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Speaking Notes: CCCABC AGM, April 9, 2008, BC Context for Child Care in the Face of  
Corporate Intrusions and Government Obstinacy**

I'd like to start with a caveat about being called in the flyer for this event a "leading expert" on child care. Accepting this descriptor in this room seems to me to be the height of hubris. The real experts are you, the early childhood educators, parents, grandparents and long-time advocates. But I will lay claim to being an advocate, someone who had good child care provided by wonderful early childhood educators who taught me about parenting and helped my children to flourish.

So having heard from Deb Brennan more about the Australian experience with a massive shift to corporately-controlled and delivered child care.....where are we in BC?

What can I tell you that you don't know?

In BC we have a stark contrast between public desires and demands for a publicly funded, high quality, affordable, accessible and inclusive child care system and BC government action. We have a stark contrast between a regularly-reported and confirmed crisis in child care and regular government news releases and statements from the Minister of State for Child Care that everything is moving in the right direction, there is no crisis.

The need for a publicly funded child care system in this province (and nationally) has never been greater. The research evidence is piled high demonstrating both the importance of attending to the early years of a child's life and the benefits to children of participation in quality programs in their preschool years. The evidence points particularly to the importance of involvement in these kinds of programs for children who are vulnerable on a variety of scales and for a variety of reasons, not least of which is living in a low income family. For the record, BC has the highest child poverty rate in the country for the 4<sup>th</sup> year in a row. Most of those poor children live with parents who are working.

Mothers are participating in the paid workforce in record numbers, over 75% for those with a child 3 years or older. And the rate is not much less (64%) for mothers with infants and toddlers. Yet we have regulated spaces for only 12% of children under 12 years.

The crisis in child care manifests itself in many ways. An under-supply of spaces is affecting the ability of mothers to return to work after having a child; employers are frustrated that they can't hire or keep parents who are can't find care for their children. As an example, a recent survey indicated 80% of West Kootenay parents are having trouble finding child care. Wait lists are years long in most centers.

Poor wages and benefits are overwhelmingly responsible for recruitment and retention problems plaguing child care employers. The average ECE wage in BC is only \$12-13 an hour, not a living wage for anyone trying to raise a family. BC is the only province that has not used public funds to improve child care workers' wages and benefits since 2002.

Because public funding for child care has been cut, and has never been adequate for supporting the actual costs of providing quality care, child care providers have to charge parents high fees. (Here we encounter the ironic loop of low wages and high fees precluding the ability of most ECE's to afford the care they provide to other people's children. And we see families trapped in poverty because they can't find or afford childcare that would enable them to go to work.)

On the positive side, in BC we have a strong tradition of child care advocacy from community, parents, unions, and individual champions in various levels of government. More recently child care has found some new allies in municipal government and chambers of commerce (e.g. BC). Resolutions are passing at municipal conferences and annual meetings. For example, from the West Kootenays we have this news:

The West Kootenay chambers identified child care and rural transportation as the two issues that must be addressed to enhance the economic prosperity of the region, communities and the province.

Regional chambers elevated child care to the top of the agenda for the provincial business community, leading to initiatives around funding, as well as programs to enhance recruitment and retention in the field.

"The Chambers in the region must be congratulated for the role they have played in moving this issue to the forefront of the provincial policy agenda," says John Winter, president and CEO of the BC Chamber of Commerce. "Despite the fact that we have seen government act on several of our recommendations, the bottom line for business is, if childcare is not addressed in a comprehensive way, it will have a huge impact on businesses' ability to remain viable, let alone competitive and profitable."

West Kootenay Chambers will call for a guarantee of quality, affordable child care in every community in B.C. in a resolution presented at the AGM. They want the provincial government to make developing, funding and implementing a comprehensive Child Care Strategy for B.C. an immediate priority....

(As an aside – While I absolutely welcome the support from business groups making the economic case for child care, I wish sometimes they would express the same passion for supporting children's development and entitlement to good care and quality programming just because it's the right thing to do and our children's right.)

The crisis in child care is acute and parallel to recruitment and retention problems in other parts of the social services workforce (see recent First Call child care survey and SPARC BC report for BCGEU). The effect of large-scale undervaluing of the work of caring for and serving children, seniors, people with disabilities, immigrants and refugees, and families in distress, is affecting the quality of service delivered. Instability does not promote good quality service. Overworked and underpaid employees cannot always do their best.

This disrespect for the work of caring is reflected in the lack of adequate funding from government, coupled with an historical undervaluing of caring work, often linked to a perception of caring work as women's work, which is undervalued in a market economy.

The child care and academic communities have presented governments with well-researched frameworks, policy recommendations, budget suggestions, evidence of public support, evidence of business support – ad nauseum. What little infrastructure we have for child care in this province is the fruit of years of good advice to government from the early childhood community. But the main thrust of our advice – to invest public funds in building a stable, non-profit child care delivery system that offers children and parents quality, affordability, universality, and accessibility -- has been largely ignored. The brief life under the last NDP government of the Child Care BC Act came too late in their mandate and was quickly reversed by the incoming Liberal government.

Given this picture of need, and of a rich field of research evidence and policy advice, how is the current provincial government responding?

Most of you will be familiar with the yo-yo treatment of child care and early years funding and policy responsibility over the years.... The current split between MCFD and MOE being responsible for child care and ECD and early learning respectively is yet another challenge to overcome for those who would like to see a comprehensive, integrated approach. This split is also in danger of feeding the apparently deliberate devaluation of quality child care settings as some of the best early learning programs available, while emphasizing the StrongStart programs.

You will also be all too familiar with the cuts to child care funding, repeatedly throwing families, child care providers and referral centers into crisis, then giving a little bit back and claiming to be giving “more than ever”.

Between 2001 and 2007, BC has experienced a 388% increase in its budget surplus as a share of our GDP, yet during this same period provincial child care funding has declined by 33%. So it's not for lack of money that we are in this crisis – something else is at work here.

Many of us have puzzled long and hard over this. What is it this government, and the current federal government, have against child care? Why, despite their rhetoric, do their actions demonstrate a commitment to investing even designated federal child care dollars in ‘ABC’ – anything but child care?

It seems that a strong ideological bias is at work here – a “market” bias, a view of the world that turns everything, including the care and education of our children, into a commodity. Hence this government insists on making targeted subsidies to parents as “consumers” of child care the cornerstone of their child care funding. They have this romanticized (or brutal) view (depending on your perspective) of parents shopping for child care with their wages or their subsidy dollars in the “free market” – aided by “healthy competition” and other “market forces,” expecting this will produce an adequate supply of quality care. Despite being clothed in the rhetoric of supporting “parent choice,” this approach obviously hasn't worked for most families and is opening the door to a host of other threats to our dreams of a quality public child care system. Choice, of course, means nothing in a context of scarce and unaffordable spaces.

International evidence reinforces the failure of the subsidy approach. A 2006 child care study published by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development concluded that

governments must directly fund child care services because this model brings “more effective control, advantages of scale, more even national quality, more effective training for educators and a higher degree of equity in access and participation than parent subsidy models.”

The ideological bias we are up against carries a view of families as individually responsible for the care of their children. The idea of all children having an entitlement to quality care and learning environments, and that we have a collective responsibility to support this entitlement seems to be totally off the radar of this government and the whole neo-liberal agenda. Again, this is looking at what they’re doing, not what they’re saying.

Knowing this bias towards commodification, recent legislative changes have raised suspicions about government’s intentions at a time when ABC, or 123 Busy Beavers, is trying to buy their way into BC. With operating funds already being provided to private providers, BC’s unprecedented offering of capital funding to private, for-profit child care operators is of particular concern.

The concern is heightened by trends in other parts of the social services sector, such as employment training, seniors and health care, where government funding has been going increasingly to private, for-profit corporations. The adoption of a competitive bid process advantages large corporations (capacity issues) which are happy to snap up government contracts and enrich themselves at public expense, just as ABC has done. Look at the fall-out for the workers in these sectors – poverty wages, benefits cut or non-existent, creating desperation for families and risk for their children. Big box child care fits right in with this trend, despite the Minister of State’s protestations that government will not let this happen, or isn’t promoting it.

There’s another major disconnect operating here -- between this bias toward allowing for-profit, even multinational, corporations to provide public services such as child care, and the advice government has been given repeatedly from communities consultations, processes, forums and research **it has funded**.

Think about all the provincial and federal investments (Children First, Success By 6, HELP, UEY) and community efforts that have gone into establishing local planning tables for ECD, and mapping community assets to assist with local planning. Yet these community development models and tables would be completely sidelined by the corporate chain service delivery model. Decision-making would move to private boardrooms, with no accountability to local community structures or processes.

Parent participation in child care governance will be undermined too – and all the community-building that occurs when people volunteer on boards of directors and feel ownership of a local center.

And learning from the ABC “vertical or horizontal” integration, even curriculum gets commercialized, or staff training packages. Meanwhile the BC government is spending big dollars on developing new early learning curriculum and frameworks. And while some of us have questioned if we are reinventing the wheel, when excellent early childhood development

college programs have been around for years, this will be a lost investment if corporate control invades.

A move to allow big box corporate child care into this province would fly in the face of numerous recommendations from the early years field, across sectors.

For instance this, from the BC Healthy Child Development Alliance forum proceedings just last November:

### **Suggestions to Policy Makers for Advancing the BC Early Child Development Agenda**

#### **Long-term Planning**

- Develop a governance model for ECD that ensures accountability to communities.
- Ensure public accountability for spending of ECD dollars.

#### **Policy Approaches**

- Develop policy and plan in consultation with children, parents, populations – from the community up.
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The provincial governments' own child care and early learning consultation results released in June 2006 emphasized the importance of community planning, among other themes.

And as we've heard from the Australian experience, large corporate operators will ultimately, find it hard to make a profit in "non-profitable" (smaller, rural, poorer) communities, who will then lose what little access they have.

Canada does have some for-profit child care, but it's mostly delivered by small businesses and individuals. Some BC municipalities have few group centers, and a majority of private and/or in-home providers (small businesses). There is little foreign investment. In BC the figure is 60% non-profit operators, while the non-profit child care sector makes up 80% nationally.

Still, it's not just ABC we need to worry about. There are home-grown for-profit chains also looking to make money in the child care "market" – Telus was recently recognized with a WorkLife BC award for being a family-friendly employer, partly because:

(From WorkLife BC awards communication): TELUS provides emergency child care referrals at no cost to employees. They have partnered with Kids and Company, a national day care provider, with locations across the country to provide a choice of full time, part time or emergency day care services. Each location is planned in partnership, so locations are close to corporate offices and team members can use any location across the country. **Each day care is even designed with consistent colours, toys and facilities – and staff wear the same uniforms – so children feel familiar with the environment regardless of the location (sic !!!)**

Recognizing the weakness of accountability, local control and sustaining quality in a for-profit setting, in 2005 First Call adopted a position on public funding for child care being directed only to the non-profit sector. The position included grandfathering public funding to existing private operators. This position was offered to government as advice in its planning of how to spend public dollars.

We have an opportunity, too, with the federal child care bill (C303) now before parliament, that if proclaimed would direct public funds (federal) to non-profit child care services only.

The BC government has been promising an early years plan, and/or a child care plan for the last several years, if not more. The child care community has been attempting to participate in shaping that plan. There has been more than sufficient research evidence, experience from other countries and community opinion offered to support the development of a publicly-funded child care system that is accountable to the families and communities it would serve.

In the current context, we have corporations salivating over the money to be made from government subsidies and other direct contributions to child care. We have the possibility of corporate retaliation against good public policy (such as Bill C303) under NAFTA and GATS agreements if we let commercial child care proliferate.

It's time we got on with insisting the BC government shut the door to these threats and protect our children and our communities from the commodification of child care services. **BC Child Care is Not for Sale.**