The Progressive Potential of Local Social Policy Activism

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Abstract

A local network of progressive activists can make a significant difference to social policy outcomes, even when regressive policy currents prevail at other scales of the state. This is the conclusion to a case study of the struggle in Ottawa over welfare reform during Mike Harris's Common Sense Revolution in Ontario. Much of the literature on this topic stresses the regressive nature of the trend toward downloading of social programs to local governments during the 1990s. This position is valid but tends to obscure the potential of efforts at the local scale to achieve progressive social policies. In this case, a local anti-poverty network, by working with and within the local government and community-based organizations, successfully resisted some of the most regressive aspects of the welfare reform agenda of the Harris government and created a set of services that responded well to the needs of the majority of social assistance recipients. This case highlights the multiscalar nature of the social policy process and of the key role played in the implementation phase of that process by actors at the local scale. It also alerts us to the possibility that progressive policy networks can run through branches of the state. Community-based activists should recognize that they may have allies at City Hall, both among the elected councillors and the staff of its departments. At the same time, progressive actors inside the local state need to nurture those institutions in the community that provide the material base for progressive social movements.

Résumé

Un réseau local d'activistes progressistes peut avoir une influence considérable sur l'issue des politiques sociales, même si une idéologie rétrograde en matière de politiques prévaut à

d'autres niveaux au sein de l'État. C'est la conclusion tirée d'une étude de cas portant sur le combat mené à Ottawa contre la réforme de l'assistance sociale mise en œuvre dans le cadre de la Révolution du bon sens du gouvernement de Mike Harris, en Ontario. Une bonne partie de la documentation sur ce thème insiste sur la nature rétrograde de la tendance à transférer la responsabilité des programmes sociaux aux administrations municipales qui a caractérisé les années 1990. Cette position est valide, mais elle tend à masquer le potentiel des efforts déployés par le secteur local pour mettre en place des politiques sociales progressistes. Dans le cas évoqué ici, un réseau antipauvreté local, en collaborant et en s'investissant avec l'administration municipale et les organismes communautaires, a combattu avec succès certains des aspects les plus rétrogrades de la réforme de l'aide sociale du gouvernement Harris et mis sur pied un ensemble de services qui a répondu efficacement aux besoins de la majorité des prestataires. Ce cas particulier met en lumière la nature multiscalaire du processus d'élaboration des politiques sociales et le rôle clé joué à l'étape de leur mise en œuvre par les acteurs locaux. Il nous sensibilise également à la possibilité pour les réseaux progressistes en matière de politiques d'agir au sein des filières de l'État. Les activistes communautaires devraient réaliser qu'ils ont peut-être des alliés à l'hôtel de ville, tant parmi les conseillers municipaux que chez les employés des divers services. Parallèlement, les intervenants progressistes au sein de ces administrations locales doivent alimenter les institutions qui fournissent à la communauté les fondements matériels des mouvements sociaux progressistes.

Introduction

A local network of progressive activists can make a significant difference to social policy outcomes, even when regressive policy currents prevail at other scales of the state. This is true even in a medium-sized Canadian city without a progressive municipal political party or an organized progressive urban social movement. This is the conclusion to a case study of the struggle in Ottawa over welfare reform during Mike Harris's Common Sense Revolution (1995 to 2002). My purpose in this article is support this claim and to identify the conditions and strategies that accounted for the efficacy of the local network.

Much of the literature on this topic stresses the regressive nature of the trend toward the downloading of social programs to local governments during the 1990s.[1] This can hardly be denied. The federal decision in 1995 to cancel the Canada Assistance Program (CAP) and to make deep cuts to transfers to the provinces had severely negative consequences for the country's social safety net. In Ontario, the Harris government shifted the burden further downward, expanding municipal responsibility for the cost and administration of several social programs, including social housing, public health, and social assistance. Within a few years, the federal government was recording fiscal surpluses, the government of Ontario was cutting

taxes, and the municipalities were left to choose between service cuts and large property tax increases.

Even the most moderate definition of progressive social policy involves some form of economic redistribution. The fiscal base of municipal governments is the property tax paid by their residents, which is not an adequate source of revenue for redistributive programs. In the voluntary sector, local community-based organizations (CBOs) that provide social services and advocate progressive policies have tended to rely heavily on provincial and federal sources of funds; during the 1990s, this funding was cut back sharply and subjected to new, more onerous regimes of accountability that weakened their capacity for advocacy (Scott, 2003).

Some observers viewed downloading to the municipalities and offloading to voluntary organizations as deliberate strategies designed to roll back welfare-state entitlements in the new age of global competition. Jenson and Phillips (1996), for example, saw these moves as aspects of a "regime shift" designed to shrink the state. Keil observed that much of the "dirty work" of globalization and neoliberalization was being assigned to cities (2002, p. 586). Peck (2002) viewed downloading as central to the qualitative transformation of the policy regime from welfarism to workfarism. This downward transfer of functions did not include the transfer of authority to the lower level of government. Rather, in the case of social assistance, municipal governments and CBOs were used as service delivery mechanisms by the provincial government, which maintained control both of funding and of the policy framework for the function. Peck describes such arrangements as "extralocal rule regimes" (2002, p. 338) that constrain the options of the local actors. Ontario Works, the program at the centre of this case study, was a prime example of an extralocal rule regime. Its directives set down 938 pages of detailed rules and procedures for its management.[2]

These are powerful arguments for the inadequacy of the local scale as a base for progressive social policy. My intention in this article is not to refute them but to suggest that they have tended to obscure the potential of efforts at the local scale to achieve progressive social policies.[3] There is a body of literature on this side of the argument as well. Masson (2006), for example, has argued in her account of feminist organizing within Quebec's new regional economic development structures that there is no optimal scale for progressive mobilization. Rescaling changes the structure of political opportunities in complex ways, foreclosing some options while creating new ones. Strategy evolves in relation to the political openings available, the perceptions of social movements, the resources available, and the issues of the day.

One of the opportunities provided by downloading is the enhanced role of the local scale in policy implementation. Theorists of "street-level bureaucracy" (Lipsky, 1980) argue that those who deliver public policies on the front lines play

a powerful role in determining the nature of those policies in practice. McElligott's (2001) study of Employment and Immigration Canada's front-line employees portrays the potential that these workers and their union had in resisting formal policies in the interests of their clients. I suggest here that the same case can be made for a local anti-poverty network composed of local activists, elected municipal councillors, and municipal social service staff. Extralocal rule regimes exist, and can be powerful, but they can also be resisted and subverted.

Warren Magnusson (1996) views the municipality as an especially significant space for political action. It is here, he says, at the local level, that critical social movements arise from everyday life, meet, find common ground, and develop joint projects. For Magnusson, the very inadequacy of municipal government is a virtue. He argues that the advantage of the municipality is not its sovereign authority over its territory; it is in fact quite the contrary. The real promise of a municipality, from the point of view of progressive politics, is "as an organizational node in the flow of critical and creative social movements. It is to their constitution that it must contribute" (Magnusson, pp. 114–5).

Let us now turn to the case study to assess the merits of these arguments. I will focus on two key struggles that developed in Ottawa in response to the welfare reform agenda of the Harris government: first, resistance to workfare; and second, the creation of an alternative set of programs for social assistance recipients. In both struggles, the key factor appears to be the presence of a strong network of anti-poverty activists with a presence both inside the municipal government and in community-based organizations (CBOs). The article concludes with a discussion of the conditions and strategies that account for the outcomes in this case.

The empirical data for the case are drawn from official documents, minutes of municipal council and committee meetings, newspaper articles, relevant secondary sources, and twenty-one semi-structured interviews with key informants, located in Ottawa's CBOs, the municipal social services department, and the municipal council.

The local anti-poverty network

In Ottawa in 1995, there was an identifiable and self-conscious local anti-poverty network situated in a variety of institutional locations: social agencies; advocacy groups; the elected municipal and regional councils; the Social Services Department of the regional municipality; and academe. The Social Planning Council of Ottawa-Carleton provided leadership within the community of social agencies in Ottawa, including a network of twelve community resource centres (CRCs) (Moscovitch, 2003). The CRCs had their origins in the initiatives of local activists and played important social roles within their respective areas of the city with programs determined by their community-based boards. Community development staff in several of these centres facilitated organizing by social housing

residents, social assistance recipients, tenants, and recent immigrants, among others. Several new service organizations and advocacy groups came into existence in this way (Tanner, 1999).

Managers and staff of the Social Services Department of the Regional Municipality of Ottawa-Carleton (RMOC) were members of this anti-poverty network. Beginning in the early 1960s, a series of progressive Social Services Commissioners had built up a service-oriented core of professional staff and worked to ensure access to services by people on the basis of need. In the 1970s, the RMOC, through the Social Services Department, began to provide the CRCs with core funding. The Commissioner at the time insisted on evidence of strong community involvement and support as a condition of funding a CRC. The aim was to build collaborative networks in the community, fostering cooperation with the Social Planning Council and the community-based social agencies.

A core group of progressive members of the RMOC Council also identified with this network and gave it support in a variety of ways. In 1995, three such councillors were members of the Community Services Committee of the RMOC Council and made activists welcome to make presentations to its meetings. The RMOC was also a source of financial support to many CBOs, but not on a scale that could substitute for the federal and provincial cutbacks in the mid-1990s. However, the RMOC did continue to provide core budget support to the CRCs through this period.

Within this network, there was a congruence of views on the issue of welfare reform. As elsewhere in the province, its members had engaged actively with the Social Assistance Review Committee (SARC) formed by the Peterson government in 1986. Chaired by George Thomson, the SARC's consultative process across Ontario from 1986 to 1988 had provided a forum for community-based social service groups, anti-poverty advocacy groups, municipal social service departments, and individual activists. One municipal councillor from the RMOC, Ruth Wildgen, was a member of the SARC, and local activists from Ottawa contributed to the work of several of its sub-committees. The SARC's report, *Transitions*, served as a program for the advocates of progressive welfare reform in Ontario. A SARC Network, composed of local groups in centres around the province, pressed the provincial government to implement the SARC's recommendations.

The reforms proposed in *Transitions* were, with some qualifications, a progressive version of active social policy. In Esping-Andersen's (1990) typology, Ontario was a liberal welfare state; the social assistance system was designed to provide temporary support to people in need. The SARC's recommendations would not have changed that; they would not have brought about qualitative changes in the nature of class relations in Ontario. However, they would have improved substantially the quality and quantity of support provided to people in need, and would have reduced the stigma associated with the receipt of social assistance. A refundable child tax

benefit and a disability income program would have removed children and people with disabilities from the social assistance system entirely. For people able to enter the labour market, a program of "Opportunity Planning" would have provided support tailored to each individual's needs, whether they were sole-support parents, older laid-off workers, young people who had not finished high school, or people with other barriers to employment. The *Transitions* agenda was marred, however, by the SARC's recommendation that full benefits for "employables" be made conditional upon participation in Opportunity Planning. This introduced a workfarist element into a generally progressive set of reforms.

The Ontario SARC Network ceased to be active in 1991.[4] At the local level, however, cooperation continued into the 1990s. Several Ottawa-based anti-poverty activists and social service professionals participated in the work of the Advisory Group on New Social Assistance Legislation. Appointed in the last days of the Peterson government, this advisory group made two reports to the subsequent NDP government.[5] It amended the *Transitions* recommendations to eliminate the workfarist aspect of Opportunity Planning and urged the Rae government to proceed quickly with the implementation of the full SARC agenda.

The *Transitions* agenda, however, was abandoned by the Rae government. The failure of welfare reform during the Rae years had several causes: the Bank of Canada's zero-inflation policy brought about the worst recession in Ontario since the 1930s (Fortin, 1996); federal cutbacks in the scope and level of Unemployment Insurance coverage drove large numbers of people onto welfare as the assistance of last resort (McIntosh and Boychuk, 2000); from March 1989 to March 1994, the proportion of the total population of Ontario relying on social assistance rose from 5.8 to 12.7 per cent (Fortin, 1996). This crisis, compounded by the federal decision to cap annual increases of Canada Assistance Program transfers to Ontario, Alberta, and British Columbia at 5 per cent, contributed to large fiscal deficits in Ontario. In these circumstances, the Rae government abandoned plans for significant welfare reform. This and its Social Contract legislation led to the broader political crisis that ended with the Rae government's defeat in the 1995 election.[6]

The Progressive Conservatives (PCs) won the provincial election of June 1995 on the strength of their platform, the Common Sense Revolution (CSR). The two central planks of the CSR were tax cuts and workfare. Workfare became the "visceral issue" (Walkom, 1995) of the 1995 election campaign, fed by public anxiety over the cost of social assistance and hostility toward those who relied on it.

There was much public support for workfare in Ontario in 1995, but also widespread resistance. Active opposition came primarily from social advocacy groups and the labour movement. In Toronto, the Social Planning Council launched *Workfare Watch*, an on-line series of bulletins and newsletters that provided critical analyses of workfare, both as it was experienced elsewhere and as it came to be practised in Ontario.[7] The Ontario Social Safety Network served to link activists

around the province. However, as Peck (2001) observed, this opposition actually served the interests of the Harris government, which used workfare as a wedge issue to consolidate support for the agenda of the Common Sense Revolution.

By mid-1995, in Ottawa and other localities around the province, the anti-poverty network could see no prospect of progressive welfare reform at the provincial level, and viewed federal policies as a part of the problem not a source of solutions. Disappointed by the Ontario NDP, and appalled by Harris and the PCs, they had nowhere to turn but to their own resources.

Resistance to workfare

There is an extensive literature on the regressive nature of the welfare reforms of the Harris government.[8] This can be summarized briefly. First, the benefit rates were inadequate even before they were cut by 21.6 per cent in 1995, and they were not raised during the entire eight years of PC government, a period during which Statistics Canada's Consumer Price Index rose by over 17 per cent. The program did not provide adequate support to people in need. Second, the workfarist program assumptions were stigmatizing, suggesting that social assistance recipients must be forced to work. The program therefore reinforced both maldistribution and misrecognition. Third, the formula of Ontario Works that mandated "the shortest route to employment" for each client created a cycle in which people tended to move between insecure, low-wage employment and stigmatizing, inadequate welfare. This reproduced and reinforced existing patterns of inequality and discrimination in the labour market. The disadvantages that came with the social class of one's family of origin, as well as one's gender, race and ethnicity, immigrant status, and related characteristics, were recreated and intensified. Fourth, the streaming of clients into different programs likewise reinforced existing inequalities; the most employable clients got jobs, while the least employable were warehoused or placed in make-work schemes. Fifth, the work-first policy encouraged the expansion of low-wage employment, thereby undermining the wage levels, working conditions, and regulatory standards governing other workers.

Nevertheless, there was a large constituency of support for the PCs and their CSR platform in the Ottawa area, albeit less than a majority. In the 1995 election, the PCs won three of the eight ridings in the RMOC and placed second in four of the other five ridings. There was also support for workfare among members of the RMOC Council. A debate at the Regional Council early in 1995 on a pro-workfare motion was defeated by just one vote, ten to nine. Much of the local media also favoured workfare.[9]

When the issue of Ontario Works came before the Community Services Committee (CSC) of the RMOC Council in May, 1996, anti-poverty activists from local CBOs urged the councillors to reject its workfarist design. The councillors debated a motion that the RMOC decline to participate in Ontario Works

completely and that it develop its own program in consultation with its community partners. Those who opposed the motion argued that this was unrealistic; the province controlled most of the funding for social assistance and had the authority to contract with another organization in the community to deliver the Ontario Works program if the RMOC refused to do so. Nevertheless, the motion almost passed, losing by just one vote. The CSC, and later the full RMOC Council, voted instead to give its Social Services Department a mandate to work with the provincial Ministry of Community and Social Services (MCSS) in the implementation of Ontario Works, but also the political backing to implement the program on the basis of two key principles: client choice; and voluntary participation. This became the basic guideline for the implementation of Ontario Works in the RMOC. The Council also set up an arm's-length group, coordinated by the Social Planning Council, to monitor and evaluate the implementation of Ontario Works in the RMOC.

The most contentious component of the Ontario Works program in its early days was the Community Participation program, the core workfare program. Ontario Works would require an employable social assistance recipient to accept an "offer" of a community placement with a non-profit or public organization, either as his/her sole obligation or as a supplementary requirement to other activities. This placed CBOs at the centre of the workfare debate and large numbers of them rejected the role expected of them. The Board of Directors of the Social Planning Council, of several CRCs, and of many secular and faith-based CBOs in the region explicitly refused to accept the placement of Ontario Works clients in their organizations under the Community Participation program.

The RMOC Social Services Department accepted the position of CBOs taking this stand and reassured them that there would be no sanctions for any CBO doing so. The Department itself, however, was under pressure from the MCSS to place large numbers of social assistance recipients in the Community Participation program. Its first effort at drafting an Ontario Works Business Plan was rejected by the Ministry because its projected number of Community Participation placements was too low. The RMOC was forced to increase this number from 225 to 1,238 for the first year and was expected to keep on increasing it thereafter. The Regional Council made the required changes in its Business Plan, but for the next three years the Social Services Department simply ignored these targets. A Department manager describes what happened:

> The result was that in the first fiscal year of community placements Ottawa was dead last [in the province] in terms of numbers. We were given a target; we didn't pay any attention to the target. The target wasn't huge, but we didn't come anywhere close.... That was not our approach. Our approach was client-centred community placements.

An *Ottawa Citizen* editorial reported on June 22, 2000, that the RMOC was still only achieving 22 per cent of its provincially-mandated workfare target. The only Community Participation placements being made were those that were voluntary both for the client and for the host organization. These low numbers sparked a public row between the RMOC and John Baird, the Minister of Community and Social Services appointed after the Harris government was re-elected in 1999. According to the *Citizen*, Baird complained that the RMOC was "not trying hard enough" to get people into workfare placements. The Chair of the CSC defended the RMOC by pointing out that it had successfully placed well over this target in actual paying jobs.

In 2000, after three years of resistance by the RMOC, the MCSS agreed to recognize "self-initiated placements based on a two-party agreement between the Department and the client".[10] This qualitatively changed the nature of the Community Participation program. It meant that a client could engage in voluntary activities as a genuine volunteer; the host agency did not even have to know that the individual was a social assistance recipient. For its part, the Social Services Department adopted a policy of accepting self-reporting of hours worked on the part of Community Participation participants and the Department aggregated and reported these numbers to the MCSS. Once these numbers were achieving the target in the Business Plan, the Ministry was satisfied. As the same senior manager put it:

> The province wanted numbers.... We gave them numbers. They never, ever questioned the numbers. They wanted to win politically. It wasn't about the substance of the issue of attachment to the labour force.

After this time, workfare, narrowly defined, faded as an issue. Several organizations that had previously refused to accept Community Participation placements agreed to do so once it was clear that they were voluntary. This is not to say that Community Participation placements always worked out well for the clients. The arm's-length, community-based evaluation team found that experiences were mixed: some people found them helpful; others were disappointed (Project Team for Monitoring Ontario Works, 1999). However, considering the high level of concern about workfare after the election of the Harris government in 1995, it seems safe to conclude that the coercive and stigmatizing features of this aspect of Ontario Works had been successfully resisted and subverted in Ottawa as early as 1998 and certainly by 2000.

Partners for Jobs

The dynamics of the anti-poverty network were also instrumental in the construction of a set of progressive alternatives to the regressive workfarist approach of the Ontario Works program.

The genesis of these alternatives can be traced to the experience with the concept of Opportunity Planning first proposed by the SARC in 1988. In 1992, due to pressure from CBO-based activists, Ottawa took on one of six pilot projects in the province to test the viability of the approach. The Opportunity Planning Pilot Project was labour-market focused, aiming to assist social assistance recipients to become financially independent. It involved intensive work by a client and a caseworker to identify the barriers experienced by each individual and to develop an action plan that was appropriate to their needs. The action plan could include training, counselling, volunteer work, and/or various supports such as child care and direct assistance in finding employment. Training could include support for post-secondary education (both college and university) when the client had the necessary academic qualifications; in such cases, it was permissible to combine a student loan with social assistance and even to relocate out of town if that were necessary to enter the appropriate program. Each element was tailored to the individual and recorded in an action plan agreed to jointly by the caseworker and the client. Those who participated were exempted from the mandatory job search requirement to which General Welfare Assistance clients had always been subjected.

Participation in the pilot project was voluntary; social assistance clients were offered access to the program and were free to decline if they wished. In practice, since it was a pilot project, it had limited capacity and there was much more demand for the program than it could accommodate. Participants were assigned to the program on a random basis, both as a way of coping with the capacity limits and as an approach to evaluation. Outcomes were compared to a control group. This random approach helped to avoid the problem of "creaming" to which such programs are susceptible — the practice of selecting the participants who seem most likely to succeed. Thus, some participants were ready immediately, for example, to enter a post-secondary education program, while others required literacy programs, intensive psychological counselling, or addiction recovery programs. The program was popular, and few who were offered the chance turned it down.

The pilot project provides a good example of how the members of the local anti-poverty network interacted. The pressure to launch the project in Ottawa came from the community-based members of the network. Staff of the Social Services Department welcomed this community pressure, which carried more influence with regional councillors than the staff alone would have had.

One Social Services Department manager put it this way:

> It always worked better when we were getting shoved and cajoled and led and challenged by a community, and we were seen as the quiet, cooperative bureaucrats.

Community pressure also led to a decision by the RMOC Council to put up additional funding from its own budget for the pilot project, specifically for the purchase of services from CBOs for counselling, training, and support services to project participants. The RMOC made the project management accountable to a Community Management Committee chaired by a representative of the Social Assistance Recipients Council, with membership that included representatives of several other community organizations. The Community Management Committee managed the fund for purchase of service contracts with CBOs.

The evaluation of the Opportunity Planning Pilot Project in Ottawa, completed in early 1996, found it to be highly successful. Both clients and staff expressed high levels of satisfaction with the program. A cost-benefit analysis found that the cost per participant was less than the costs associated with a control group despite higher initial costs in terms of staff training, smaller caseloads per staff person, and access to a wider range of support services. The cost saving resulted from a higher rate of success in moving from social assistance to financial independence, and a lower rate of returning to assistance, compared to the control group. These findings served to consolidate support for a progressive, anti-workfarist model of social assistance among the regional councillors. When the issue of Ontario Works came before the Community Services Committee (CSC) of the RMOC Council at its meeting of May, 1996, the CSC, and later the full RMOC Council, voted to put forward the model of Opportunity Planning as its preferred approach to the implementation of Ontario Works. This served as the vision informing the set of programs developed in the RMOC over the following years.

Community-based activists continued to play a significant role in the process of program development. The Social Planning Council launched a series of People's Hearings in 1997. People living in poverty, facilitated by the community development staff of the Community Resource Centres, addressed issues of employment, social assistance benefits, housing, community programs, education, child care, access to transportation, hydro and telephone services, and participation by people with low incomes in the making of public policy. The RMOC Council provided important political space by receiving the results of these hearings in a public meeting and by commissioning two task forces to follow up on its recommendations: one on poverty issues; and the other on employment. Among the social policy outcomes of these task forces was the design of the RMOC's Partners for Jobs program.

Through Partners for Jobs, the Social Services Department built a program for social assistance recipients with twelve "pathways" that aimed to serve as acceptable choices for most clients of Ontario Works. These pathways included many of the elements of Opportunity Planning, including basic education and literacy, job-specific training, and opportunities for community placements that were

genuinely voluntary. One program, "Employment Development Initiatives", brought together social assistance recipients, educators, and employers around specific employment projects designed to provide permanent employment at decent rates of pay (generally, double the minimum wage or better).

The full set of options in the Partners for Jobs program was a compromise with the workfarist regulations of Ontario Works. All Ontario Works clients were required to sign a participation agreement and opt in to one of the Partners for Jobs pathways. Nevertheless, by providing a wide range of options, by making these pathways genuinely helpful, and by offering them in a respectful way, the original workfarist vision of the Common Sense Revolution was subverted and transformed into a more progressive form of active social policy.

Conclusion

It is worth noting the things that the local anti-poverty network was not able to accomplish. It could not change the level of social assistance rates, which were set at the provincial level. Pressure from the CBO-based activists did lead the RMOC Council to establish a fund for "Essential Health and Support Systems" to replace some of the benefits eliminated by the province, but this could not compensate for the drastic reduction of rates introduced in 1995. Moreover, the more effective components of Partners for Jobs, notably the Employment Development Initiatives, were under-resourced. The local network could not remove the basic coercive element of the Ontario Works program, the mandatory participation agreement. There was little that the network could do to mitigate the effects of the new Service Delivery Model (SDM) introduced for Ontario Works. The SDM was designed primarily to detect fraud and to reduce caseloads and costs. It worked in such a way that social assistance recipients tended to be "discouraged, diverted, and disentitled" from their right as citizens to support when in need.[11] Moreover, the reputation of Ontario Works generally, and of the SDM in particular, made it much more difficult to recruit progressive front-line staff to work with social assistance clients. Finally, the Ontario Works model made it impossible to find solutions for those social assistance recipients labelled "hard-to-serve", sometimes described as having "multiple barriers" to employment. Many were homeless people who suffered both mental illness and addiction, yet could not qualify for the Ontario Disability Support Program because of its rigid criteria. To qualify for Ontario Works they had to sign a participation agreement undertaking to start down one of the pathways to employment, but both the client and the caseworker knew that this was fiction. Partners for Jobs was not the solution and none seemed possible under the rules of Ontario Works.

These are all major qualifiers to the claim that a local anti-poverty network can be effective even when regressive policy currents prevail at other scales of the

state. They reinforce the arguments of Peck (2002) and others that resistance to workfarism must be undertaken at scales higher than the local. This is freely acknowledged here. The point of the argument is to highlight what can be accomplished at the local scale, and to identify the conditions accounting for success.

The local anti-poverty network, by working with and within the local government and CBOs, successfully resisted some of the most regressive aspects of the workfarist welfare reform agenda of the Harris government. Working from the model of Opportunity Planning, the network subverted the Community Placement program and transformed it into one among a range of options that might prove helpful to social assistance recipients. In Partners for Jobs, it created a respectful set of services to respond to the needs of the majority of social assistance recipients. These were significant achievements.

The key agent in the case was the local anti-poverty network with members in CBOs, the municipal council, and the management and staff of the Social Services Department. These actors shared a common set of perspectives and preferences for welfare reform, a policy legacy drawn from the experience of working together intensively on the issues both before and during the period of the Social Assistance Review, and in the fifteen years that followed it.

Despite the existence of a regressive extralocal rule regime, there were important structural advantages at the local scale. Active social policies requiring individual case management can only be administered at the local scale. Moreover, municipal governments have a long tradition of responsibility for the administration of social assistance in Ontario. This combination of administrative exigency and policy legacy changed the political opportunity structure, leaving political space for a significant degree of local discretion in the design and implementation of programs. The provincial authorities, both political and administrative, made serious efforts to limit that discretion and did succeed to some extent. Nevertheless, an active anti-poverty network took advantage of the structural advantages of the local scale to make a significant difference in the quality of a social program as it was delivered.

The case highlights the multiscalar nature of the social policy process (Mahon, Andrew and Johnson, 2005) and of the key role played in the implementation phase of that process by actors at the local scale. It also alerts us to the possibility that progressive policy networks can run through branches of the state. Community-based activists may have allies at City Hall, both among the elected councillors and on the staff of its departments.[12] This suggests that participation by community-based activists in electoral politics at the municipal level is worthwhile and it can make a significant difference to the lives of its citizens. At the same time, progressive actors inside the local state need to nurture those institutions in the community that provide the material base for progressive activists; as the case suggests, much of the impetus for progressive policy may come from this base.

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Notes

1 See, for example, Moscovitch (1996), Graham, Phillips, and Maslove (1998), Teeple (2000).

2 Directives for the Ontario Works program can be found in December 2008 at: http://www.mcss.gov.on.ca/mcss/english/pillars/social/directives/ow_policy_directives.htm

3 Specific accounts of what is "progressive" may vary by the policy field under discussion. For welfare policy, the account in this article relies on Nancy Fraser's (1997; 2003) concept of "parity of participation." Progressive social policy aims to achieve parity of participation not only in formal political decision-making but in the social life that makes such participation possible. Parity of participation in a contemporary capitalist society with a culturally diverse population demands both economic redistribution and cultural recognition. For the policy field of social assistance, these principles are expressed in the concept of sustainable livelihood — the activities, assets, and entitlements by which people make a living. A sustainable livelihood is a prerequisite to parity of participation; this should be guaranteed in a way that is not stigmatizing for those in need.

4 The SARC Network went through a number of stages. The decision to cease province-wide advocacy efforts was taken, in part, due to the perception that the new NDP government of Bob Rae would move ahead quickly to implement the SARC's recommendations; see the account of the SARC Network by McCrimmon (1991).

5 These were *Back on Track* (Ontario. Advisory Group on New Social Assistance Legislation 1991) and *Time for Action* (Ontario. Advisory Group on New Social Assistance Legislation. 1992).

6 The larger story of the fiscal and political crisis of the Rae government cannot be told here. For a range of interpretations, see Ehring and Roberts (1993), Walkom (1994), Schwartz (1994), Jenson and Mahon (1995), Monahan (1995), Rae (1996), Rachlis and Wolfe (1997), Courchene (1998), and Panitch and Swartz (2003: Ch. 8).

7 The Workfare Watch Bulletins and Newsletters continued until 2002 and are an important source of evidence of the resistance to workfare in Ontario during the Common Sense Revolution. They were taken off-line in 2006 but can be retrieved by first going to www.archive.org and entering www.welfarewatch.toronto.on.ca in the "Wayback Machine" search engine.

8 There have been several scholarly critiques of the Ontario Works program (Lalonde 1997; Moscovitch 1997; Torjman 1997; Greene-Sang 1999; Hollingsworth 2000; Torjman 2000; Vosko 2000; Peck 2001; Herd 2002; Lightman, Mitchell and Herd

2004a, 2004b; Herd, Mitchell and Lightman 2005; De Wolff 2006).

9 From 1996 to 2000, Ottawa's major daily newspaper, The *Ottawa Citizen* was owned by Conrad Black's Hollinger Inc. Black appointed as editor Neil Reynolds, a man respected as a journalist but well-known as a libertarian conservative. Reynolds recruited a new editorial-page team, including two from the neoconservative Fraser Institute (McDonald 1997).

10 RMOC. Commissioner, Social Services Department. Report: Ontario Works Business Plan — Update. 20 August 1997. (http://www.ottawa.ca/calendar/ottawa/archives/rmoc/Community_Services/18Sep97/Rvsdow.pdf. Accessed December 14, 2008)

11 The phrase originates with Herd and Mitchell (2002); see their detailed analysis of the Service Delivery Model of Ontario Works, as well as other studies of the SDM done in the Social Assistance in the New Economy (SANE) research program (Lightman et al. 2004a; Herd et al. 2005).

12 Mahon (2006) found similar networks inside and outside the local state in three Canadian cities responsible for progressive outcomes in child care policy.

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