A real, although usually unacknowledged, need for day care arose in Alberta in the years prior to World War II since women with young children were sometimes forced to work outside the home in order to shelter, feed, and clothe their families. These women were largely left to their own devices when trying to arrange for the care of their children. Indeed, not only did the provincial government fail to provide any funding for day care, but it was renowned for seizing children from parents who were unable to provide the means of subsistence and quickly making those children available for adoption to families in Alberta, other provinces, and the United States. Consequently, it is little wonder that the need for day care was not a major public issue in Alberta prior to the early 1940s: poor working-class families were better off trying to organize day care privately rather than involve a government bureaucracy that was primed to take away their children.\(^1\)

EDMONTON'S FIRST DAY NURSERIES, 1908–17

Edmonton’s first day nursery was an initiative of the Local Council of Women. In October 1908, the group “decided to undertake the establishment of a creche, patterned after the highly successful day nurseries of eastern cities, where the children of working women are properly cared for from 7:30 a.m. until 6:30 p.m., leaving their mothers free to work with an easy mind knowing that their little ones will be warm, well fed and happy during their absence.” The Edmonton Creche was operational by the end of 1908. According to the Edmonton Bulletin, it was situated in a leased house near the Immigration Hall since it was intended
to serve the children of new immigrants. Between 1906 and 1910, 216,000 immigrants arrived in Alberta. At the time of the census of 1911, these new immigrants constituted a majority of the province’s population of 375,000.2

At the time of the founding of the Edmonton Creche, a handful of day nurseries in Eastern Canadian cities and a widespread network of day nurseries in the cities of the northeastern United States had already been established. The day nurseries in the United States “were part of a broad social reform movement ... aimed at improving the lives of children and their families, which included the establishment of settlement houses, charity kindergartens and children’s aid societies.” In cities where orphanages and children’s aid societies were well established, day nurseries developed a distinctive identity (Prochner 2000, 40–41). Since there was no Children’s Aid Society in Alberta in 1908, however, the Edmonton Creche was forced to immediately become a residential home on top of a day nursery and was soon renamed the Edmonton Creche and Children’s Home. In April 1909, it had fourteen children in residence but continued to provide “a daily home to little ones whose mothers go out working by the day or are unable, through illness or other causes, to attend to their children during their waking hours.” Associated with the day nursery was “a free employment bureau.” Women desiring domestic work could register at the creche; in turn, the creche provided the list of registrants to any “ladies requiring workwomen” who telephoned.3

That same year, the provincial government passed an act that required all communities with populations of ten thousand or more to have a children’s shelter (Prochner 2000, 46). This led to the establishment of a Children’s Aid Society in Edmonton that, in early 1910, assumed the work of “the ladies of the Creche.” The original Edmonton Creche and Children’s Home was closed and a new residential shelter for neglected and delinquent children was opened.4

Even though Edmonton’s first day nursery closed in 1910, the need for day care had hardly dissipated. Immigration to Alberta between 1911 and 1915 (at 170,000 people) was almost as high as between 1906 and 1910, and there was also considerable migration to Alberta from Central Canada and the Atlantic provinces. The population of the City of Edmonton jumped from 25,000 in 1911 to an astounding 73,000 in 1914, before falling back to 59,000 in 1915. Clearly some new immigrants and migrants were stopping in Edmonton for a short time before moving on to rural areas; many others, however, put down roots in the city and contributed to the strong demand for day care in the years immediately before and during World War I.
In response to this demand, the Children’s Aid Society established a stand-alone day nursery in 1912 and moved the facility to successively larger premises on four occasions between 1912 and 1916; the last of the moves was to a building that had previously been the location of the Caledonian Hotel. In early 1917, this day nursery looked after thirty-two children with a staff of three. It is noteworthy that the staff at Alberta’s first dedicated day care suffered from exactly the same plight as the tens of thousands of workers (almost all women) who have worked in day cares in Alberta in the last ninety years: wages that fell far short of the value of the work. An Edmonton Bulletin story in early 1917 commented, “No high salaries are paid at the Nursery, and in this respect the total salaries do not represent the work that is actually done by the staff.”

I have not located a record of what happened to this day nursery after 1917. We do know that no mention of it was made in 1930 at the time when a new Edmonton Creche was organized by the Local Council of Women. The most likely guess is that the day nursery in the old Caledonian Hotel closed shortly after the end of World War I because of the combined effects of two developments.

First, in 1919 Alberta followed the lead of Manitoba and Saskatchewan and introduced a mothers’ allowance program (Guest 1980, 217n12). Although the term “mothers’ allowance” is a misnomer for the program in Alberta since the only eligible mothers were those whose husbands had died or who had been committed to a mental hospital, the program did somewhat reduce the demand for day care in Alberta. Among the mothers who were ineligible for mothers’ allowance payments in Alberta were the unmarried, separated, or divorced, and those whose husbands were disabled, in jail, or had deserted the family (Cohen 1927, 23). However, the mothers’ allowance program meant that some of the mothers who could in no way be blamed for their plight no longer required day care. This change undoubtedly lessened the interest of elite charitable organizations in supporting a day nursery since they generally believed that parents and their kin should be held responsible for young children.

Second, Edmonton’s population was much more stable in the early 1920s than a decade earlier. Only 54,000 immigrants arrived in Alberta between 1921 and 1925, less than one-third the number that had flooded the city between 1911 and 1915; Edmonton’s 1925 population of 65,000 was still less than the population in 1913–14 at the outbreak of World War I. This stability may well have lessened elites’ anxieties about social change and caused them to pay less attention to the social needs of working-class immigrant families.
In both 1921 and 1931, Alberta contained slightly less than 78,000 children under the age of five. By 1941 this number had fallen slightly to 75,000. Most of these young children were part of husband-wife families and were cared for by their mothers on a full-time basis. During these years, most women exited the labour force after they married; as a consequence, in 1931 there were only 2,200 husband-wife families in Alberta where the wife was in the paid labour force, representing less than 2 percent of all husband-wife families (Alberta Bureau of Statistics 1981, tables 1 and 23).

Nevertheless, when a woman had to support her young children on her own or when her husband’s wages were insufficient to sustain the family, she was forced to work for pay and, in order to do so, to make arrangements for the care of her children. A sufficient number of women needed child care in Drumheller in the mid-1920s to prompt a women’s organization associated with the communist movement to organize a day care. The Women’s Labour League saw this day care in political terms: it was depicted as “free from bourgeois influence” (quoted in Seager 1981, 378). The proletarian day care in Drumheller, however, was a lonely exception throughout Alberta. The vast majority of mothers had to make their own child care arrangements as best they could, taking into account convenience and cost. Often these arrangements were satisfactory but sometimes they were horribly inadequate.

In 1929 in Edmonton, “five small children, left home alone while their mother worked, were barely rescued from their burning home by a passerby.” This prompted Lady Rodney, convenor of child welfare in the Local Council of Women, to personally investigate the care of young children in the inner city. She reported finding “unsanitary conditions, children locked in rooms while their mothers worked, irresponsible caregivers, overcrowded care situations and, in one case, six or seven babies in a home, some lying on the floor holding their bottles” (Campbell 2001, 82). Lady Rodney’s research helped to mobilize action by prominent citizens, supported by the municipal government. In 1930 the Edmonton Creche and Day Nursery Society was formed and opened a new Edmonton Creche.

Twenty years later, the society claimed that its founding in 1930 was meant “to meet the appalling situation then existing in Edmonton due to the depression.” But while the depression may have exacerbated the situation, it is undoubtedly the case that dismal care arrangements were a standard feature of the day care
landscape in Alberta’s largest cities in the years before the depression. Lacking resources and fearing the loss of their children, working-class mothers sometimes had no option but to leave their young children in care environments that were less than the best. What was “appalling” in this situation was not the mothers’ neglect of their children but rather the deep-seated economic and social inequalities that gave mothers no other viable options. Seen in this light, the response of the ladies of the Creche was meant to salve the consciences of Edmonton’s elites rather than to seriously address the condition of the children of Edmonton’s poorest families: given what Lady Rodney had found, a creche that accommodated merely eighteen children was in no way a serious attempt to meet the needs of the children.9

While the new Edmonton Creche was the only subsidized day nursery in Edmonton, and indeed in all of Alberta, in the 1930s, the city had at least one commercial day nursery during that decade: Edmonton College Inc. was established in 1935 with both kindergarten and day nursery divisions. The day nursery offered both full-day and half-day care and would have attracted enrolment from parents who had a steady and decent income. Poorer families would have continued to rely upon relatives, neighbours, or nearby family day homes to look after their young children.10

The outbreak of World War II greatly increased the demand for female labour in Canada: not only did it lead to a rapid expansion of many industries, but it also choked off the supply of immigrant labour. Most of the federal government’s war contracts were placed with firms in Ontario and Quebec, with Vancouver and Manitoba being secondary war-production centres. As a consequence, single Albertan women were actively recruited by war industries in other provinces, and the National Selective Service (NSS) facilitated their relocation. A total of 15,000 civilians left Alberta during the war, a great many of them women recruited by war industries. As a result of this exodus of civilians and enlistment into the military, Alberta’s population declined from 796,000 in 1941 to 776,000 in 1942 (apparently its low point between the 1941 and 1946 censuses). But at the same time as many young men and women left the province, the demand for industrial employees in Edmonton and Calgary increased from approximately 25,000 in 1939 to 35,000 in 1943. Married women were the only relatively untapped source of industrial labour living in the two cities; consequently, care of their children became an issue. In 1941 there were 13,000 children under the age of five in Edmonton and Calgary, and another 13,000 aged five to nine years.11
Among the 10,000 employed in primary wartime manufacturing in Alberta, 2,000 were women. Even higher proportions of women worked in other wartime industries such as meat processing and garment manufacturing. For example, the Great Western Garment Company in Edmonton was the largest garment manufacturer in Canada during the war; in 1942, 425 of its 488 employees were women. Furthermore, in the first quarter of 1944 alone, the NSS in Calgary placed over 3,000 women in jobs. Taking these figures into account, a conservative estimate would put female wartime industrial employment in Calgary and Edmonton at 40 percent of the total of 33,000 industrial employees in July 1944, or approximately 13,000. No statistics are available for how many of these women had young children, but because of the structure of the labour market at the time, we can assume that working mothers numbered in the low thousands. Many more young children now required day care than at any previous point in Alberta’s short history.

STRUGGLES OVER WARTIME DAY NURSERIES

On 13 August 1943, Alberta’s new premier, Ernest Manning, met with representatives of Edmonton’s Committee on Day Care for Children of Working Parents and delighted them by announcing that the provincial government had entered into a cost-sharing agreement with the federal government to provide day nurseries “for the care of young children whose mothers are engaged in war industry.” It looked at that moment, and for at least the next six months, as if Alberta would become the third province, after Ontario and Quebec, to partner with the federal government in funding wartime day nurseries. However, first the City of Edmonton and then the federal Department of Labour balked at the specifics of the province’s funding schemes for day nurseries. This delayed the implementation of the agreement, signalled that the province would have to come up with more money than originally planned, and tempered the commitment of both Premier Manning and Dr. W.W. Cross, the provincial cabinet minister responsible for administering the cost-sharing agreement.

In early May of 1944, Premier Manning and Minister Cross formally abandoned their plan to fund wartime day nurseries when they accepted the controversial and highly disputed conclusion of a provincial advisory committee that “there is not sufficient demand in either of the Cities of Edmonton or Calgary to warrant the establishment of day nurseries for the care of children of mothers
Early Efforts to Organize Day Nurseries, 1908–45

A wide range of organizations in Edmonton and Calgary lobbied against this conclusion but to no avail. The possibility of reopening the matter greatly diminished once it appeared there would be a speedy end to the war in Europe after the successful Allied invasion of Normandy on 6 June 1944. The matter seems to have been definitively settled by the results of the Alberta election of 8 August 1944, when the Social Credit League easily returned to power. Ernest Manning had formulated a decidedly more conservative program than his predecessor, William Aberhart, and the 1944 election proved that Manning’s conservatism offered electoral rewards, particularly in rural and small-town Alberta, where Social Credit won every seat (Finkel 1989, chap. 4).

Effective Research and Advocacy, 1942–43

A great deal of sophisticated research and advocacy work by citizen groups in Calgary and Edmonton preceded the Alberta government’s decision of August 1943 to sign a dominion-provincial cost-sharing agreement. The first of such efforts occurred in Calgary in 1942. Preliminary investigations in the spring and summer of 1942 concluded that there were inadequate provisions for the care of the children of working mothers. Not only was there no charitable day nursery in Calgary, but the only kindergarten located in a city school offered only a half-day service and “private kindergartens ... were very crowded and too expensive for many working mothers.” The investigation also cited reports of children being left alone or in inadequate environments while their mothers went to work. This led to a study of the demand for day care by a joint committee of the Local Council of Women and the Council of Social Agencies (CSA) in the fall of 1942. It is significant that this effort in Calgary was initiated before the federal government’s plan for wartime day nurseries was widely known, indicating that the groups were simply trying to get a day nursery going on their own. They failed, however, to find a suitable location for such a nursery.

Research and advocacy did not begin in Edmonton until April 1943, when a broadly based committee was struck by the Edmonton CSA. From the outset, this group was in contact with federal government officials in charge of the wartime day nurseries program and geared their efforts toward trying to involve Alberta in the program. The immediate objectives of the Edmonton Day Care Committee (EDCC) were to survey “the need for day nursery care among women employees of the larger Edmonton industries” and to assess how the standards of care
at the city’s existing charitable day nursery, the Edmonton Creche, compared to what they believed should be the minimum standards for day nursery care. The committee also solicited support for its efforts from a number of women’s organizations.

The group’s needs study was very thorough. Discussions were held with experts such as plant managers, personnel managers, clergymen, and school nurses, as well as “large numbers of mothers.” In addition, the committee studied newspaper advertisements seeking care for children of working mothers and distributed survey forms to women working in industrial plants and to other women through women’s organizations. Most of the evidence pointed to the need for wartime day nurseries although the survey results were not nearly so conclusive. The committee argued that some forms were not returned because of a “language barrier” and that many women were unwilling “to commit themselves until they could see the nurseries in operation” or because they felt “the signing of a survey form would be an admission of neglect on their part.” In the end, the committee concluded that both out-of-school care (OOSC) and preschool care were needed and should be established in Edmonton.17

The EDCC took a two-pronged approach to lobbying the provincial government. It first met with the deputy minister of Education “and had no difficulty in persuading him of the need for child care.” However, the Department of Education was not willing to provide the funds required by the cost-sharing agreement. In late June, the EDCC met with the deputy minister of Health, who informed them that sponsorship from his department was only available through the Child Welfare Branch. In explaining why the EDCC favoured sponsorship by the Department of Education over the Child Welfare Branch, its secretary informed Fraudena Eaton, the associate director of the NSS, that “there is a definite lack of confidence in the Child Welfare Department among the members of the committee.” One of the criticisms of the Child Welfare Branch was the low provincial standards for foster homes. In light of this, the EDCC did not believe that foster homes should be used for the day care of the infants of mothers engaged in wartime work, and inquired, “Are there any plans available for group care of the infant-two year old, with definite standards set by the Dominion?”18

All of this advocacy for wartime day nurseries occurred at an opportune political time—during the first weeks of the premiership of Ernest Manning, who took charge following William Aberhart’s death on 23 May. Premier Manning’s immediate political task was to rebuild the Social Credit League’s electoral base prior to the next election, scheduled for 1944. In light of this, it is hardly
surprising that he was open to representations from the Calgary Day Nursery Committee (CDNC) and EDCC, especially considering that they were supported by prominent women’s and social services organizations in each city. In late July 1943, the Edmonton committee presented a report to the province that advised signing the Dominion-Provincial Agreement that specified a 50-50 split of the operating costs of wartime day nurseries. The provincial government accepted this advice, as announced by Premier Manning on 13 August, but only with an important condition.

Delays While Finances Are Negotiated

The provincial government was prepared to make a contribution toward the establishment of wartime day nurseries in Calgary and Edmonton, but only if each city made an equivalent contribution. On 31 August 1943, Minister of Health W.W. Cross sent a letter to the acting mayor of Edmonton proposing that “the Federal Government will pay fifty percent, the Province twenty-five percent and the municipality twenty-five percent.” After a meeting with Minister Cross in Edmonton in January 1944, Fraudena Eaton reported, “Honourable Dr. Cross has no illusions about being able to close down day nurseries once they are established and believes the province will have to continue the service in part at least after the war. For this reason he is insisting on the financial cooperation of municipalities at this stage.”

Minister Cross’s letter of 31 August to the City of Edmonton indicated that he was prepared to establish an advisory committee that would have “almost full authority to decide whether the scheme is to be proceeded with or not.” He also outlined a formula for choosing members of the advisory committee that would seemingly guarantee a favourable recommendation: “one recommended by each municipality willing to take advantage of this arrangement, one from the Department of Health and the one appointed by the [National] Selective Service.” This demonstrates that the provincial government was enthusiastic to proceed with wartime day nurseries as long as its financial commitment could be limited.

The City of Edmonton’s administration responded to Minister Cross’s proposal in haste without considering evidence on the need for wartime day nurseries in Edmonton and without any discussion with either the CSA or the EDCC. The city rejected participation because of the request to contribute toward the operating costs of day nurseries, and opined, “We feel that the present creche
meets the local situation better than any organization which might be set up under the agreement.”

Despite lobbying from the EDCC, including a presentation to city council on 27 September 1943, the three city commissioners (two bureaucrats and Mayor John Fry) persisted in their hardline position. In a report on 6 October, they continued to reject municipal involvement in the wartime day nursery program and even called into question the province’s involvement: “It is really an integral part of running the war and as such should be administered solely by the Dominion Government in conjunction with the employers concerned in war works.” The commissioners also argued that any additional demand for day care could be accommodated by the Edmonton Creche and by the commercial centre, Edmonton College, which “is caring for 85 children of mothers employed in essential industries, and has accommodation for 50 more.”

If the provincial government had been lukewarm about wartime day nurseries, it could have used the City of Edmonton’s intransigence in the fall of 1943 as an excuse to mothball the program. Instead, the province made a major funding concession that broke the impasse: it agreed to pay 25 percent of the gross operating costs of a day nursery, before parent fees. Since the federal government would pay 50 percent of the net costs, after parent fees, the municipality would only be responsible for the remaining operating deficit. At the 11 January 1944, meeting of city council, Alderman Ainlay estimated that the city would only have to pay $50 of the $1,000 monthly operating expenses of a day nursery filled to capacity. The commissioners were instructed to discuss the matter with the premier and minister of health and confirmed this estimate. However, they cautioned that there would be considerable start-up costs for a day nursery and concluded, “Your commissioners are still of the opinion that this is a matter entirely for the Dominion Government.” This time, Edmonton City Council rejected the commissioners’ position in total and passed the following motion on 24 January: “The establishment of a day nursery is desirable and that we authorize the commissioners to appoint a member of this [provincial advisory] committee with a report of the committee’s conclusions to be brought back to council.” Council made a fateful error at that meeting in delegating the choice of Edmonton’s representative on the advisory committee to an administrative body that was unsympathetic to the project.

Meanwhile, in Calgary, the CDNC had placed newspaper advertisements in September 1943 and again in November in order to establish that the demand went beyond the minimum of twenty children required under the terms of the
Dominion-Provincial Agreement. Working mothers were asked to call a telephone number to register their children. The September advertisement attracted forty-four applicants, while the November survey generated seventy-nine more, of whom forty-three had mothers who were working. Importantly, the City of Calgary did not express the same reservations about sharing in the funding of a day nursery, and the mayor informed Minister Cross that the CDNC was prepared to administer a wartime day nursery. Indeed, a Calgary Day Nursery Provisional Board appeared on the scene no later than January 1944.25

At the beginning of 1944, social agencies, women’s organizations, and other community groups in Edmonton and Calgary continued to make a strong push for government-sponsored day nurseries. Calgary City Council was entirely behind this community effort, while Edmonton City Council had come around to a position of support despite significant opposition from the city commissioners. At the provincial level, the government was supportive but unwilling to take on primary financial responsibility for any aspect of new day nurseries. This was demonstrated in late 1943 when Minister Cross wrote to the federal minister of Labour, Humphrey Mitchell, to convince him to share the cost of purchasing and renovating a building that could house a day nursery in Calgary.26 It is significant that in this letter, W.W. Cross demonstrated a pragmatic attitude toward which children would qualify for care under the cost-sharing agreement—he was not interested in applying his own definition of war industry to the list of mothers’ occupations gathered in the CDNC survey, but rather in getting the NSS to apply its operational definition to occupations like teaching, nursing, and railway coach cleaner so that he could ensure sufficient demand to trigger federal participation in the cost-sharing agreement.27

For the federal Department of Labour, the wartime day nurseries program was strictly a means to increase the supply of married women at a time when there were widespread shortages of workers in industries deemed essential to the war effort. Fraudena Eaton was a consistent administrator of this policy: at no time did she promote the establishment of day nurseries for any other reason. Her observations on the labour market in Calgary in January 1944 are thus crucial to the eventual decision of the minister of Labour against purchasing property in Calgary for a day nursery. Eaton did not believe there was a serious shortage of women workers in Calgary. “The employment situation for women in Calgary is fairly easy,” she wrote, “and will probably continue this way at least until the agricultural work opens up and some girls go back to the farms.” On the question of purchasing the property, she concluded: “I do not believe the emergency
is so great or would extend over a sufficiently long period of time to warrant agreement to share in the cost of purchasing property.”

This position was not formally conveyed to the Alberta government until a letter dated 10 March. Minister Cross would have received this letter just days before the membership of the provincial advisory committee was set by an executive council order on 17 March. The federal government’s unwillingness to assist with the purchase of a property in Calgary meant that the province was looking at a larger start-up cost than it had anticipated and also sent the clear message that the establishment of a day nursery in Calgary was not viewed by the Dominion as being crucial to the war effort.

Whether the federal government’s decision on this matter affected the final composition of the advisory committee is not known. Back in August 1943, W.W. Cross had proposed a four-person advisory committee, with the provincial Health Department nominating one member, Calgary and Edmonton one each, and the NSS the fourth member. The committee appointed on 17 March had seven members, four of whom were nominated by the province. The key point is that three of Cross’s nominees turned out to be unsympathetic toward the idea of establishing wartime day nurseries. Indeed, a letter to the Calgary Herald at the time noted that one of Minister Cross’s nominees, “Mrs. Harold Riley, long associated with child welfare, is known to be opposed to Day Nurseries and had not attended any previous meeting on the subject.” The federal government may have stacked the committee at the last minute in order to try to secure a negative recommendation. It is also possible that the Social Credit government simply did not want to proceed unless the need for wartime day nurseries was vetted by a committee that included those who represented the socially conservative philosophy of the members of its core constituency. In either case, Minister Cross’s nominations to the advisory committee ensured that its work would not be a routine exercise of endorsing the thorough research conducted by the Calgary and Edmonton advocacy committees and accepting their recommendations in favour of wartime day nurseries in each city.

Why the Provincial Advisory Committee Made a Negative Recommendation

Only three of the members of the advisory committee were not nominated by Minister Cross. The City of Calgary nominee was Alderman Hedley Chauncey, who represented city council’s favourable view toward the establishment of
a wartime day nursery. When Alderman Chauncey was unable to attend the second meeting of the committee, he was replaced by Mayor Andrew Davidson. Unfortunately, the elected council of the City of Edmonton did not demonstrate the same political acumen in nominating a representative. They had delegated the task to the city commissioners, who opposed council’s position in favour of Edmonton’s participation. The commissioners immediately nominated Frank Drayton, superintendent of the Children’s Aid and Civic Relief departments for the city. The commissioners are bound to have known that this senior city employee was unsympathetic to the idea of day nurseries. Wartime day nurseries in Alberta would have been partially subsidized by the three levels of government and thus represented material support for working parents, many of whom were low income. Such a program of family support ran counter to the philosophy of the child welfare system that Drayton administered.31

Like the City of Edmonton, the NSS bungled their choice of a representative for the advisory committee. Marjorie Pardee was a member of the EDCC and the provincial commissioner of the Canadian Girl Guide Association. Even though she was firmly committed to the idea of wartime day nurseries, well versed in the research that had been done to establish the need for such nurseries in Edmonton, and extremely conscientious, she lacked the knowledge and status to definitively convey how the NSS administered the program.32

The question to which the NSS representative needed to respond authoritatively concerned which women worked in “wartime industries” according to the Dominion-Provincial Agreement. This matter was the subject of much discussion at the advisory committee’s first meeting on 4 April 1944, with committee members offering conflicting interpretations. A fully informed NSS representative would have been able to rule this discussion out-of-order by pointing out that the operational definition of “wartime industries” had been established as priority A and B essential occupations and asserting that the authority to make this determination rested strictly with a local NSS office. Minister Cross’s letter to Humphrey Mitchell dated 29 December 1943 had already accepted the federal government’s authority on this crucial matter. Marjorie Pardee’s lack of knowledge also made her unable to detail how an NSS office participated in determining which children qualified for care in a wartime day nursery; this would have allayed some committee members’ fears that the nursery could be used by “mothers who merely wanted a place to park their children.”33

The issue of eligibility was also debated at the advisory committee’s second meeting on 26 April. The committee again treated eligibility as being open to
subjective interpretation rather than as a technical question. Their modus operandi was to read out the name and occupation of women who had responded to a newspaper advertisement and have each committee member decide “whether or not the applicant was eligible to use Day Nurseries for her children! The results of this varying from 8 to 19 according to the individual member’s opinion.”34 What should have been a bureaucratic determination based upon labour market data was turned into a normative debate.

In addition to Maude Riley, Minister Cross’s nominees to the provincial advisory committee were the committee chair, Dr. Angus C. McGugan, superintendent of Edmonton’s University Hospital; Harry Coombs, supervisor of the Child Welfare Department in Calgary; and David Sullivan, a high school inspector in Edmonton. The non-voting secretary of the committee was Alexander Miller, the secretary of the Bureau of Public Welfare in Edmonton and hence a close associate of Cross. One of these nominees, David Sullivan, turned out to be a consistent supporter of the establishment of wartime day nurseries. It is possible that his appointment was influenced by the Department of Education, which had signalled support for day nurseries in 1943. The other provincial nominees, however, were inclined against the idea. Marjorie Pardee took note of this at the first meeting of the advisory committee on 4 April and wrote to Fraudena Eaton that “the attitude of certain members of the committee did not encourage me in hoping to see day nurseries established, though Mr. Sullivan, Mr. Chauncey and myself feel the need does exist.”35

The advisory committee made three telling decisions at its meeting in Edmonton on 4 April that suggested it was either inept or crudely looking for a way to justify a negative recommendation, or most likely something of both. First, it decided that the research completed by the EDCC and CDNC in the previous fall and winter was “not of much help” because it was out of date.36 Second, instead of using that past research as a baseline and asking each advocacy group to take steps to update the baseline, the provincial advisory committee decided to embark on its own independent survey of the need for wartime day nurseries. An independent study is not in itself a bad idea although, if conducted properly, it would have been very time consuming. The provincial advisory committee, however, decided to do a minimal-effort, quick study of the current need for day nurseries using the single method that had proven most problematic in past research: getting working women to commit to a sight-unseen day nursery by returning a coupon advertisement through the mail. The survey coupon itself was biased since it requested responses from women employed in “war
industries” without indicating that the federal government’s definition of war industries was much broader than munitions and armaments. The method of distributing the survey coupon was equally suspect since it was simply printed in major newspapers for a number of days running.\textsuperscript{37} Third, the committee instructed its secretary to write letters “to the provinces of Manitoba and British Columbia to secure information as to the reasons they had refused to participate in the agreement.” This investigation fell outside of the committee’s formal mandate, as established by order-in-council 355/44, and it is therefore peculiar that the committee pursued this course of action. It is likely that securing this information was a tactical move by the opponents of wartime day nurseries who were searching for ways to bolster their position.

A three-week gap separated the first meeting of the advisory committee in Edmonton and its second meeting in Calgary. In that time, both the EDCC and CDNC were very active. The Edmonton advocates did not try to mobilize working mothers to reply to the advisory committee’s newspaper advertisement but instead initiated a major new systematic study. The study was conducted between 18 and 22 April 1944, and built upon the findings of a study carried out in December 1943 that had involved distributing a survey form to all elementary school children covered by the Edmonton Public School Board. Using the results of the December survey, the EDCC identified a ten-block area that had a high proportion of working mothers. Forty women volunteers from the Citizens’ Volunteer Bureau conducted a new door-to-door survey in those ten blocks. This study effectively demonstrated the difficulties faced in any survey of working mothers. Despite repeated callbacks, some working mothers were never available for interviews. Others refused to be interviewed. The volunteer interviewers also found some children “who had no adult supervision” and “appalling conditions … in some crowded houses where families with two or three children were living in one small room.” These findings demonstrate the value of on-site investigations.

The survey results were probably not as convincing as the EDCC would have hoped. In the ten-block area, sixteen mothers of twenty-one children said they would use a day nursery if it were close to their home. To supplement these numbers, eight other working mothers known to the EDCC but living elsewhere in Edmonton were contacted. Representing ten children, they confirmed their desire for day nursery care. The EDCC then got the Edmonton NSS office to check the occupations of the twenty-four working mothers: “all but 3 fell in either A or B priorities and would be eligible for day nursery care.” The EDCC also noted,
“This survey covered less than a quarter of the area which could conveniently be served by one day nursery.”

All this research effort in Edmonton went for naught. The advisory committee ignored the results of the systematic study and did not even invite representatives of the EDCC to appear before it. Instead the committee treated responses to the newspaper advertisement as the only relevant indicator of need. Since only eight Edmonton mothers had replied to the coupon advertisement, they concluded that there was insufficient demand to support a wartime day nursery in that city.

Advocates in Calgary took a different approach. According to Marjorie Pardee, the CDNC phoned working mothers on their lists and encouraged them to respond to the newspaper advertisement. This elicited twenty-six replies from Calgary, more than triple the number from Edmonton but still not enough to secure a favourable recommendation from the provincial advisory committee.

One of the interesting facets of the research on wartime day nurseries in Alberta is that nowhere in any archives have I found a document that opposes their establishment, whereas extant documents from dozens of different groups and individuals register support. However, a prominent opponent of the day nurseries program did address the advisory committee at its meeting in Calgary on 26 April: Rose Wilkinson, representing the Catholic Women’s League (CWL) of Calgary, “waxed eloquent about the sanctity of the home” and made a submission that “was definitely unfavourable to the project.” Wilkinson was also a prominent member of the Social Credit movement; indeed, she had just returned from Toronto, where she had been one of the Alberta delegates to the national Social Credit convention. She successfully ran as a Social Credit candidate in Calgary in the August 1944 provincial election and served continuously as a member of the legislature until her retirement in 1963. In 1944 Wilkinson was one of only two members of that caucus from Calgary and was one of the few female members of the legislature. She was, therefore, a very high-profile opponent of wartime day nurseries who undoubtedly had the ear of Premier Manning and Minister Cross, and who had a number of kindred spirits on the advisory committee itself. Her affiliation with the CWL was certainly less significant in this matter than her association with the inner circle of the Alberta Social Credit leadership. In fact, the position against day nurseries taken by the CWL of Calgary was contradicted by the support for wartime day nurseries expressed by the CWL of Edmonton, whose president had been a member of the EDCC.

Separate votes on the need for wartime day nurseries in Edmonton and Calgary were taken at the advisory committee meeting on 26 April. “The result
in both cases was the same,” wrote Marjorie Pardee to Fraudena Eaton. “Mayor Davidson, Mr. Sullivan and myself being of the opinion that a need existed for the establishment of day nurseries. The other three members voting no and the chairman casting the deciding vote against.”

Why the Cabinet Accepted the Advisory Committee’s Recommendation

The decision of the provincial advisory committee was immediately greeted by a flood of opposition. Within a week, the two daily newspapers in Edmonton had each published two editorials that disputed the conclusion of the advisory committee. The Edmonton Bulletin was particularly disparaging of the decision, noting the results of the systematic surveys conducted in December 1943 and April 1944 that were apparently ignored and criticizing the newspaper coupon questionnaire for being “vague and complicated and uninformative.” The Bulletin expressed its contempt for the work of the committee when it prefaced its remarks with expressions like “anyone who knows anything at all” and “thinking people.”

The Edmonton Journal took a more constructive tone in its editorials, at one point praising Minister Cross for showing “such a commendable desire to extend health and hospitalization services on a broad basis to the people of Alberta.” Rather than belittle the advisory committee, the Journal simply argued that the CSA was the authoritative body on welfare matters and that the CSA’s support for the establishment of wartime day nurseries in Edmonton carried more weight than the negative recommendation of the advisory committee.

In contrast, the two Calgary daily newspapers did not editorialize on this subject in the days immediately after 27 April. Nevertheless, in the first ten days of May 1944, Premier Manning received messages of protest from the CDNC and the University Women’s Club of Calgary to go along with similar messages from a number of Edmonton organizations: the Planning Board of the Citizens’ Volunteer Bureau, the War Services Council, the Edmonton CSA, the Ladies Jay Cee Club, and the University Women’s Club. Copies of the letters from the latter two groups were reprinted in the Bulletin, which also printed a letter from “a working mother” who testified as to the benefit her child received from attending a day nursery in Vancouver. The Journal published a story based upon the letters of the latter two groups.

W.W. Cross at first indicated that the provincial cabinet would decide whether to accept the provincial advisory committee’s recommendation at a meeting on 2
May. He was also quoted defending the recommendation in considerable detail, suggesting not only that he had been thoroughly briefed but also that he was in agreement with the logic of the committee’s majority decision. One line of argument used by Minister Cross to defend the recommendation involved the low number of children of qualified working mothers who had signed up for the wartime day nurseries, specifically four in Edmonton and nineteen in Calgary. In addition, Cross emphasized that this decision to reject wartime day nurseries was consistent with the decisions in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and British Columbia. He stated, “Vancouver turned down the plan flat, after making complete investigation.”

The provincial cabinet did not make a final decision on this matter on 2 May, presumably because of the storm of protest that had followed the release of the advisory committee’s recommendation. Instead, the matter was put over to the following week for a decision by the Executive Council of senior cabinet ministers. On 9 May, Premier Manning issued a written statement that explained why the government had decided to accept the recommendation against establishing wartime day nurseries. The statement mainly reiterated the arguments that Minister Cross had offered previously in defence of the recommendation. Indeed, the only new element in the statement was the assertion that the advisory committee had decided to conduct its own survey of the need for day nurseries because “the evidence and the viewpoints” contained in the materials submitted to it “were so conflicting and contradictory.” Since previous reports on the 4 April meeting of the provincial advisory committee had not mentioned this factor and since the archival record is devoid of documents expressing opposition to wartime day nurseries, it is doubtful whether this element of Premier Manning’s statement is accurate. Perhaps he was confusing the sharp ideological conflict among committee members with what appeared in the submissions.

The decision of the Executive Council sparked even more protest for the next several weeks. Both Edmonton papers editorialized against the decision on 10 May, as did the Calgary Herald on 26 May. The Edmonton Journal published its fourth editorial on the matter on 14 June. The Journal was particularly insistent that Frank Drayton be censured for his failure to represent city council’s position on the matter. At about the same time, Edmonton City Council formally asked Minister Cross to reopen the question. Among the other groups who expressed support for wartime day nurseries were the Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire (Junior Branch) of Edmonton, Local No. 1 (Edmonton) of the Amalgamated Building Workers of Canada, the Council for Canadian Unity of
Edmonton, two different units of the Labour Progressive Party in Edmonton, the Stanley Jones Home and School Association in Calgary, the Edmonton Junior Chamber of Commerce, and the Soroptimist Club of Edmonton.47

Throughout the spring of 1944, there was a shortage of women workers for essential occupations in both Edmonton and Calgary. For example, for the week ending on 13 May 1944, there were 635 jobs available to women in Edmonton, more than double the number of women registered as out of work. At the end of June, the federal minister of Trade and Commerce described the shortage of workers in Edmonton as being worse than anywhere else in the country.48

The combination of an increasing number of married women in the paid labour force, a strong demand for even more married women, political pressure by prominent women’s and social services organizations, and a looming provincial election led Premier Manning to announce on 17 July that wartime day nurseries would be reconsidered by the Executive Council “at the earliest possible date.”

That same day, Calgary “clubwomen,” in conjunction with the Calgary CSA, opened a demonstration day nursery for children between three and five and a half years of age. Their hope was that government funding would become available so that the day nursery could be kept open past September. Operated in the James Short school, the day nursery struggled to build an enrolment; only twenty-two children were in attendance by mid-August. Apparently parents were unwilling to discontinue other care arrangements for an experiment that might well be ended on 15 September. Their caution proved sensible, since the clubwomen were forced to close the day nursery when no government money was forthcoming.49

Indeed, the CSA of Edmonton never found out whether the Executive Council ever reconsidered the issue of wartime day nurseries and by the middle of October had concluded that “further agitation is probably useless.”50 The sweeping Social Credit electoral victory on 15 August, as well as successes on the European war front, had allowed the provincial government to quietly let the matter drop.

The Manning government of 1943–44 exhibited considerable pragmatism in its consideration of wartime day nurseries, even if at its philosophical heart was a social conservatism that celebrated the care of young children by mothers at home. That pragmatism covered gaining benefits from the Dominion government for Albertans and building sufficient popular support to ensure the election of the Social Credit League to a third consecutive term. This suggests that only compelling practical advantages would have prompted the Manning
government to consider reopening the matter, and such advantages never materialized during the latter half of 1944.

Accommodating and Challenging the Gender Order

A number of arguments were put forward by advocates in Alberta to justify the establishment of wartime day nurseries, notably labour shortages, child neglect, juvenile delinquency, and child development. One argument that is noticeably missing from the historical record, however, is that day nurseries promote gender equality by giving women with young children greater opportunities to pursue paid work and education. This argument was anathema to Alberta society, where women’s freedom from the homemaker role was widely feared. Despite advocates’ efforts to dispel it, this fear was an important component of the belief system that rejected the establishment of wartime day nurseries.

Advocacy groups recognized that the care of young children in day nurseries contradicted the principle of mothers looking after their children at home. Some groups proclaimed allegiance to this principle but explained why they also supported wartime day nurseries. For instance, the CWL of Edmonton stated its belief “that women’s proper sphere is her own home and that her work as the mother of a family is her noblest career.” The CWL then argued that day nurseries are necessary when “the mother of young children is forced by circumstances to become the breadwinner of the family.” The EDCC implied support for this principle when it asserted, “This committee advocates the extension of day care of children only because our country is at war and women are called upon to meet a serious labour shortage.” And while an editorial in the Edmonton Bulletin proclaimed its adherence to the view that “for children there is no substitute for homes,” it immediately added: “But pretty and high-minded as this view may be, it still merely dodges the facts. Whether mothers should work or not, they still do work. They still have children who need day nursery attention.”

Other advocates took an analytical approach to the contradiction. “We are aware that the greatest opposition to opening a Day Nursery here is the belief in the principle that mothers of preschool children should not be away from home,” wrote the University Women’s Club of Calgary. “The fact is that mothers of many children are already working. It is this existing condition rather than a theory with which we are concerned.” The CDNC offered a blunter dismissal of the relevance of normative principles to the current circumstances: “Whether
you think a woman’s place is in the home, that mothers of small children should not work, these principles do not enter this agreement at all. This is a Wartime Emergency measure.”

The analytical positions noted above highlighted how a normative view of women’s role in raising children could not deal with important social and economic problems. Two problems in particular were emphasized by advocates: enabling women to produce goods needed for the war and ensuring that the children of those women would receive adequate care in their absence.

Advocates made many labour-market arguments to support the establishment of wartime day nurseries in Alberta, but these arguments never challenged the precepts of the existing gender order. Nor did the arguments that day nursery care was needed to protect young children or that OOSC was needed to prevent juvenile delinquency. However, those advocates who promoted an educational form of day nursery care offered a partial criticism of the gender order. They did not directly critique women’s inferior status but rather questioned the efficacy of women’s child-rearing practices. According to these advocates, it was appropriate to liberate women from exclusive responsibility for young children not for their own benefit but to serve the developmental needs of children. Along this line, the Soroptimist Club of Edmonton wrote to Premier Manning, “We sincerely hope that the matter will be reopened, and that you will throw your influence on the side of ‘supervised training and care’ for small children, whether they be the children of mothers working in industrial plants, or in their own homes or offices.” The Calgary Herald editorialized in favour of a preschool educational system and cast doubt on the quality of child care provided by many stay-at-home mothers.

While this scientifically grounded critique had the potential to partially disrupt the gender order that tied mothers to the care of young children, it also had the potential to reinforce the class hierarchy: it divided stay-at-home mothers between the educated, who are familiar with and apply modern child psychology in their parenting, and the uneducated. Many in the latter category likely saw the experts’ call for a preschool educational system as an affront to their competence as mothers.

As mentioned earlier, an important factor that promoted opposition to wartime day nurseries in Alberta was fear of women’s freedom. It would seem that a belief in women’s virtuousness was tied to their subservience as caregivers. Once free of that subservience, women’s moral character was immediately suspect. Some members of the provincial advisory committee expressed this fear.
when they asked what controls would prevent “mothers who merely wanted a place to park their children from using the nurseries.” A wartime day nursery system, they worried, would be a temptation for some women to stray away from a life of virtuous domesticity.

The most widely read syndicated advice columnist of the day was Dorothy Dix. Her column of 3 May 1944 featured a discussion of young mothers who shirk their parenting duties when given the opportunity. Dorothy Dix responded to a letter from “Tired Neighbour,” a middle-aged women who had been regularly looking after the children of a number of young mothers in her neighbourhood, apparently without compensation. “Every afternoon they dress themselves up, dump their young ones on me, and go shopping and to the movies,” she wrote. “I am sick and tired of it.” Dorothy Dix replied that “a woman’s babies are her own individual responsibility,” even if that meant “a 24-hour job at hard labour.” She emphasized that a mother does not have “the right to wish them off on Grandma, or any kind neighbour, while she goes off to enjoy herself.”

In this everyday moral drama, women appear hedonistic and self-centred once they are given any kind of personal latitude. But somehow when they are tied to the home, engaged in hard domestic labour for twenty-four hours of every day, they are the perfect caregivers for their children. Just as the fear of women is linked to their freedom, the idealization of women as caregivers is linked to their servitude.

In the middle of June 1944, the National Council of Women met in Port Arthur, Ontario. The council called for the establishment of nursery schools under the education system and an end to discrimination in employment against married women. “Gone are the days when woman was content to accept a pattern of life laid down for her,” stated Mrs. Frank Ritchie, a delegate from Manitoba, “and gone, too, are the days when whole aspects of life were accepted as closed to her.” This was a clear demand for greater freedom for married women.

Ritchie’s comment was the focus of a strongly worded editorial in the Calgary Herald that predicted dire social consequences if married women pursued careers. Birth rates would fall and families would suffer. “The married woman who prefers to compete with her husband in the field of labour,” stated the editorialist, “thus shirking or neglecting the vital responsibilities of her rightful sphere as a homemaker, definitely becomes a national liability.” The fear of freedom for women is unmistakable. The notion of a “rightful sphere” is invoked to justify married women’s responsibility for the domestic milieu. It should be remembered that less than a month before this, the Herald had issued a strong
editorial statement in favour of educational nursery schools. The coexistence of these two editorial positions demonstrates that the challenge to the patriarchal gender order coming from the proponents of scientific child study was indirect and very partial.

In conclusion, justifications for wartime day nurseries in Alberta largely accommodated rather than challenged the gender order. Advocates presented the nurseries as a necessary exception to a preferred state of child care by mothers in the home. It would take almost a quarter of a century before the demand for day care in Alberta would become more directly linked to feminist struggles for women’s equality. But even then, with the Social Credit League of Ernest Manning still in power in the 1960s, advocates for public subsidization of quality day care downplayed the implications of day care for the gender order. Instead, they presented the same sorts of pragmatic arguments that had almost won support for wartime day nurseries in the 1940s.