

Citation: Bezanson, Kate, “Feminism, Federalism and Families: Canada’s Mixed Social Policy Architecture” (2018) 14 *JL & Equality* 169

Abstract: In 2018, with a self-declared feminist prime minister, a federal commitment to gender-based budget analysis, and a Cabinet composed of ministers who are 50 percent women, Canada’s social policy architecture is being transformed. This transformation is taking place alongside the rise of a reactionary conservative populism abroad and on the heels of almost a decade of federal Conservative social policy based on “family values” in Canada. Despite its comparatively progressive character, Canada’s social policy architecture remains nested in a liberal welfare state model, with potentially deleterious outcomes especially for mothers, lower income, and racialized women. Further, populist discourses around families, and the social and tax policies associated with them, remain popular among many voters. Such approaches are often regressive and may entrench inequalities, yet they continue to flavour some of Canada’s policies related to families. This article explores some of the consequences of Canada’s family policy incoherence. It examines key federal family-related policies over the last decade, including the Liberal government’s recent extension of parental leaves to eighteen months, its income-based targeting of childcare spending, and its 2018 Gender Equality Budget. This exploration: (1) offers a dynamic theoretical framework for understanding gender in relation to law and social policy; (2) considers why families and federalism are complex political and policy terrain; (3) catalogues Canada’s mixed family policy architecture; and (4) recommends that a feminist future in Canadian social policy will require deviation from the current trajectory to include recalibration of parental leaves and an orientation to childcare as a public good.