beat existed – and still writes about child-care issues when she can.

### **Literature Review and Theoretical approach:**

Not much has been written on how women and women's issues are sidelined by the media, how issues pushed by female reporters are given less weight in papers than those by male reporters, and how news judgments are made overwhelmingly by male editors on how much space or how many stories – if any – will be devoted to issues perceived as women's interests. But what has been written is convincing: I would argue all of these theories affected how the child-care issue was covered. Among them:

#### **1. Sidelining of female reporters – and their stories – in the newsroom:**

In *Women, Media and Politics*,<sup>12</sup> Kay Mills argues female reporters reject covering issues they care about, to report on cops and national security, because those stories will get them good pay and promotions. They'll be seen as "serious," she says. "Many of the women I have interviewed remember the glazed looks that came over editors' eyes when they suggested stories on child care or women in politics," Mills says.

Little, apparently, has changed since that book was published in 1997. The *Toronto Star's* Monsebraaten,<sup>13</sup> who reports on child care issues, but didn't specifically cover the election campaign, agrees female reporters are afraid to push for stories that are seen to be about "women's issues" because they feel it will sideline their career.

That's a loss for readers, because these are not only stories women can often tell better than their male colleagues – because of their own experiences – but they are stories readers want to know about, Mills argues. Because women live different lives, they have a different approach to the news, and frame issues differently, Mills says. And because they are more involved in home and family issues, those stories matter more to them than to men. "They may have done more of the marketing, housekeeping, or childrearing than their spouses. They may be raising the children alone. ...They bring these experiences to their jobs as journalists."<sup>14</sup>

It's not just that they are afraid of being sidelined in their careers, they are concerned – "because most newspapers are run by men," – that their efforts on these stories will be wasted, Monsebraaten says. "You know the way it works. Unless an editor thinks your story is exciting" it's not going to get play," she says. "So why spend the time to write something that's not going to get in the paper, or it's going to be truncated or get bad placement?"<sup>15</sup>

Despite their low ranking with the news room, Mills argues these are the stories readers say they want more of: "News of their own community, articles about personal finance, fitness or child care – are subjects women within the newspaper may be likely to care about as well."<sup>16</sup> But if female reporters are avoiding them, they aren't getting done. That's because, as Greenaway points out, the majority – by far – of reporters who

currently cover child-care issues are women. “It just makes more sense. Women are the ones juggling home care and child care.”<sup>17</sup>

But even if there are women reporters interested in dealing with women’s stories, can their voices be heard in the din of male-dominated newsrooms, or male-dominated story meetings? “You have to have ‘the rule of three’ functioning before there will consistently be impact,” said Glenda Holste, an editorial writer and columnist for the St. Paul, Minn., Pioneer Press, quoted by Mills. “If there is just one woman in a story conference or editorial page meeting, you have to blend in. If there are two, you compete for attention. When there are three women, you reach a critical mass.”<sup>18</sup>

Other influences: whether men have been sensitized to women’s issues by seeing those stories play well, or win awards, whether men are married to women who work, who have experienced prejudice, and whether they have daughters who are working and are experiencing these issues. “When it’s daddy’s little girl who’s getting dissed, it sinks in in a way it never did before,” says Mills quoting newspaper journalist Patt Morrison.<sup>19</sup>

In “The Influence of Reporter Gender on Source Selection in Newspaper Stories,” Cory L. Armstrong points out: “Internal structural decisions may affect news content.” Editors decide where stories will appear and what prominence they will receive. “The degree to which internal decisions are made by copy editors and mid-level managers of the newspaper may contribute to the news representations.”<sup>20</sup>

But here’s the thing: childcare was big news in the 2006 election. There was something else at play:

2. In *Real Majority, media minority: the cost of sidelining women in reporting*, L.

Flanders argues we should analyse not just who is telling the story – men or women -- but how it is being told. <sup>21</sup>

In the case of the Tory child care program, analysis of the articles, indicates, for example, the story was being told primarily in the voices of male sources – men who were mainly politicians or party communications officers, men, as Statistics Canada findings indicate consistently, who are the least likely to be tasked with arranging for childcare, and therefore the people who would be least affected by the plan.

In fact, though throughout the election, poll results <sup>22</sup> showed women were more concerned about child care than men, and that they were more nervous about a Conservative government than men, not only were men the prominent sources in the child care stories, but male columnists were the primary analysts.

So how good was analysis and commentary from people who were the least like affected, and why did reporters choose them to tell the story?

In her paper “How Newspaper Sources Trigger Gender Stereotypes,” Armstrong explains: “Reporters seek out sources because those individuals have witnessed an event or because of their title or position, not necessarily because of their overall knowledge or demonstrated competence.” <sup>23</sup> And those, as she points out in her earlier cited paper on source selection, are most likely to be men. <sup>24</sup>

Monsebraaten pointed to another issue in “how” the story gets reported, as opposed to by “whom.” Social affairs reporters are a dying breed at newspapers across Canada, she says, meaning those reporting on child care may not have the expertise a beat reporter may have. Further, those who regularly cover child-care issues – women –

are also unlikely to be the ones out on the campaign trail, providing the stories and analysis of the issues, because the majority of political reporters are male, which is why, in fact, a majority of the stories written on child care, were written by men. <sup>25</sup>

The fact that the child-care platforms were reported on during an election campaign might also explain the lack of analysis and congruity in the reports. Election campaigns are covered not only by journalists who report, off and on, from the campaign trail as they are replaced by others, but by reporters back in the newsroom who are picking up on announcements made across the country – making it difficult for one reporter to build knowledge on any one campaign issue.

The timing of this story during an election campaign also meant the issue was covered more often by men, who dominate political beats – and thus election issue coverage – and who may be less interested in childcare than women.

As a result, no single reporter at either the *National Post* or the *Globe and Mail* was reporting consistently and continuously throughout the campaign on the childcare platforms. There were, instead, several touching in on the topic at each paper, making it difficult for them to build on knowledge of the issue, notice shortcomings in the programs, or analyse them.

Another factor, in the how as opposed to just the who, is “how” stories get framed. Mills argues that because women live different lives, they have a different approach to the news, and frame issues differently. Journalists report what is familiar or important to them: so more women in the newsroom report on social affairs issues such as day care, than men, and as Armstrong points out in her study of source selection, they are more likely to quote women in their stories, than male reporters are. <sup>26</sup>

Further, because of their “different lives” they can report on experiences they are aware of that often take place in the private sphere. Parents with children of childcare age “have the least amount of time to get their voices heard,” Monsebraaten points out. “You’re helping your kids with their homework, so you can’t go to night meetings. And once you’re out of that period, you’re into other things.”

And, she argues: “It’s not an ongoing problem for a big percentage of the population, so it’s difficult to get traction.” But, she believes, having women who have had these experiences report on and analyse the childcare issue, would have made a difference. <sup>27</sup>

**3. It’s not just reporter’s framing the agenda, but newspapers:** In his paper “The *National Post* and the Nanny State: Framing the Child Care Debate in Canada, <sup>28</sup> Luc Theriault, argues that fully a year before the last election, the *National Post* framed the Liberal’s “significant social policy breakthrough” on day care – that would have committed \$5 billion over five years to the provinces to create early education and day care,” as being about a “bureaucratic social program” or a “massive top-down government –run program,” and one that served the middle class, rather than those who need it, with a series of articles running under the theme “the Nanny State,” which culminated on Dec. 11<sup>th</sup>, 2004, with an editorial called “Say No to the Nanny State.”

Co-incidentally, one of the proposals the *Post* argued for was a \$2,000 per child annual tax deduction, which is only \$600 off from what the Conservatives delivered in their \$2.5 billion plan.

So did the *Post* series act as a pre-emptive strike against the Liberal’s child care program?

In her study on source selection, Armstrong points out: “A more overt type of influence can occur when news organizations have a particular slant in their coverage based on the organization’s political ideology.”<sup>29</sup> And while the agenda may have been the *Post*’s, Theriault argues it may have influenced coverage in the *Globe*, as well. Monsebraaten agrees, arguing the *National Post* has had an influence on the rest of the national media. “It’s really pushed the media to the right, and I think ultimately we’re still feeling that.”<sup>30</sup>

**4. Crisis reporting:** How newspapers frame a story is also affected, Michele Mattelart argues in her book: *Women, Media and Crisis*,<sup>31</sup> by the times. In times of crisis the theme of family “comes to the fore...The cultural industries, by the way in which they manage crisis themes, effectively encourage this movement back to the family unit. In the advanced industrial countries, this movement is also encouraged by politics designed to raise the birth rate,” discourage abortion, “and by fiscal penalties against households in which both the father and the mother are breadwinners. Behind all these measures looms the threat which the crisis represents for women’s jobs, since women are often the first victims of both unemployment and manpower cuts.”<sup>32</sup>

Canada is not in crisis and there is currently a shortage, not excess, of manpower. Nonetheless, the Conservative policy – whose tax aspect rewarded one-income families over two – seemed aimed at penalizing homes where both the father and mother are breadwinners. Was it to encourage higher fertility rates, which are currently below the rates necessary for replacement of Canada’s population? Or simply to promote conservative values?

What Mattelart also touches on in her book is the societal notion that women's household work be unpaid.<sup>33</sup> In fact, a major portion of the debate around the child-care plans appeared to be a *crie de coeur* to pay women for childcare in the home. But a much stronger thread throughout the Conservative side of the debate was the notion that the establishment of government-subsidized quality day care in Quebec had resulted in unionization of childcare workers and a demand for improved wages. In fact, not only was child care not going to be free, or worth the Tory offer of \$100 a week, but it might be most assuredly going to increase if the rest of the country followed Quebec's path.

In short, mum is cheaper.

#### **ANALYSIS:**

Here's how the two papers reported on the Tory plan:

##### ***Globe and Mail:***

The day after the Harper child-care policy was announced, the *Globe* wrote an editorial that got to the heart of the issues right away.<sup>34</sup> It noted: the \$100 a month tax credit for every child "will do little to assist anyone's choice," "that many parents need to go out to work and require affordable daycare," that "government has an obligation to make women's equality concrete by supporting child care in various ways," including "offering financial support to help facilitate the choice to work," that the current tax system "penalizes" the choice of stay-at-home parents and makes it unaffordable for some," while \$113 million of the \$545 million federal tax subsidy of \$7,000 for each child "went to individuals earning more than \$100,000 a year", and much of it went to those earning more than \$200,000. The *Globe* suggested Harper target support for those who need it, or use the \$2.5 billion to lower taxes across the board.

But most important to note, the editorial reported that “choice” was about appearance, not about reality: “While his child-care policy, with its element of choice, looks superior to that of his opponents, it would help those in need far more if it were actually targeted at them.”

From that point on, that message – which turned out to be correct – was lost in the *Globe*.

New articles printed the same day as the editorial – including an analysis piece – did not critique or quote others critiquing the effectiveness of the plan that their own editorial writers had noted wouldn’t live up to it’s promises.

Further, the paper was unsuccessful in obtaining analysis or criticism from the majority of provinces who would lose the money they’d negotiated with the Liberals to create child-care programs, analysis that abounded *after* the election. Nor did it seek reports from the day care centre operators, or providers or those who had created new programs that would lose funding – or parents who were already on waiting lists for day care spaces. Those stories would come, again, after the election.

Another opportunity for analysis was lost when the *Globe* printed the results of a Strategic Counsel poll Dec. 8<sup>th</sup>, 35 that found 48 per cent approved of the Harper child-care proposal and 45 per cent like Liberal program. When looked at by gender: 50 per cent of women prefer Liberal plan compared with 40 per cent of men. Meanwhile 52 per cent of men liked Harper idea best, compared with 43 per cent of women.

The *Globe* quoted Strategic Counsel managing partner Timothy Woolstencroft saying women are probably more likely to consider daycare a voting issue than are men, noting women tend to be the primary caregivers and are more often obliged to make the

decision about whether to return to work. Support for the plans was also affected by age: a slight majority of those in their child-rearing years, 18-34 preferred the Liberal idea, while a small majority between the ages of 34 and 50 liked the Conservative notion, the *Globe* reported.

There was something else at play that negatively skewed reporting on the issue: the misuse of a 2003 Vanier Institute of the Family national survey of Canadian Values to support the Tory plan, which appeared in Margaret Wente's column in the *Globe* on Dec. 10<sup>th</sup>, among many other places. "Did I mention that most parents say they're rather stay home with their kids if they could afford to? Mr. Martin doesn't have a nickel for them," she said. <sup>36</sup>

But as Allan MacKay president of Vanier, noted in a commentary in the *Globe* Jan. 9: the notion that the Vanier Institute's 2003 study indicated "Canadians do not want to support a national system of early child care," was wrong. <sup>37</sup> The study found "in an ideal world, the No. 1 choice of people is to have one's partner, followed by one's parent, then another relative, followed by home-based, followed by a child-care centre." But because parents know they don't live in a perfect world, almost 70 per cent "are prepared to see their tax dollars help cover the costs of supplemental child care," and one-third "told us that child care for parents working outside the home is a 'very high priority,'" he pointed out.

His essay didn't stop the continuing misrepresentation of the study.

Then came Reid's beer and popcorn quote. That led to a Dec. 13 editorial in the *Globe* that appeared to reverse the paper's earlier position that the Conservative plan did

not offer choice. This one, instead, praised the Conservatives for putting “the issue of choice on the table.”<sup>38</sup>

***National Post:***

On Dec. 5<sup>th</sup>, the day before the Tory plan was announced, *National Post* reporter Heather Sokoloff set out details of the expected child care programs, and in rare reporting on the Conservative program, interviewing people from both sides of the issue, including women, the day before the Conservative policy was formally announced.<sup>39</sup> But when the program was announced, reporters on the campaign trail did not challenge the veracity of the program, and instead quoted Harper saying something now known to be completely false: “It’s a universal payment, but the heaviest benefits are at the lowest income.”<sup>40</sup> Nor did reporters challenge Conservative opposition MP Rona Ambrose, whose file childcare was, on her report two-thirds of Canadians want care that’s not institutional – another misrepresentation of the Vanier study.

Meanwhile, the editorial on the 6<sup>th</sup> proclaimed: “On child care, Harper’s got it right,”<sup>41</sup> and lauded a Conservative plan that would put money into parents’ hands “that could be spent on whatever form of care best suits their kids’ needs best – be it formal daycare, babysitting or stay-at-home parenting,” though there were absolutely no requirements in the plan that the money actually be spent on child care.

The word “choice” made it into headlines, as well, giving the illusion it existed. “A Question of choice,” declared the headline over Tory Hugh Segal’s regular election campaign analysis column. “Tories think government should facilitate choices and opportunities for Canadians. The Liberal/NDP establishment believes they know best, and if something is not state- run, then it cannot be of any value at all.”<sup>42</sup>

**Overall Analysis:**

What is astonishing is not that this rhetoric made it into a political pundit's column, but was repeated in quotes from male politicians on an almost daily basis in Canada's national newspapers without challenge.

The newspapers, for the most part, failed to analyse: whether the \$100 a-month would enable parents to choose to put their children into child care, or enable women to leave the workplace and stay home, how much of that \$100 parents would retain after taxes – and where they would ultimately end up spending it.

Nor was there analysis of the language used to sell the program – that it would give parents “choice,” or that it was “pro-choice” and pro-family, as opposed to the Liberal campaign which was portrayed as practically forcing parents to abandon their children in sterile, institutions as Theriault's study points out.<sup>43</sup>

It was a war of words. Harper used the word “institutionalized” day care programs to disparage the Liberal plan, and “choice” to promote his own. “You can choose the child-care option that best suits your family's need,” the *Globe* quoted him as saying. “Government should support your choices, not limit them.”<sup>44</sup> – though his plan did nothing of the sort.

Harper's language so successfully drew on feminist catch-phrases that one *Post* reader declared: “I find it ironic that Paul Martin is pro-choice when it comes to abortion rights, but is anti-choice when it comes to deciding how parents should raise their children.”<sup>45</sup>

In short, childcare, was a major election issue, but whether people understood the issue, was another question.

### Aftermath of the election coverage:

Fast forward to immediately after the election and even as far as a year later, and the portrayal of the program was very different – in fact, very critical -- indicating that readers had not understood the childcare platforms – and journalists hadn't either. Newspapers reported that Harper's promise to create 125,000 new child care spaces in five years through tax incentives for businesses and grants for community groups was impossible to fulfill: a similar \$10 million plan initiated by the Mike Harris government in Ontario, between 1998 and 2004, had not created one new space,<sup>46</sup> something Martha Friendly had been trying to tell them during the campaign.<sup>47</sup> They also reported the government had to establish a task force to make recommendations on how to encourage businesses to create the promised child care spaces – consultation one might think might have been done before the proposal was dropped in the election campaign – and that the government had yet to reveal what the recommendations were.

And in an article titled “Child-care proposal gives least to poorest”<sup>48</sup> the *Globe* grandly gave front-page coverage to a Caledon Institute of Social Policy report, “The incredible shrinking \$1,200 child-care allowance and how to fix it,”<sup>49</sup> an update on an earlier Caledon study, “The Choice in Child Care Allowance: What you See Is Not What You Get,”<sup>50</sup> released during the election campaign, which neither the *Globe* or *Post* covered. The Caledon findings that went unreported during the campaign indicated that families earning \$30,000 to \$40,000 were the *least* likely to benefit from the plan. A family with two children, with one under six, earning \$36,000, for example, would only net \$388 a year for the child out of the \$1,200. Though neither the *Globe* or *Post* reported that, the *Post* did publish Harper's previously mentioned contention – unchallenged --

that the Tory plan would help the middle class and poor, while the Liberals plan wouldn't. <sup>51</sup>

After the election, and after the Conservative government announced it was axing a Canadian Child Tax Benefit (CCTB) that was due to pay out \$249 annually, the update on the Caledon study reported: Those who make \$200,000 a year or more, with one parent already at home -- in short, those who already have plenty of choice -- benefit the most. They get to keep, after taxes, \$1,076 of the \$1,200 annual amount. Families that benefit the least: Those with two working parents and a combined income of \$30,000. Out of the \$1,200 for each child, they'll net a shocking \$199.

As Ed Gillis, a legislative assistant Savoie's office, who has been tracking the program, explained: The rest is going back to Ottawa as an "income tax claw back of \$244 million that the Conservatives have refused to re- invest in child care," on top of the \$400 million they saved when they axed the CCTB. <sup>52</sup>

Though the Caledon study was freely available during the campaign, the papers failed to report on it, never mind analyse its findings. But consider how they reported on the more "male-issue" economic platforms: The *Globe* reported Jan. 12<sup>th</sup> it had *hired* the conservative think-tank C.D. Howe Institute to analyse which program would most benefit taxpayers: a cut to the GST, promised by the Conservatives, or a cut to income taxes promised by the Liberals. <sup>53</sup> The money was there -- never mind the interest -- to analyse and compare the Tory and Liberal tax plans, but not the plan that most affected women, though it was the marquis platform for all three major parties during the campaign.

Newspapers also reported that families were surprised to find out – as they filed their income tax returns in the spring of 2007 -- that they had to pay tax on the childcare benefit. While newspapers had reported that during the campaign, it apparently hadn't sunk in, Greenaway notes. <sup>54</sup> “How” the taxable aspect of the plan was reported may have had a lot to do it. <sup>53</sup> Simply reporting something is taxable, is much different, as the C.D. Howe example illustrates, than showing readers, with charts and studies, just how much will be taxed.

And the kicker post-election child-care story? The government spent \$123,205 on a study that informed them that Reid may have been right about beer and popcorn: “The general consensus was that the \$1,200 will not have any real impact on child-care choices and instead will be used to help with the next bill.... No one is going to be in a position to go back to work or stay at home to raise children because of the \$1,200,” it said. <sup>55</sup>

Post-election newspaper analysis and reporting on the earlier beloved child-care program, was so critical, in fact, that the Harper government announced major changes to his marquis election promise in the March 2007 budget. In recognition that business was not going to create 125,000 spaces – something even the mildest of research by reporters, not to mention Tory campaign planners, would have uncovered – Harper reversed the plan to give \$250 million a year in tax credits and incentives to business and community groups, and instead transferred those monies to the provinces (as the Liberal program had) to create the child care spaces the Tories had earlier painted as bureaucratic and institutional. <sup>56</sup> The step was taken months after the government received the task force study, that reported what business was saying all along –business owners don't have the money, time, or expertise to create day care spaces, as Canadian Federation of

Independent Business president, Catherine Swift, pointed out.<sup>57</sup> But, who needed the task force study? The federal Conservatives must have been aware that a similar Ontario plan initiated by the Mike Harris Conservatives between 1998 and 2004 had not created one new day care space, despite \$10 million in untapped incentives, Friendly pointed out – during the campaign.<sup>58</sup>

The budget reversal achieved what no amount of effort on the part of child-care advocates during the election could: it led to a flurry of news stories analysing the failures of the Conservative child-care program. Giesbrecht noted he had conversations with reporters during budget week, “where they’ve actually asked the questions they should have asked a year ago like: ‘What if? What’s at stake here?’ Those questions were not being asked in the last election.”<sup>59</sup>

In the end, neither paper gave readers a complete picture – until after the election. The fact that those being quoted, unchallenged in most reports with alternative viewpoints, were, like Conservative leader Stephen Harper, mostly privileged white men with a political stake in defending the Conservative child care program definitely influenced the quality of analysis. And the one woman taking front stage on the file, Conservative MP and “child care” critic, Rona Ambrose, simply repeated Harper’s mantra.

There was another place where the female voice was missing, however, during the campaign – and that was on analysis.

Political pundits in the papers were all men: In the *Globe and Mail*, the three “Strategists” critics were Moe Sihota, Thomas Axworthy, and Peter Donolo. In the *National Post*, conservative pundit Hugh Segal squared off against Liberal John Duffy.

We had representation from various party followings – but not from half of Canada’s population.

While female journalists like the Globe’s Galloway and the Post’s Sokoloff were reporting on the stories, analysis, for the most part, was by men. Andrew Coyne and Don Martin in the National Post. Jeffery Simpson and Lawrence Martin in the Globe and Mail, with Margaret Wentz – who does not purport to represent a feminist view -- weighing in on the debate once.

Columnist Don Martin, for example, analysed the child care program announced by the Tories in one paragraph, and concluded, seemingly without thought, never mind economic analysis: “a 1,200 grant for every six and under child, parents could hire a relative or family member to give far superior loving care.”<sup>60</sup> For \$1,200 a year?

But what may have skewed the coverage even more was the women whose voices were not heard: We did not see feature stories on parents describing their child-care woes, or on where the 70 per cent of women with kids aged three to five who work outside the home and the 65 per cent of all women with children under three who work for pay were putting their kids while at work. Nor did we read about Chinese immigrants forced to send their children back to China to be brought up by their grandparents because they can’t afford day care on minimum wage jobs – until after the election campaign.<sup>61</sup>

These women and families remained invisible, as did their problems, as described so well by Laura Flanders in *Real Majority, Media Minority*.<sup>62</sup> It’s not just a matter of getting women into the newsroom, but getting women into the stories, the people, in this case, who Statistics Canada consistently reports, take on the majority of child-care duties.

Where, in short, were the voices of women like Angela Hilland, a Winnipeg Accountant and mother of two children in child care, who asked in an interview whether it was a good use of taxpayer money to fund families earning \$200,000 a year. “Providing child-care funding for all families, regardless of whether they use publicly funded child care, is like contributing public funding for hospital beds for people who don’t need them,” she said. <sup>63</sup>

*Ottawa Citizen* political reporter Norma Greenaway, who covered the campaign, was perplexed to discover readers didn’t realize they had to pay tax on the \$1,200 annual credit, or that the program, in the end, wasn’t about choice. “Most mothers I know knew it was taxable, and though the [political] focus was on choice, to me it was so clear it wasn’t going to provide choice.” <sup>64</sup>

But in retrospect *Globe and Mail* reporter, Gloria Galloway, thought there was, perhaps, a lack of analysis was on the word “choice,” and how much parents would retain of the \$100. “Yes, we probably could have poked much bigger holes in child care, specifically, than we did before and during the campaign,” she says, though she does not attribute it to gender issues. <sup>65</sup>

In the end, confusion in the public’s mind may have spelled the end of a child-care program not just for this election, but many more: “We had a sniff at a future of actually putting together a national system of early learning and child care,” says Giesbrecht. “One year later we’re as far from it as we’ve ever been.” <sup>66</sup>

Greenaway agrees: “To be honest, I’m convinced there won’t be a big program to create universal childcare in our lifetime. I think it’s gone.” <sup>67</sup>

### Conclusion:

When one of the early acts of a newly elected government, is to reverse policy on its marquis election platform, as the Conservatives did partially with their child care plan by returning some money to the provinces to create day care spaces, <sup>68</sup> it would seem that there is a realization by them, that the program is flawed. But, as this paper proves, nowhere in the election campaign coverage by Canada's two national newspapers, the *Globe and Mail* and the *National Post*, did we see evidence of those flaws in the coverage of the plan, excepting in one editorial in the *Globe*, a position that was later reversed.

Further, the reasons for the missed analysis have been discussed and debated for the last 10 years in important media criticisms cited in this paper, such as Laura Flanders, *Real majority, Media Minority, the cost of sidelining women in reporting*, <sup>69</sup> and Kay Mills's *Women media, and politics* <sup>70</sup>, both released a decade ago, and more recently in Cory L. Armstrong's 2004 and 2005 studies on gender stereotyping in newspapers. <sup>71</sup>

As a result, the Conservative party got a free-ride on one of the most critical and debated social planning issues of the past quarter century, child care programs, because the media failed to promote women into political reporting beats and national news editor positions, failed, perhaps because of the bias of male editors, to recognize the importance of these "soft" news issues to their readers – and to federal policy-making as a whole.

Nor, in the end, did they make an effort to see that the predominant issue of the campaign was covered by those reporters – social affairs reporters who are predominantly women – who had the contacts and background experience to effectively provide critical reporting on the policy.

Finally, this dramatic failure can also be blamed on a decline in emphasis on so-called “soft” women’s news issues, as media outlets cut back on the number of reporters covering these beats.

In short, a well-documented gender-bias of the media, combined with the scattered nature of reporting among many reporters and editors on the election campaign trail, may have translated into a win for a party running on a marquis platform that was clearly and obviously flawed to experts in the know – who could not be heard no matter how well-researched their commentary, nor how important.

In the end, the people who will pay for the media failure are the readers who look to the media for clear-cut, unbiased, non-discriminatory critical reporting and analysis – and their children.

### **End Notes**

<sup>1</sup> “Poll finds gender gap on daycare.” *Globe and Mail*, Dec. 8, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> “Tories aim daycare dollars at parents.” *Globe and Mail*, Dec. 6, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> “NDP lays out its \$71-billion plan.” *Globe and Mail*, Jan. 12, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> “A Winning Issue: child care.” *National Post*, Dec. 7, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Norma Greenaway, Ottawa Citizen political correspondent, phone and email interviews, February/March, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Martha Friendly, Coordinator, Childcare Resource and Research Unit, University of Toronto, phone and email interviews, February/March. 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Don Giesbrecht, president of the Winnipeg-based Canadian Child Care Federation, phone and email interviews, February/March. 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Friendly, interviews.

<sup>9</sup> Giesbrecht, interviews.

<sup>10</sup> NDP MP Denise Savoie, phone and email interviews, February/March 2007.

<sup>11</sup> “Martin aide apologizes for child-care comment.” *Globe and Mail*, Dec. 12, 2005

<sup>12</sup> Kay Mills, *Women media, and politics.. Edited by Pippa Norris*, 1997 New York: Oxford University Press, p 44.

<sup>13</sup> Laurie Monsebraaten, reporter, *Toronto Star*, phone and email interviews, March, 2007.

<sup>14</sup> Mills, p 42.

<sup>15</sup> Monsebraaten, interviews.

<sup>16</sup> Mills, p 41.

<sup>17</sup> Greenaway, interviews.

<sup>18</sup> Mills, p 45.

<sup>19</sup> Mills, p 45.

<sup>20</sup> Cory L Armstrong, “The Influence of Reporter Gender on Source Selection in Newspapers Stories.” *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*. Spring 2004

<sup>21</sup> Laura Flanders, *Real Majority, Media Minority: the cost of sidelining women in reporting*. 1997. Monroe, Maine: Common Courage Press.

<sup>22</sup> Brian Laghi “Poll finds gender gap on daycare.” *Globe and Mail*. Dec. 8, 2005. A-4.

<sup>23</sup> Cory L Armstrong, and, Michelle R. Nelson. “How Newspaper Sources Trigger Gender Stereotypes.” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, Winter 2005.

<sup>24</sup> Armstrong, The Influence of Reporter Gender on Source Selection in Newspaper Stories.

<sup>25</sup> Monsebraaten, interviews.

<sup>26</sup> Armstrong, The Influence of Reporter Gender on Source Selection in Newspaper Stories.

<sup>27</sup> Mosebraaten, interviews.

<sup>28</sup> Luc Theriault. "The National Post and the Nanny State: Framing the Child Care Debate in Canada." *Canadian Review of Social Policy*. 2006

<sup>29</sup> Armstrong, The Influence of Reporter Gender on Source Selection in Newspaper Stories.

<sup>30</sup> Monsebraaten, interviews.

<sup>31</sup> Michele Mattelart. *Women Media Crisis: Femininity and Disorder*. London: Comedia Publishing Group. 1986.

<sup>32</sup> Mattelart. *Women Media Crisis: Femininity and Disorder*, p 2.

<sup>33</sup> Mattelart. *Women Media Crisis: Femininity and Disorder*, p 7.

<sup>34</sup> "Harper's prescription for choice in child care." Editorial. *Globe and Mail*. Dec. 6, 2005. A-22.

<sup>35</sup> Laghi "Poll finds gender gap on daycare." A-4.

<sup>36</sup> Margaret Went. "Help! Harper is starting to make sense." *Globe and Mail*. Dec. 10, 2005. A-29.

<sup>37</sup> Allan Mackay, "Keep your eye on 'family' issues." *The Globe and Mail*. Jan. 9, 2006. A-13.

<sup>38</sup> "Popcorn, beer and child care." *Globe and Mail*. Editorial. Dec. 13, 2005. A-22.

<sup>39</sup> Heather Sokoloff. "Gulf between parties is size of a small child." *National Post*. Dec. 5, 2005. A-8.

- <sup>40</sup> Allan Woods. "Tories tackle child care plan: Parents would decide how to spend \$1,200 per child." *National Post*. Dec. 6, 2005. A-1.
- <sup>41</sup> *National Post*. Dec. 6, 2005. "On child care, Harper's got it right." Editorial. A-20.
- <sup>43</sup> Hugh Segal. "A question of choice." *National Post*. Dec. 9, 2005. A-27.
- <sup>43</sup> Theriault. "The National Post and the Nanny State: Framing the Child Care Debate in Canada."
- <sup>44</sup> Campbell Clark and Jane Taber, "Tories aim daycare dollars at parents." *The Globe and Mail*. Dec. 6, 2005. A-1.
- <sup>45</sup> Michael Stevenson. "Dollars rock cradles." *National Post*. Dec. 7, 2005. A-21.
- <sup>46</sup> Scott Piatkowski. "Child care in the news: the real cost of Harper's phony child-care cheques." *Rabble.ca* posted on the Childcare Resource and Research Unit website Aug. 4, 2006.
- <sup>47</sup> Friendly, interviews.
- <sup>48</sup> "Child-care proposal gives least to poorest." *Globe and Mail*, April 26, 2006. A-1.
- <sup>49</sup> Ken Battle, "The incredible shrinking \$1,200 child-care allowance and how to fix it," Caledon Institute of Social Policy, April 2006.
- <sup>50</sup> Ken Battle, "*The Choice in Child Care Allowance: What you See Is Not What You Get*," Caledon Institute of Social Policy, January 2006.
- <sup>51</sup> Woods. "Tories tackle child care plan: Parents would decide how to spend \$1,200 per child."
- <sup>52</sup> Ed Gillis, assistant to NDP MP Denise Savoie, phone and e-mail interviews, March 2007.

<sup>53</sup> Janet McFarland. "GST plan proves better for the poor." *Globe and Mail*. Jan. 12, 2006. A-1.

<sup>54</sup> Greenaway, interviews.

<sup>55</sup> "Tories child-care pan falls flat," poll says. *Globe and Mail*. Sept. 11, 2006. A-4.

<sup>56</sup> Norma Greenaway, "Provinces, territories to share \$250 M for child-care spaces." *The Ottawa Citizen*. March 20, 2007.

<sup>57</sup> Catherine Swift, president, Canadian Federation of Independent Business, phone interview, March 2007.

<sup>58</sup> Friendly, interviews.

<sup>59</sup> Giesbrecht, interviews.

<sup>60</sup> Don Martin. "My daring bid to break free of the tour bubbles." *National Post*. Dec. 6, 2005. A-6.

<sup>61</sup> "Child care so costly immigrants sending babies back to China." *Globe and Mail*, Jan. 1, 2007) A-1

<sup>62</sup> Flanders, *Real Majority, Media Minority*.

<sup>63</sup> Comments from Angela Hilland, Winnipeg mother and accountant, from e-mail interview, February 2007.

<sup>64</sup> Greenaway, interviews.

<sup>65</sup> Galloway, interviews.

<sup>66</sup> Giesbrecht, interviews.

<sup>67</sup> Greenaway, interviews.

<sup>68</sup> Greenaway, "Provinces, territories to share \$250 M for child-care spaces."

<sup>69</sup> Flanders, *Real majority, Media Minority, the cost of sidelining women in reporting*.

<sup>70</sup> Mills's *Women media, and politics*

<sup>71</sup> Armstrong, "How Newspaper Sources Trigger Gender Stereotypes" and "How Newspaper Sources Trigger Gender Stereotypes."

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