

Interview with Annis May Timpson

Lori Chambers

INTRODUCTION

It was recently my pleasure to conduct an online interview with Annis May Timpson, recipient of the Canadian Women Studies Association / Association canadienne des études sur les femmes (CWSA/ACEF) Book Prize for 2003. Annis May Timpson is Director of the Centre of Canadian Studies at the University of Edinburgh. She studied at Bristol, Oxford and Toronto and came to Canada initially as a Commonwealth Scholar. Dr. Timpson has taught Politics and Canadian Studies at the universities of Birmingham, Nottingham and Sussex and Women's Studies at the Open University. She has written on British political culture, Canadian politics and public policy and is currently researching new forms of governance in Nunavut. Her book, *Driven Apart: Women's Employment Equity and Child Care in Canadian Public Policy* (UBC Press, 2001) won the inaugural CWSA/ACEF book prize in 2003 and was designated as an "outstanding academic title" by *Choice*. It was also awarded the inaugural Pierre Savard Award by the International Council for Canadian Studies.

LC

What inspired you to pursue this important topic?

AMT

I had a long-established intellectual interest in the relationship between political participation and policy outcomes. This developed as a graduate student in the late 1970s when I was taught by people who were actively engaged in the community power debate. I became interested in exploring why some issues raised in community politics became absorbed into public policy agendas while others were not. I wanted to consider this question from a feminist perspective because I was aware how much easier it had been for women to persuade governments to develop policies that were located in the public domain than those which spanned the public and domestic spheres.

When I began thinking about this topic, in the mid-1980s, I was aware that while feminist scholars had begun to address these policy questions in Britain, the United States and Scandinavia, there was very little scholarship on the development of women's employment equality or child care policies in Canada. Yet the reports of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women (1970) and

the Royal Commission on Equality in Employment (1984) had called on the federal government to address both policy issues.

I think it is important to say that my interest in this topic was not driven by scholarship alone. I had grown up in the 1960s absorbing messages about the difficulties of combining paid work and motherhood and I'm sure, at a subconscious level, my sense of injustice about that message affected my choice of topic. Moreover, I was part of the generation of feminists who saw paid employment as critical to women's fulfilment and actively campaigned in the 1970s for the provision of twenty-four hour child care to support this goal.

LC

What was your greatest challenge in researching this project?

AMT

As in all research projects there were a number of challenges both intellectual and practical! At an intellectual level, although my interest in this topic had initially been shaped by the community power debate, the literature on feminist theory burgeoned as I worked on the project. So while my initial inspiration for the project had been issue-based and policy-oriented, I realised as I went along that I needed to ensure that the project was also informed by theoretical debates amongst feminist scholars. I found the discussions of female citizenship by scholars like Ruth Lister, Jane Jenson, Janine Brodie and Anna Shola Orloff particularly helpful and was impressed by Joan Tronto's writing on the ethics of care. Through reading their work I gradually developed my ideas about women as worker-citizens and mother-citizens. Nonetheless, it was a challenge that my theoretical interests shifted in the course of the project, away from questions about how I might contribute to the community power literature by examining the fate of two policy issues raised in feminist campaigns to a broader interest in contributing to new feminist scholarship on citizenship.

The second big challenge was that although I am a Canadianist, I am not Canadian. I live and work in the UK and this meant that the periods in which I could concentrate on research in Canada were necessarily intermittent (and, significantly, they were largely pre-Internet). I always felt that I had to cover all possible bases

while I was in Canada. This meant that I would go to Canada and research frantically, feel very excited about the work, and then return to the UK with piles of research material that took a long time to digest within the constraints of a full-time job. I don't think this is an unusual research experience (and there may have been some advantages created by the trans-Atlantic distance) but I often wished that I had been able to have the research material immediately to hand so that I could absorb and reflect as I went along.

The third challenge was practical and, as those who have been kind enough to get me to and from airports know well, the trans-Atlantic transportation of my research material presented certain challenges! There are quite amusing stories of my spending the last night of research trips in friends' basements literally (*je confesse*) ripping the French sections out of federal government documents so that I could keep within my baggage allowance. I remember too the alarm that set in when Air Canada mislaid the suitcase filled with photocopies of women's submissions to the Royal Commission on Equality in Employment (it turned up eventually). After that, I carried my interview tapes on board and never put all the material relating to one chapter in a single suitcase!

LC

What was your greatest pleasure or accomplishment in writing this book?

AMT

The day I finally settled on what the first sentence should be! Indeed there was a great sense of relief when I wrote out the first and final sentences and came up with the title.

It was a real pleasure to conduct the interviews. Indeed, this part of the research meant more to me than anything. I sense that not being Canadian played to my advantage here: there was perhaps less fear on the part of federal officials and activists in talking to someone outside the country and a definite generosity in terms of their time and willingness to talk to a foreign academic. The interviews brought the issues alive to me, made it possible for me to forge interpretations and connections that I would not otherwise have made.

It was also a delight to work in the Public Archives in Ottawa. There is no place quite like that reading room with its splendid view across the Ottawa River to the federal buildings in Gatineau where many of the officials whom I interviewed actually work. And there's such a rhythm to the place: the way it rocks around the clock with its rules and regulations. I loved the space and that feeling of being at the hub of interdisciplinarity with researchers working on such varied topics. Perhaps the highlight was wading through the submissions women made to the Royal Commission on the Status of Women. You could almost feel those women burning the midnight oil as they pounded away on their erratic typewriters,

frequently apologising to the commissioners that domestic commitments had prevented their writing until just before the deadline (*plus ça change*). Buried in those boxes were intriguing handwritten remarks at the bottom of formal letters between ministers and commissioners: they led to interpretations I would not otherwise have made.

The third pleasure was working with the librarians in the Child Care Resource Centre and the Industrial Relations Unit at the University of Toronto: Martha Friendly, Michelle Turiano, Bruce Pearce and Vicki Skelton. They had such a deep knowledge of their collections and a real interest in their respective subjects and they were all tremendously helpful.

I guess the sense of accomplishment comes not at the point of writing the book but later when the reviews come out. It was then that I began to look back and realise that I had sustained a major project that not only told an important policy story but highlighted the significance of royal commissions as forums for exploring female citizenship. It is satisfying to realize that you have contributed to knowledge and that your book becomes part of the literature that informs the next generation of students.

LC

The reader leaves this work with a sense of frustration, not with the research but with the failure of government to consider employment equity and child care as inter-related issues, despite repeated assertions by Royal Commissions and ordinary women that such a vision is necessary. How did frustration impact on your research and writing?

AMT

I guess there was a sense of frustration that the story would never end but just alter as it went through various mutations in different governments. While the connection between gender equality in the workplace and the provision of childcare was articulated by a wider range of stakeholders as time went on, policies to support the provision of child care for working mothers changed relatively slowly.

I think I also felt frustrated that (after all the work women put into campaigns) it was only when questions about child care and adult employment were disconnected from a feminist agenda that the connection between these two issues came to be clearly articulated by the federal government, specifically in the Liberals' 1993 Red Book published before the Chrétien government came to power. Even then the Liberals failed to secure provincial agreement for their national child care program.

My other frustration was with Canadian federalism. In theory, federalism is supposed to facilitate policy innovation by permitting regional variation. In practice, I found that federalism blocked policy innovation with respect to women's employment because the jurisdictional tug-of-war between the Feds and the provinces became a major force that prevented policy

change with respect to child care.

LC

You provide an excellent explanation of why there is a disconnect between employment equity and child care policies (jurisdictional politics, fiscal constraints, institutional issues, organization of social movements and ideological forces). Given these conclusions, what recommendations do you have for activists who wish to overcome this disconnect?

AMT

That's a really good question. I guess my overall answer is to recognise these political and economic realities and take them on board in planning political campaigns. More specifically, however, I would suggest that:

1. At the jurisdictional level it is crucial for child care activists to coordinate federal, provincial, territorial and municipal campaigns to bring about national child care provision. Problems of inter-jurisdictional coordination are never straightforward for social movement actors in federal systems. Technological advances in communication do help but linguistic and cultural differences in different jurisdictions still make coordination complex.
2. At the fiscal level: keep lobbying for more federal child care funding but recognise that whatever the talk about a national child care strategy the Feds will probably be more inclined to channel their dollars to individuals via tax credits or tax relief than through cost-shared programs which make the federal government's fiscal contribution less obvious to the parent.
3. At the institutional level I think it is more straightforward: identify the officials who are working in the different policy arenas and find ways to bring them together so that they talk to each other and begin to consider how the management of their own policy files could be enhanced by forging connections across departments.
4. In terms of social movements: I think one of the important facets of the evidence I uncovered in my work was that there have been elements of ambiguity within the women's movement in Canada about the pursuit of child care policies. There have also been ambiguities amongst child care advocates about locating child care campaigns within the women's movement. Unless these ambiguities are addressed and solid connections maintained between activists in the women's movement and the child care movement, the connection between gender equality in employment and child care will not be sufficiently reinforced.
5. On the ideological front, try to identify when and how

governments have recognised the importance of developing policies which span the domestic/public divide. Build on that knowledge if you want to develop campaigns which connect gender equality in the workplace with the provision of child care.

LC

You suggest that royal commissions can empower citizens and engender public discourse. How can we ensure that governments are more responsive to the recommendations of royal commissions?

AMT

Speaking as a Brit, I think Canadian governments are relatively (and I emphasise relatively) good at responding to the reports of royal commissions! Despite the fact that the idea of a royal commission is a British innovation, in my opinion Canadians have used royal commissions with greater effect over time. Nonetheless, your question touches an important point. After all, royal commissions cost money and the public should expect the governments which commission these inquiries to respond effectively. I guess one thing that could happen is for a Public Inquiries Office to be established. This could support (in bureaucratic terms) the process of setting up royal commissions (so that these inquiries could get up and running more efficiently than they do at present) and take responsibility for coordinating government responses to commission reports. The only reservation I have about this suggestion is that to be effective as public inquiries, royal commissions have to be independent from government, and such an institution could affect their autonomy.

It seems to me that activists also have a role to play in ensuring that governments respond to royal commission reports. The fact that the National Action Committee on the Status of Women was founded to ensure that the federal government responded to the report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women reinforces the point. Activists can be critical in ensuring that royal commission reports become manuals for policy change rather than items to be shelved and ignored.

However, going back to the first part of your question, I do think it is important to recognise that royal commissions have a value beyond their recommendations and reports. They provide a variety of stakeholders with the opportunity to articulate their visions of a more effective society, they provide a wealth of research material that might not otherwise be produced and they push the parameters of policy discourse in new directions. These processes are important and should not be overlooked.

LC

How, in the absence of a current commission, do we keep the public redefining and questioning, as you call it, "the contours of female citizenship."

AMT

I think there are all sorts of ways of redefining the boundaries of women's citizenship. The process does not rely on the existence of public inquiries: I was simply arguing that royal commissions provide important civic forums in which new ways of thinking about women's engagement in civil society can be explored. For me the process of questioning the contours of female citizenship has to operate on several levels at once: in private conversations between women; in organizations concerned with protecting women's interests, at the neighbourhood level where women may, perhaps, transcend boundaries of class, race, religion, age or sexual orientation most easily when addressing local issues together; at the jurisdictional levels be they municipal, territorial, provincial or federal where policy issues affecting women are decided; and, crucially, at the international level where cross-national and cross-cultural dialogue can help us re-evaluate the parameters within which our own sense of citizenship is constructed.

LC

Do you have a new project that you are working on? In what direction has this project led you for future study?

AMT

When I completed *Driven Apart* my research took what appeared (at the time) to be a complete shift of direction. I had been planning to build on the research for the book and move on to a broader project on gender and royal commissions. However, while I was in the final stages of undertaking the primary research for *Driven Apart* (in 1998), I had the opportunity to interview officials in Yellowknife and Iqaluit about the creation of Nunavut. I was completely riveted by what I heard and found. It is not often in the career of a political scientist that a new jurisdiction is created in the country on which you specialise, let alone a jurisdiction like Nunavut which seeks to address Aboriginal priorities within a model of public government.

Since completing *Driven Apart* (in 2000) I have been looking at the complexities of developing new approaches to government in Nunavut. Part of this work has focused on the development of a population-reflective public service which aims to adopt working practices that are culturally relevant to the predominantly Inuit population in the territory. Having looked at how the federal government developed employment equity policies that did not recognise women's need for child care, it is interesting for me to consider how the Government of Nunavut is trying to develop culturally-relevant policies to promote Inuit employment. It is also concerning to see that although Inuit women are finding it much easier to get jobs in the new government than Inuit men, they are concentrated in support positions at the bottom end of the bureaucratic hierarchy.

There are significant connections between studying gender and working on the North: questions of dealing with marginalization and doing politics differently. It has been fascinating to shift my research from the federal sphere to the arena of territorial politics. It has made me realize how limited our understanding of Canadian politics remains when we focus on policy and politics at federal and provincial levels.

LC

Is there anything about the book that, in retrospect, you would explore in a different way, or using other sources?

AMT

It would have been a much bigger project but the thing I would have most liked is to have looked in more detail at how the provinces handled child care. In some senses, I took on board the feminist agenda as it emerged through the royal commissions calling for national child care legislation and I focused on how the federal government addressed (or failed to address) this question. However, that is only part of the story and it is incomplete in many senses without an understanding of how the provinces responded to the Mulroney and Chrétien governments' initiatives to develop national strategies on child care (Trudeau refused to contemplate such an inter-jurisdictional initiative). So there's a challenge for someone else to take up.

The other thing I would have loved would have been to have interviewed a range of the women who presented submissions to the Royal Commission on the Status of Women. I interviewed the key lobbyist for the commission (the late Laura Sabia), the chief commissioner (the late Florence Bird) and the director of research (Monique Bégin) but I wished there had been the opportunity to talk to the women who took part in the inquiry. I would have liked to ask them to talk more about how they thought at the time about questions of employment equality and child care.

Finally, I did worry sometimes that the book itself would reinforce the idea that women should be responsible for child care. I hope if someone reads my book in one hundred years time that the whole question of child care will not be so gendered and will be seen as a policy issue shaping parents' employment, be they men or women.