
Social Policy in the Late 1990s and Beyond:
What is to be done?

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As the Social Security Review unfolds [July 1995], it is clear that, with the exception of a couple of programs (UI and health care), the Federal government is getting out of the business of direct social program provision and financing. Social programs are once again to be the responsibility of the provinces. Further, given the magnitude of cuts outlined in the 1995 budget, program restructuring and retrenchment will be extensive. Not only did this budget cement a back-to-the-future social policy scenario, it also brought new meaning to the notion of "social policy by stealth": the Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST, to be implemented through Bill C-76, the 1995 Budget Implementation Act) is a clever Machiavellian ploy intended to foster divisiveness among those vying for pieces of a smaller pie, and to leave the Federal government off the hook, both in terms of the size and the distribution of these resources.

Unlike the reforms of the early post-Second World War years, or those pursued in the early 1970s, reform 1990s-style rests on an explicit rejection of the notion that increased market insecurity should be met with greater social security.¹ On the contrary, despite recognition of the increasing precariousness of stable, full-time employment, the current strategy is intended to severely curtail entitlement and coverage in a range of social programs.

In its backward gaze, the government has set its sights on the earlier part of this century, squarely rejecting policy mechanisms of the Keynesian welfare state. But the government is not alone in reaching back: many in the social policy community would also have us return to the Keynesian policies upon which the post-Second World War welfare state was based. These policies include full employment, economic growth produced by stimulating effective demand, and the two-track system of contributory and non-contributory benefits. While full employment was presumed to provide

a living wage for those who worked, the two-track system of benefits was intended to provide income supports for those who could not do so.

There are a number of problems with the uncritical application of Keynesian policies, however. The boundaries of the Keynesian welfare state were constructed on the basis of exclusion and inclusion;² in our scramble to preserve existing levels of protection and programs, we often lose sight of this fact. For example, the principle of full employment, touted by many as a consummate objective, is a problematic concept. To begin with, the post-war welfare state was constructed around a *particular notion* of full employment — *white male full-time paid* employment.³ Furthermore, the counterpart of full employment is the wage-labour imperative.⁴ Full employment, pursued in conjunction with a supporting array of contributory benefits, is a component of a fordist industrial strategem that entrenched the dishonorable and illegitimate status of non-wage labour. The fordist industrial deception was to provide workers (primarily “white workingmen”) with the appearance of economic independence, exempting capital-labour relations from categorization as a dependency relation.⁵ Importantly, the deception of wage labour’s independence was in part consolidated through the two-track system of contributory and non-contributory means-tested programs.

The reforms the Liberals are pursuing today can be seen to reinforce, rather than undermine, this deceit. This is achieved through the marshalling of new, and the entrenchment of old, categories of claimants based on their level of non-wage labour “dependence.”⁶ While women, First Nations’ peoples and people of colour were the principle victims of earlier attempts to exclude, restructuring today has a broader reach. The new rhetoric of “dependency,” the central concern of the current round of social security reform, has ensured that many more will lose benefits or entitlement altogether.

The current agenda is transforming a defining feature of the post-war welfare state in Canada: it is decoupling and reassembling the relatively privileged status of “first-track” compared to “second-track” benefits.⁷ Until relatively recently, contributory benefits, provided through programs like UI and C/QPP, have escaped the stigmatization associated with means-tested benefits. But the distinction between those who appear to “get back what they put in,” and those who get “something for nothing”⁸ is being redrawn. The possible conversion of UI into a two-tiered system, one of the likely outcomes of UI reform, is extending the dependency discourse to a category of recipients, primarily white men, who were previously largely exempt. Meanwhile, the circumstances of those previously excluded is worsening.

The honorable status of “first-track” programs is now under threat. It is tempting, then, to try and defend the integrity of the privileged status of contributory benefits. What else is there to hold onto? But should

we not take the opportunity to challenge the taken-for-granted equation of wage labour with "independence" and its corollary, that independence is an unqualified good? Is it possible to recognize unpaid labour, promote interdependence and reject the consumption-oriented economic paradigm informing Keynesian policies? Can this be done while retaining the principle of full employment? If not, how can we articulate and pursue an alternative agenda for change without losing more ground?

Unfortunately, the circumstances in which the present decoupling is taking place work against this kind of questioning. The transformation of a significant proportion of UI claimants into "UI dependents" is intended to fortify rather than unseat assumptions about the independence of wage labour. The new distinctions drawn between "frequent" and "occasional" claimants actually sharpen the "dependency/independence" dichotomy, intensifying the wage-labour obligation. In the struggle to preserve existing levels of protection, it is difficult to remind ourselves, let alone challenge the fact, that the status quo was achieved in part by entrenching the deliberately constructed distinction between the "deserving" and "undeserving."

The degradation of "first track" employment-based benefits has serious implications in the context of the ongoing restructuring of employment. Reflecting the general pattern of income polarization and declining middle, the creation of new social divisions is shrinking the pool of "deserving" and expanding the class of "undeserving."

There are no easy policy prescriptions for these difficult times. But we cannot merely strive to reincarnate Keynesian policies. The requisite powers have been wrested from the hands of the federal government. And more importantly, these policies were seriously flawed to begin with.

NOTES

1. Jane Pulkingham, "Remaking the Social Divisions of Welfare: Gender, 'Dependency,' and Social Security Reform in Canada." Paper presented at the 30th Annual Meeting of the Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association, University of Quebec at Montreal, June 7, 1995.
2. Phil Squires, *Anti-Social Policy: Welfare, Ideology and the Disciplinary State* (New York: Harvester/Wheatsheaf, 1990).
3. John Keane and John Owens, *After Full Employment* (London: Hutchinson, 1986), pp. 18-26. Pat Armstrong and Hugh Armstrong, "Taking Women into Account: Redefining and intensifying employment in Canada," in Jane Jensen, et al. (eds.), *Feminization of the Labour Force: Paradoxes and Promises* (Oxford: Polity Press and Basil Blackwell, 1988), p. 68.
4. Keane and Owens, p. 14. Keane and Owens refer to this as the "fetish of employment" (p. 14).
5. Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon, "A Genealogy of Dependency: Tracing a Keyword of the U.S. Welfare State," *Signs*, 19,21 (1994), pp. 309-336.

6. Pulkingham, p. 6.
7. Ibid, p. 16.
8. Fraser and Gordon, p. 322.



Les enjeux de la réforme des services de santé et des services sociaux au Québec

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Mis en place en 1971, dans la foulée des travaux de la Commission Castonguay-Nepveu, le réseau québécois des services de santé et des services sociaux a fait l'objet d'un réexamen global par la Commission Rochon (1988). Créée par le Parti Québécois, cette commission a vu sa composition et son mandat remaniés par le Parti Libéral. Son constat principal porta sur la rigidité du système mis en place, notamment en raison du fait qu'il «est pris en otage» par des dispensateurs de soins et de services souvent plus préoccupés d'intérêts corporatistes et institutionnels que de concertation des efforts pour offrir aux clientèles les services requis.

Le rapport a été assez froidement accueilli par le ministre Lavoie-Roux qui, plutôt que de s'attaquer à la tâche, préféra formuler une sorte de testament politique (1989) avant de quitter son poste. Son successeur au sein du gouvernement, le ministre Côté, proposa un changement de paradigme en cherchant, du moins dans son discours politique, à faire en sorte que la réforme proposée «place le citoyen usager au centre du système de services». Il déposa finalement une législation qui se caractérisait avant tout par d'importants changements des structures (Côté, 1991 et 1992). Trois ans plus tard, il est maintenant possible de mieux percevoir les enjeux en cause ainsi que certains aspects qui sont passés inaperçus à l'époque.

Sept grandes zones d'enjeux apparaissent identifiables : l'impact de l'intégration d'établissements différents, l'importance accordée à la concertation, l'introduction de plans de développement des ressources humaines, la multiplication des structures de représentation professionnelle, la poursuite des compressions, la reconnaissance de l'importance des ressources communautaires et la place des usagers dans cette réforme gouvernementale. Nous aborderons chacune de celles-ci.