

HOW COULD THIS HAPPEN? THE EXCLUSION OF LOW-INCOME SINGLE MOTHERS FROM UNIVERSITY IN NOVA SCOTIA

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Research question: *What was the policy process that led to the exclusion from university in 2001 of single mothers on social assistance?*

Purpose of the research:

The research objective was to identify in detail the causes of the policy failure that resulted in the exclusion of low-income single mothers from university in Nova Scotia. Adult education is a form of social policy, and concerns relating to access to education are as vital to the field as are those relating to what takes place once adults are involved in learning. Griffin (1987) wrote

[T]o argue, from any normative or ideological position, that it is justifiable that individuals should bear the costs of others' learning is to invoke some kind of redistributive principal and to begin to construct adult education as a form of social welfare policy. (p. 36)

The findings and conclusions from my research may be useful to adult educators and social justice activists seeking to hone their strategies for influencing more progressive social policy so that access to adult education is ensured. The findings may also be of interest to people involved in political life and in the development and administration of social programs.

Research methodology:

The research was done in two separate phases:

Phase One, historical inquiry

Phase Two, document analysis (discourse analysis and content analysis)

Historical inquiry into evolution of the Canadian welfare state, 1900-2005

The historical inquiry took in literature from the disciplines of sociology, political science, and adult education, as well as materials that would not be considered academic literature (e.g. fact sheets, newspaper articles). The work of feminist scholars was sought in this research, since their perspectives on the advancement of women in society and women's role in influencing social policy were highly relevant. Shifts in ideology and in social policy (mainly student aid and social assistance) were examined, throughout the past century as the Canadian welfare state took shape and evolved.

The social programs of concern to the study are administered by the provincial governments, and in the case of social assistance, some municipalities. These programs operate under legislative frameworks that the federal government establishes and oversees and the provinces administer, therefore both levels of government were of interest. The federal legislative frameworks largely determine program objectives and profoundly influence their outcomes.

The historical inquiry allowed for a chronicling of events in Canada's social policy history and an examination of their significance. Five periods in Canadian history, four of which were posited by Hick (1998) in an on-line social policy history course provided some structure for the study:

The Early Period, 1840-1890

The Transitional Phase, 1891-1940

The Interventionist Phase, 1941-1974

The Era of Erosion, 1975-1994

I added the period, The Consolidation of the Era of Erosion, 1995-2005.

Document analysis of two selected periods in the history of Nova Scotia and Canada

A blend of content analysis and discourse analysis was applied to transcripts of the debates (Hansard) in the House of Commons and in the Nova Scotia Legislature.

The selected periods were

- The Early Period: 1986-1992 (Nova Scotia) and 1987-1989 (Canada)
- The Late Period: 2000-2001 (Nova Scotia) and first half of 1994 (Canada)

Comparisons were made of the discourse from the two periods to see if key features of the discourse changed over time. The content of debates and the patterns, contradictions, and absences in the discourse were investigated. Two characteristics of the discourse were of particular interest:

- 1) omissions of the perspectives and needs of low-income single mothers and general ignorance of their lived experience
- 2) the absence or presence of statements and terms that signalled neo-liberal ideology

Only the debates were subjected to discourse and content analysis.

Also examined were:

- transcripts of two standing committee hearings (one from each level of government, from each of the two policy areas of interest)
- proceedings from the 1987 National Forum on Post-Secondary Education
- a report of a provincial royal commission on post-secondary education

- a report on the evaluation of the Employment Support Program (part of the provincial social assistance system)
- two policy papers published by the CD Howe Institute which exemplified neo-liberal language and ideology as it manifests in social assistance and student aid in Canada
- a survey report from a student advocacy group on the financial situation of students in Nova Scotia in the 1990-1991 university year

These documents were closely examined and relevant quotes, facts, and insights were drawn from them, however they were not put through the discourse and content analysis as the debates were.

Background to the issue of concern:

- new provincial social assistance program introduced in Nova Scotia in 2001
- new regulations included clause 67 (1): "A person attending a post-secondary program of more than 2 years shall not receive assistance..." (Government of Nova Scotia, 2001, clause 67(1)).
- student aid programs originally designed for single students with no dependents and for or married students; not for single parent families
- single mothers living on low incomes and having no assets were unable to finance university study without social assistance to supplement student aid, as a policy paper I authored illustrated in detail, concluding that single parent families would face monthly budget deficits of between \$117 and \$259 even when accessing all available supports (Reed, 2005)
- women were affected almost exclusively: proportion of female single parents on social assistance is 95 per cent as of 2010 (Maureen O'Connell, personal communication March 3, 2011), and there is no reason to think that the proportion was significantly different in the past
- 1,600 Family Benefits recipients were enrolled in university when that program was revoked (FB was the long-term provincial social assistance for people not expected to work, and many single parents, myself included relied on it during the 1980s and 1990s as they studied full-time)
- key difference between Family Benefits and new Employment Support and Income Assistance program: single parents classified as employable under new program once their youngest child is 12 months old - must participate in training, education, or workforce, but not university (no program longer than two years). This change had taken place in social assistance programs first in the United States (Hart, 2002), and soon afterward in British Columbia, Alberta, and Ontario.

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Research findings:

Phase One Findings

The Canadian welfare state was always based on the residual model of social policy, although in the middle of the 20th century, it leaned toward an institutional model, when universal programs such as old age benefits and family allowances were introduced. This was beneficial for women, who took up post-secondary study in larger numbers than ever before, even surpassing men in the numbers enrolled in undergraduate university programs. Social assistance programs, although they have never been generous or universal, did provide stable and secure support to women who became single mothers, either through pregnancy or marriage breakdown. Women have been, and are still, disproportionately affected by social policy due primarily to their care giving responsibilities and to income inequality in the labour market. The well known difficulties women have had with unemployment benefits and pensions also have played a role.

There was an abrupt shift back to a residual model of social policy beginning in the late 1970s, in which a trend began of the federal government limiting social spending through freezes, cuts, and caps. Responsibilities were passed down from the federal government to the provinces and municipalities, placing a strain on the lower levels of government, particularly in times of economic downturn, such as in the recession of the early 1980s and again in the early 1990s.

Going into the 1990s, erosion of support for post-secondary education and social assistance programs intensified and neo-liberal ideology became fully embedded in the political economy. A key feature of this was the restructuring of the federal-provincial framework for providing social assistance. National standards of provision to which the lower levels of government had to adhere were eliminated, and funding was cut by \$7 billion over three years (Guest, 2003). This paved the way for Nova Scotia's 2001 social assistance policy, which devalued women's care giving role in the family and restricted their access to post-secondary education. It also resulted in a reduction in benefit levels and the personal allowances for children were moved from the social assistance program to the provincial child benefits program in order to encourage parents to leave social assistance.

Funding for post-secondary education was consistently capped and rolled back, beginning in the early 1970s, (Seguin, 1997) putting institutions under pressure to increase tuitions. Student loans and bursaries did not keep pace with these increases. Nova Scotia became the province with the highest tuitions in the country and remained so for roughly 20 years. The one program that was created to assist post-secondary students who had dependent children, the Canada Study Grant was introduced in 1997, but at a benefit level that was not indexed to inflation in the general cost of living or the sharply increasing cost of university tuition. In 1983 my full-time, undergraduate tuition fee was \$1,373. By 1995, my son paid \$2,107 for the same program, and by 2004 the price had increased to \$6,197.

Phase Two Findings

The documents analyzed in the second phase of the research revealed the following key findings:

1. There was more of a commitment to equality of access to post-secondary education in the early period. The following quote from the Minister of Education for Nova Scotia in 1988 is an example of this:

The final point I want to make, Mr. Speaker, is there is not a single student in the Province of Nova Scotia that is necessarily being kept out of going to university as a result of a lack of money. (Government of Nova Scotia, 1988, p. 1131)

The minister's statement went unchallenged, most likely because it was true at the time. No such statement appeared in the discourse during the late period at either level of government, since it was no longer true that post-secondary education was accessible to all who want to pursue it.

2. The absence of the perspective of low-income single mothers throughout debates and in the other documents analyzed, logically seemed to lead to policies that could not address the actual needs of this group, and that would deepen their poverty and limit their opportunities for improving their circumstances. Pushing disadvantaged single mothers into poor quality, full-time employment in a labour market that is rife with gender, class, and race discrimination instead of building their capacity for high-quality employment is an example of this.

3. Neo-liberal language and ideas were absent in the early period, and ubiquitous in the late periods for both Nova Scotia and Canada when social policy came to increasingly reflect neo-liberal ideology and objectives. In the debates around the introduction of the new 2001 social assistance program in Nova Scotia, typical neo-liberal terms such as "welfare wall," "disincentives [to work]," "self-reliance," and "cycle of poverty" were used by all parties in the legislature on at least 76 separate occasions, along with many other statements conveying ideas about the importance of moving social assistance recipients into employment (Appendices in project report). This is perhaps a worthy goal. However, no concern was expressed by ruling party members about the quality of this employment or the effects on families of having a single mother struggling to fulfill the dual roles of care giver and breadwinner. This strikes me as a glaring omission. The following statements made in 2000 by the Nova Scotia Minister of Community Services, Peter Christie illustrate the clever ways in which they framed their policy objectives so they would sound benevolent:

I would ask [the opposition member] to look at the back to work programs where we have put those in place and our initiative is to make people self-reliant....Mr. Speaker, it really is disappointing that the member opposite seems to suggest (*sic*) that Nova Scotians, given an opportunity to get education to allow them to move into the workforce, would not respond positively to that kind of an opportunity, the

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from government will be forthcoming to advance this goal. New sources of support must be cultivated. It is vital that the workings of governments under neo-liberal domination are carefully analyzed so that citizens are able to challenge their negative effects. If support for disadvantaged people who seek to study in university is not provided as part of the Canadian welfare state, entire segments of society could be steered away from higher education, and their perspectives will be lost. This has ominous implications for our society's ability to ensure that adequate student aid and other social programs will continue to be available, since it will lead to further devaluing of post-secondary education and hobble the ability of disadvantaged groups in society to press their case for access to life chances. There is a danger of Canadian society becoming economically and socially stratified.

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