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LRC

Literary Review of Canada

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Don't It Always Seem to Go …

… that you don't know what you've got 'til it's gone?

John Stapleton

Child Poverty and the Canadian Welfare State: From Entitlement to Charity
Shereen Ismael
University of Alberta Press
111 pages, softcover
ISBN 9780888644619

The memorable but ungrammatical bromide from Joni Mitchell's *Big Yellow Taxi* could be the loose theme of Shereen Ismael's slim volume on how the Canadian welfare state has deteriorated since 1989, when the House of Commons adopted its guileless resolution to end child poverty in Canada by the year 2000. Ismael says as much in the opening line of the preface to *Child Poverty and the Canadian Welfare State: From Entitlement to Charity*: "I grew up as the Canadian welfare state matured, and … I did not appreciate it until it was gone."

Joni's next line in the song was "They paved paradise and put up a parking lot." But just as all of the planet's Shangri-Las have not yet been flattened to asphalt, state funding aimed at alleviating child poverty has not ended. The reality is that our lack of progress measured against collective expectation makes it feel that way. We succumb to unequivocal language because we feel the sting of a lost opportunity that seemed so close at hand.

For those expecting revelation of the "big picture answer" to why the welfare state has been downgraded to a charity model, Ismael's goals for her essay are more modest:

> This book represents my efforts to understand the changes in social policy that normalize the existence of child poverty in a rich society like Canada. To this end, I examine changes in the principles, plans and course of action of federal [government] social policy.

She admits that "state discourse represents only one dimension of a broader public dialogue on an issue like child poverty" while making the point that the Commons resolution shaped the discussion concerning the notional countdown to the elimination of child poverty in Canada.

John Stapleton worked for the Ontario government in the Ministry of Community and Social Services for 28 years in the areas of social assistance policy and operations. He is currently research director for the Task Force on Modernizing Income Security for Working Age Adults in Toronto.

The book follows the intellectual history of the welfare state from its modern conceptual beginnings in Rousseau, Smith, Marx and Bentham through its wartime distillations in the works of Lord Beveridge and Leonard Marsh. It rests in the post-centennial struggles between the noble proponents of the welfare state and its market-obsessed enemies.

Ismael does pull one rabbit out of the hat by ingeniously charting the ideological perspectives of liberal individualism, ethical liberalism and social democratic liberalism as they relate to the nature of society, human nature and the nature of child poverty. She helpfully circles back later to chart the same axes but with particular attention to welfare benefits.

One reason to buy this book would be to carefully remove and laminate these charts and use them to follow kitchen debates on welfare benefits in Canada. But on to the bad news—the history of Canada's welfare state has been analyzed, worked over and explained much more imaginatively by other writers.

Let's look at three of the best texts. The first is Dennis Guest's classic, *The Emergence of Social Security in Canada*—an author whom Ismael cites in some good measure. Second is *Changing Politics of Canadian Social Policy* by James J. Rice and Michael J. Prince. Third and certainly equal is Linda McQuaig's passionate meditation on the political economy of the welfare state in the twentieth century, *The Cult of Impotence*. It is hard to imagine why Ismael thought she needed to till the same soil again.

Ismael divides the history of child poverty in the welfare state into the post-Depression round, the War on Poverty round, the child poverty round and the child development round. In each, she invites us to see an omnipresent dogfight between the differing forces of liberalism where one of the forces holds sway.

While welfare state proponents such as Beveridge and Marsh and their forces were best able to win the post-Depression round, liberal individualists won the most recent round by trivializing child poverty as an almost natural part of the economic and political landscape. Accordingly, those who favour a return to the welfare state of the child poverty round would do well to study spin and framing and be ready to win the next round by being a better spinner, "trivializer" and framer than one's opponent.

But if Ismael is right that state discourse on child poverty is only "one dimension of [the] broader public dialogue," her game theory applied to the infinitely long game of politics is only one dimension of state discourse. We must still answer the question of why one form of liberalism wins out.

But we need to get two issues quickly out of the way: the matter of cost and a simple reality check on what governments have done about child poverty.

Linda McQuaig contends that governments continually find solutions to issues such as child poverty unaffordable because they continually change the line in the sand that defines affordability. Back when Canada had a deficit, almost anything governments did not wish to do was considered unaffordable. With the deficit resolved, we discovered that our debt would have to be paid off before anything else would be affordable.

Today we have the example of the province of Alberta, which paid off its deficit, paid off its debt and sports large surpluses and a rainy-day fund, but still has one of the toughest—if not the toughest—welfare programs in Canada with low benefits for children in need. Now that they can afford to end child poverty, they still choose not to. Why?

As for the reality check, it is quite clear that the federal government has done a lot. The approximately $10 billion now going into the Canada Child Tax Benefit has increased dramatically and

is no longer chump change. However, at the same time as child benefits have increased, the benefits for the poor have dropped dramatically and it is no surprise that inroads into ending child poverty are blocked.

But the question remains: Why has this happened? Here are four reasons why the forces of individualism have been winning.

1. Who Owns Our Kids?

In Canada today, liberal market thinking has commodified children and has made the "ownership" of children an important premise in what is responsible for child poverty. The answer is that parents are much more responsible (and believe they are much more responsible) for their children than they ever have been in the recent past.

In my case, being a so-called welfare expert inevitably leads to the dreaded question about lone parents who receive social assistance: *So why are they having children*? It is a revealing question, because in order for it to be intelligible, we must see the propagation of our species as fundamentally a market choice of individuals, preceding the question of a society's responsibility to continue itself.

It was not always like that. In the very first Mother's Allowance directive released by the government of Ontario in September 1920, the commissioners stated that lone parents were "employees" of government. These noble mothers, their partners lost to war and disease, were raising the province's children. Too many widows and deserted wives were working at jobs outside the home, a situation the commissioners saw as a recipe for neglect.

A lone parent with one child will often have to make the leap to a job paying over $35,000 a year in order to break even on the deal.

In this patronizing model of state responsibility, the state stood in the place of the man and stigma was avoided through the state's role as employer. It was not until the early 1970s, when the expectation that women should gain access to the paid workforce outside the home became commonplace that we began to equate lone parents' responsibility to earn an income with the cost of raising children.

This is the point where the intelligibility and rationality of market assertions began. We traded moral and religious notions of illegitimacy for market illegitimacy. No wonder our birth rates are declining. Young people are scared to death that they won't generate enough wealth to be legitimate parents.

2. Time Jealousy

It is obviously true that the middle class is working longer and does not have time to meet its commitments to those who matter to them. It is a familiar refrain, but if the middle class has no time, who does? The easy answer is that anyone outside the labour force has loads of time because they are not working as much as the rest of us, or they are not working at all.

Why? In the first 50 years of the post-war period, work hours in general decreased, leaving us more and more time for extracurricular activities. However, when work hours started to rise in the 1990s among those of us with good jobs (and the opposite occurred for adults with bad jobs), we started to feel the squeeze.

In the immediate post-war period through the early 1970s, the public discussion about the poor centred on suspicions of laziness and poor money management. As a public, we clucked about taxis to beer stores and railed against the work-shy.

We now accept workfare policies that control how the poor spend their time. We demand a certain number of hours from the poor—we get them out of the house and denominate eligibility for welfare in terms of hours spent in placements, rather than concentrating on how people spend their money.

In my research for this article and a Metcalf Innovations fellowship on work disincentives in immigrant communities, I took a straw poll of mall workers, car wash attendants and fast food employees regarding what they would most wish from their employers. Overwhelmingly, the answer is "more hours." It tells us is that there is now a greater stigma in working shorter hours and failing to make ends meet. No sympathy from the general public here—they're too busy with their own lives.

3. Secular Evangelism and Policy Making

Through the convergence of lotteries and the pervasiveness of TV talk show stories, as a society we have become enamoured of the idea of bootstrapping ourselves up, overcoming adversity, taking risks, making leaps and beating the odds.

The problem is that what makes good storytelling does not necessarily make good policy; yet we continue to structure our social services and tax systems on a secular evangelical model. That is, through high marginal effective tax and recovery rates that often exceed 100 percent for the person climbing from dependency to self-sufficiency, the only economically rational thing to do is either to stay poor or to make the leap. But there is a catch—the leap must be a very long one indeed.

Economists of all stripes have long lamented the disincentives caused by high marginal tax and recovery rates placed on the backs of the poor. Separate programs including social assistance, childcare services, public housing and student assistance either reduce their benefits or charge more for their services, all based on the same dollar of income realized by the poor, meaning the poor lose more than they gain by earning each dollar.

Interestingly, this has been going on for decades and no one does anything about it but all sectors of civil society do have an answer: Make the leap, beat the odds and overcome adversity.

The reality is that a lone parent with one child will often have to make the leap to a job paying more than $35,000 a year in order to break even on the deal. Ironically, according to the calculus of secular evangelism, this just makes the story sweeter. Longer odds? More adversity? More obstacles? Greater risk? Bring it on!

4. Middle Class Fear of the Poor

Canada has had two major periods of massive change in its income security systems. The introduction of cash relief, mother's allowance reform in the mid 1930s and unemployment insurance toward the end of the Depression marked the first period of reform. The last major period occurred in the mid 1960s when Canada implemented, in three short years, the Canada Assistance Plan, the Canada Pension Plan, the Guaranteed Income Supplement for seniors and a major revamp of Old Age Security.

But it is important to look at what was also going on during both of those periods. In the 1930s the Depression spawned legions of homeless and often angry men riding the rails across Canada in search of work. Governments often looked on them as recruits for revolution and there was a very real fear that they would attempt to overthrow our governments.

The first relief programs in Ontario were firmly administered by Canada's Department of National Defence. Officers separated men into small groups so they could be supervised. Cash welfare programs were implemented in the mid 1930s and were quickly increased in some municipalities up to 39 percent, even though deflation was a larger fear than inflation.

On a similar note in the early and mid 1960s, the civil rights movement in the United States called for civil unrest and an end to poverty. John F. Kennedy was violently assassinated in 1963 and, by 1965, Detroit was burning just across our border. Students were turning to protest and many believed that civil society was at risk. In response, Lyndon B. Johnson announced a war on poverty: he had a plan.

Today, in contrast to the 1930s and 1960s, the poor and their supporters are neither calling for revolution nor burning up our gentrified inner cities. So if there is nothing to fear, there is no urgency. If there is no urgency, there is no plan. If there is no plan, nothing happens.

Conclusion

In *Caring for Canadians in a Canada Strong and Free*, Preston Manning and Mike Harris weigh in on the subject of welfare eligibility in a chapter called "Lending a Helping Hand." Here they note that "the goal of reform is to open doors of opportunity but sometimes it may also involve a push through that door."

The language is careful and deliberate. It is the language of punishment with a tinge of violence. It also expresses impatience with the idea of working one's way off welfare and implies that having mouths to feed is an irrelevance. It is not a gentle push nor is it an open door—it's just a push through the door.

It is language that ultimately works with the public. The lack of protest over Harris and Manning's characterizations shows just how successful the delegitimization of basic benefits has become. It tells us that Ismael does have an important point when she says that those who control the framing of the discussion essentially win the round.

But hopefully the calculus of child poverty and state intervention is more complicated than we think. Perhaps this will mean that both Shereen Ismael and I are wrong, and that the urgency of child poverty will compel us to solutions that legitimize government intervention instead of the present currency of bake sales, silent auctions and the gifting of tax-exempt flow-through stock shares to charities.