

C'est dans cet esprit qu'il faut voir l'engouement de bien des gouvernements pour l'économie dite «sociale» et la création d'emplois d'utilité collective. Au delà d'un questionnement légitime sur son efficacité, le transfert de la responsabilité de l'État vers le secteur communautaire dans le cadre de la réforme de la santé au Québec participe du même phénomène de redéfinition de la place du travail dans une économie libéralisée. C'est ce genre de questions qu'auraient pu soulever les «dissidents» Bouchard, Noël et Labrie, étant entendu qu'il était difficile d'en attendre autant de Pierre Fortin et de Francine Séguin. La sortie des deux rapports aura plutôt montré à quel point les citoyens, surtout à revenu modeste, ont peu à attendre d'un exercice qui, au delà du recours généreux à «l'empowerment local» et aux notions de contrats d'insertion, de droits et de responsabilités ou même de citoyenneté, rive un peu plus le clou des inégalités sociales.

## NOTES

1. Konrad Yakabuski, «Plus d'équité entre assistés sociaux et petits salariés», *Le Devoir*, 15 mars 1996, p. A-1.
2. Camil Bourchard, Vivian Labrie et Alain Noël, chacun sa part. Rapport de trois membres du Comité externe de réforme
3. Voir notre article dans le numéro précédent : «Lancement de la réforme de l'aide sociale au Québec : vers la création d'un régime de revenu garanti en 1997?» *Revue canadienne de politique sociale*, 36 (1995), 108-110.

• • •

## Ontario

Brigitte Kitchen  
York University

*Ontario's March Towards Workfare*

The Government of Ontario is keeping up its speedy and relentless assault on the poor. Workfare, a widely popular proposal in the *Common Sense Revolution*, the winning political platform of the Progressive Conservative Party, is about to become a reality. A public opinion poll found that 87 percent of people polled supported the idea. Even a number of welfare recipients favoured workfare. They mistakenly expected it might open the door to a meaningful job for them. The idea has an appealing simplicity that according to the Premier came from a taxi driver. "He gave me the answer in 17 words, stop paying more and more people more and more money just to stay at home and do nothing."

Workfare is supposed to stop the draining of tax dollars into the hands of the idle. Would the cab driver still support workfare if some of the unemployed, capable of driving and reading road maps, would be put to work

driving taxis? Or, would he then consider workfare unpaid competition in the job market? Workfare is in fact the government creation of a substitute labour market for social assistance recipients only, with repercussions in the regular labour market. Low social assistance levels will inevitably put a downward pressure on wage levels in the province, hurting all workers eventually.

Workfare is by no means a new idea. In the long and painful history of the suffering of the poor at the hands of their better-off fellow citizens, few horrors are new. As early as 1349, an English vagrancy law made it illegal for people without a trade to refuse to work, and gave an individual who apprehended such persons the right to their services at a fixed wage for two years. Workfare is the modern version of the fixed wage. The 19th century Canadian version of the English Poor Laws required those out of work to run treadmills and break rocks in return for their assistance. Today such meaningless make-work schemes may no longer be tolerated. But most workfare supporters believe that people on social assistance should give something back to the community that supports them, however meagre the support. It is morally offensive, they argue, for people to expect something for nothing.

Government suggests that social assistance recipients could work on community service club projects, such as building baseball diamonds and bike paths. So far, the service clubs have been less than enthusiastic about such suggestions. Sole support mothers with children over the age of three could provide child care to other parents who are either in the regular workforce or part of other workfare projects. This is a dangerous idea for parents and children. Would parents feel comfortable leaving their children in the care of a person who might bitterly resent caring for them, but who will have to do it in order to survive?

Workfare is a clear expression of the mistaken belief that people on social assistance do not want to work or that they do not have marketable skills. Feeding the hostility against so-called "welfare drones" is the assumption that they need to get off their backs and learn the value of hard work to find jobs. They are blamed for their joblessness and not the lack of jobs in a labour market where both the private and public sector are competing in a race to lay off as many people as possible. Workfare represents a powerful indication that the Ontario government is determined to bring about the "end of compensatory entitlements," which fits their agenda of economic downsizing and restructuring. Under its impact all notions are swept away that those who have been robbed of their jobs, and not offered any new job opportunities so that corporate profits can soar, are entitled to be compensated for their losses. The size of the Ontario deficit is used

as a convenient pretext for the province to cut the entitlements of destitute people.

Workfare is an ill-thought-out idea. It puts people who are forced to accept it at risk of abuse by unscrupulous providers of work. It reduces the job market even further. Why hire someone for pay if workfare provides you with free labour? It is administratively expensive, requiring an entirely new level of bureaucracy even if workfare is contracted out to the private sector. Experiments in other jurisdictions have shown that workfare programs that did not exploit people proved hideously expensive and competed with low-paid jobs in the regular job market. Or they inflicted such suffering and degradation on people unable to find work that public outcry soon demanded that they be abandoned. But historical lessons are lost on a government driven by blind ideological fervour.



**Manitoba**

Esyllt Jones  
Manitoba Nurses' Union

*The Privatization of Home Care in Manitoba*

In February 1996, the NDP Opposition in Manitoba leaked to the media a confidential report from the Treasury Board which proposed the privatization of Manitoba's renowned home care program. It indicated that direct care provision will be contracted out to the private sector, beginning July 1. Although the government will still pay for "core" home care services, certain "non-core" services will not be entirely covered by Manitoba Health. Thus, the privatization is accompanied by user fees.

The government's decision to privatize home care has been rumoured for some time, and since the Conservatives were re-elected last April, they have pushed forward on privatization initiatives in a number of areas, including selling off the Manitoba Telephone System. In this sense, public home care is another victim of an ideological perspective that does not support public ownership and investment. There is also a patronage element to the home care issue—the health minister has publicly admitted to a personal relationship with the owner of the fastest-growing private home care company in the province.

The debate over public versus private home care must also be considered in the light of recent restructuring in health care, aimed at lowering government expenditures. After inflation, Manitoba's spending on hospital care is now lower than it was in 1988. Manitoba has seen over 600 hospital bed closures in the last four years, and is expecting many more. Lengths of stay, particularly for surgery, have been dramatically shortened. These