

Canada's Early Experience with Income Supplements:

the Introduction of Mothers' Allowances

ABSTRACT/RESUME

Entre les années 1916 et 1937, en réponse aux critiques féministes et à l'opinion prédominante à l'effet que la maternité et la vie de l'enfant avaient droit à une protection spéciale, toutes les provinces du Canada légiférèrent au sujet des allocations familiales. Ces nouveaux programmes de soutien financier furent mis sur pied pour venir en aide aux mères pauvres et méritantes, afin qu'elles puissent subvenir à leurs besoins. Des fonds publics administrés par des travailleurs sociaux professionnels servirent à tenter de relever le niveau de vie des familles dites 'marginales.' De cette façon, on espérait réduire la délinquance juvénile, les coûts toujours grimpants

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entraînés par le développement des institutions et le taux de mortalité infantile et assurer l'efficacité industrielle, la paix sociale et le développement de la nation. En rémunérant la mère, l'Etat étayait la famille nucléaire et en faisait la meilleure garantie du maintien de l'ordre social.



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When poverty was 're-discovered' as a major social problem in the 1960s and 1970s, sole support mothers were easily recognized as its prime victims. The Royal Commission on the Status of Women in 1970 identified these citizens as among the most disadvantaged in the country. For all the indignation which such revelations provoked, the poverty of female-headed families was not new. The experience of such mothers and children has traditionally been precarious and marginal. Indeed their plight, more than that of any other group, has called forth numerous efforts at remedy throughout Canada's history. Some of the most notable efforts occurred in the early decades of this century when social critics and feminists used the predicament of mother-led families to initiate Canada's first experiments with formal income support programmes.(1)

The enabling legislation, variously referred to as mothers' pensions and, more often, mothers' allowances, represented a critical stage in the history of child welfare in this country. Its emphasis on the reconstruction of the nuclear family as the unequalled environment for optimal child development entailed a significant break with much of previous practice. In the past, institutions such as orphanages, refuges and industrial schools were designed to compensate for the shortcomings of inadequate, usually poor, families. Increasingly, however, more advanced

social thinkers and the new profession of social work condemned such large aggregations of children as injurious to youth and harmful in the long run to the community. The mother, not the matron, was the best employee the state could hope for.

By the First Great War thoughtful Canadians were informed as never before about the threat which family instability, juvenile delinquency and impoverished maternity posed to national survival. The result was a demand for state action and an assault on laissez-faire liberalism which originated from two distinct ideological perspectives. The guiding principles which motivated liberal suffragists like Nellie McClung were egalitarian and practical.(2) The state's recognition of the value of childbearing by the implementation of a mothers' allowance programme would demonstrate society's commitment to the set of more humane values which women, as a sex, clearly espoused. Stephen Leacock, the anti-feminist McGill professor, on the other hand, found supporters among 'red tory' conservatives when he insisted that women needed protection in order that childbearing and therefore the preservation of sexual differences and the continuation of the race be guaranteed.(3)

Naturally not all conservatives sought state intervention. Many, certainly the majority of the clerically-influ-

enced right-wing in Quebec, resisted such a solution as smacking of modernism and secularism. In their minds voluntary philanthropy was a better approach. Nevertheless, in English Canada, and in the West in particular, mothers' allowances supplied a cause which brought together a broad spectrum of articulate, middle-class Canadians. Their agreement about the value of state action underlay a concerted campaign to introduce mothers' allowances legislation in every province in the first decades of this century. Such a campaign found sympathetic audiences because, then as now, mothers and children were judged more often the victims than the authors of misfortune. This made it almost inevitable that mother-headed families would become the first clients of the new state-run public welfare apparatus which emerged in the twentieth century.

Anxiety about the family has existed throughout Canada's history but the experience of the 1914-1918 war added authority to those voices which criticized the shortage of adequate child care services. Losses on the battlefield could most logically be made up by renewed efforts to reduce infant mortality. Such conclusions were given specific focus after the ministrations of the Canadian Patriotic Fund throughout the war had accustomed citizens to the support and supervision of large numbers of fatherless families.(4) Whereas in the past institutions had been expected to succour the human

victims of families struck by disaster, Fund workers rejected this solution. Above all their goal was the maintenance of the home life, enriched if possible, of Canada's fighting men.

"Family case work" which became the leitmotif of social work in the 1920s and 1930s, sought "to reinforce and strengthen the endangered family by drawing in the community's resources, not only in material relief, but in character and spiritual strength as well."(5) Mothers' allowances would ensure that those families, particularly among the lower classes, which were increasingly designated by case studies as deviant and distressed, could both be brought into line and sustained by efficient professionals. This was perceived as an essential step in modernizing the whole process of relief assistance in the Dominion.

Pushed by such forces, mothers' allowances legislation came thick and fast between 1916 and 1920. The five provinces west of Quebec, beginning with Manitoba in 1916, Saskatchewan in 1917, Alberta in 1919, and British Columbia and Ontario in 1920, led their eastern counterparts in this area as they did also in woman suffrage. In response to numerous appeals, two more provinces offered allowances before the Second World War--Nova Scotia in 1930 and Quebec in 1937. New Brunswick had an act on the books from 1930 but no funds were distributed until 1944.

The goal of all such legislation was "desirable citizens and social assets to the community," in other words "the development of wholesome, healthy citizenship." (6) Children from assisted homes would help compensate for the losses of war and affirm Canada as the 'Land of the Fair Deal.' Such laws were an integral part of the wave of legislation that began with Ontario's Act for Dependent and Neglected Children in 1893 and climaxed with the creation of the federal Division of Child Welfare in 1919.

The testimony of witnesses before the Ontario inquiry into the value of allowances recalled the precise concerns which activated the measure's supporters in every province. (7) Ministers, social workers, feminists, patriotic fund workers and doctors were unanimous in condemning the infant mortality and juvenile delinquency which so often shipwrecked mother-led families. They insisted, too, on the community's responsibility to hapless women who, through no fault of their own, were denied minimum security and dignity. Many drew on their own experience to mount a sustained attack on custodial institutions such as orphanages, which they proclaimed completely inadequate substitutes for domestic supervision and affection. A few witnesses even broached the difficult topic of widowers with children. This potentially revolutionary issue failed however, to rally substantial support because of unwillingness to accept

fathers being paid to stay home and the fear of outraging public morality should a female non-relative be employed as housekeeper.

Finally although great promise was held out for the new laws, there was also the time-honoured anxiety that public assistance would encourage the growth of a pauper or dependent class. The undeserving poor, or 'welfare bums' as they came to be called, were as much a concern at the onset of Canada's social security experiment as they are today.

Not surprisingly, provinces differed in the methods of separating the deserving and the undeserving. Eligibility, for instance, always included needy widows with two or more children, but not in every case the wives of the insane, the ill or the imprisoned. Unmarried mothers and divorcees also regularly faced discrimination with British Columbia, the most 'liberal' in its allocations. Applicants with only one child were nowhere a priority, but some administrations enrolled them if their situation was sufficiently necessitous. In addition, children's eligibility ended when they reached school leaving age, although rules were occasionally stretched for very gifted students. Whatever the number of dependents, fairly rigorous means, residence and morality tests attempted to screen out all but the most desperate.

Once she qualified, a woman received

funds which varied a good deal depending on where she lived. On a scale of generosity, provinces could generally be ranked from first to last: Manitoba, Alberta, British Columbia, Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia and Saskatchewan. In most instances subsidies were to be supplemented by the earnings of beneficiaries, both mothers and children. A portion of such income was deducted from the allowance. The latter requirement endeavoured to prevent the creation of a pauper class wholly dependent on public assistance. Whatever the anticipated advantages of employment for mothers or children, one deleterious side effect included the maintenance of a pool of vulnerable, cheap and part-time labour. In this way women's marginal status within the paid labour force was yet again confirmed.

The interpretation and enforcement of these regulations, which soon grew to cover thousands of families, required extensive personnel. In the beginning there was a concerted effort to coordinate a large number of volunteers with a small core of paid professionals. Over time, however, the tendency was to depend more and more heavily on the professionals whose responsibility was more clearcut and standards more codified.

Investigators of mothers' allowance claimants endeavoured to set a model of industry and independence for their clients. To supplement their own

example they instituted, in as much as they could since they were generally understaffed and overworked, a programme of home supervision. This included checking on school attendance, child hygiene, mental health, work histories, household budgets and home maintenance. There is little doubt that some mothers found such supervision irksome and patronizing. As an Ontario investigator indicated, however, others viewed it in a more favourable light:

Several mothers have spoken to me of the relief to their minds of having someone to visit with whom they could talk over their problems. Sometimes it is a wayward boy or girl, or it may be financial worries, or health needs. I have often had a woman say to me 'do call again soon. I feel so much better since talking this over with you. This is one way in which I miss my husband so much.'

(8)

In view of the desperate situation of so many sole-support mothers, supervision was a price they might well willingly pay for new security.

Although as regulations suggested, a real effort was made to keep costs at a minimum, mothers' allowances soon proved a heavy expenditure for the provinces. Unlike shared cost programmes which saw Ottawa assume a major role, allowances included no federal involvement whatsoever. The

increasing expense could be borne so long as revenues remained buoyant. When incomes slid as they did particularly in the 1930s, assistance for mother-led families became part of the crisis in provincial budgeting which formed the background to the Rowell-Sirois Commission and the Marsh Report on Reconstruction.

Inspired by social work's fascination with data collection and case studies, provinces were intent on pinpointing the sources of dependency. The result was a great wealth of statistical information, some of which has survived. This offers an unusual opportunity to examine the nature and circumstances of those citizens for whom poverty otherwise dictated obscurity. What follows is a first step in that investigation.

The Report of the New Brunswick Child Welfare Survey in 1929 set out the conditions which had inspired earlier legislation elsewhere. Investigators uncovered large numbers of "widowed mothers and their children, who are struggling against almost overwhelming odds of economic need and continuous pressure on their reserves of health, strength and morality."(9) Low wages and seasonal employment made it impossible for many men to provide for their families in case of emergency. Nor were most women able, on the paltry salaries they commanded, to support their children. Family breakdown, child prostitution, baby farming, child

beating and worse were the all too common outcome of the state's indifference. New Brunswick, operating as it did with Poor Law institutions, was exceptionally backward in its welfare services. Nevertheless, the dreadful conditions uncovered there could be duplicated to some extent at least in every jurisdiction.

Before receiving allowances, women used every possible means of keeping themselves afloat. They turned regularly to other forms of public assistance, to relatives and adult children, to employment, to boarders and to savings and insurance for additional funds. Every province acknowledged what sacrifices mothers made to keep their families intact. Desperation could sometimes produce highly unorthodox solutions. Such was the case with an Ontario woman who supported five children and a husband with terminal cancer. By "fishing, shooting and trapping and acting as a guide in summer to hunters" she was able to provide her family with food and a "two-roomed shack."(10)

The impact of a regular source of additional income on such families could be tremendous. The custodians of public welfare were unanimous in observing that mothers, relieved of their worst fears, carried on "cheerfully and courageously" and produced homes which were "a credit to themselves."(11) For some at least the generally predictable provincial

grants must have been a more certain source of comfort than wages which economic disaster or a husband's whim could withhold. The impact of receiving money which was demonstrably her own, for her own allocation, albeit under some supervision, can only be imagined for a woman who until that time might have been largely or entirely dependent on individual males.

Although the legislation was of immense significance to poorer women, the early shift in nomenclature from pensions to allowances reflected the quickly emerging focus on "the needs of bereaved and dependent children rather than . . . [on] the needs of women who happen to be mothers of these children." (12) The singling out of children insured that women's predicament as such, with all the shortcomings it indicated in marriage law and economic opportunity, was largely ignored. The fact that "the primary object of this legislation is the conservation of home life," (13) meant in effect that once again women were considered deserving of recognition only in as much as they were mothers.

The affirmation of the parental home which mothers' allowances aimed for was intended to create a milieu in which healthier, happier and more 'adjusted' young people would be produced. State assistance would, it was hoped, reduce juvenile delinquency since "children who carry the key

while their mothers work all day are not long in getting beyond their mothers' control." (14) Allowances, together with the 'fostering out' which gained momentum during the post-war period, also helped check the numbers of institutionalized children. Fewer admissions to orphanages and other institutions would both reduce public outlay and benefit the children.

Reports from every provincial agency proudly enumerated the improved health and hygiene of these client families. School and public health nurses as well as local doctors and hospitals were alerted so that illness and disability found earlier treatment than otherwise would have been the case. Among the most notable advantages for children were enhanced opportunities for education. The fact that "the average worker's child cannot afford to stay out of the factory after it reaches the age of ten or twelve years" (15) had shocked numerous observers for some years before the appearance of allowances. The introduction of factory acts barring child labour and compulsory schooling up to certain ages still proved ineffectual when family need was great. Mothers' allowances could make the vital difference.

In conclusion, the shift to the mother as the paid representative of the state and away from custodial institutions reflected disappointment with

earlier solutions and the emergence of social work with its commitment to the maintenance of family ties. These factors operated in concert with conservative forces which feared the rising tide of modern morality and feminists who had tied their suffrage campaign to the celebration of the maternal ideal. The result over the short term at least undeniably benefitted poorer mothers with children who otherwise would have found survival still more difficult. Over the longer term, however, one wonders how the shortcomings of Canada's present social security system are related to the direction taken some fifty and

more years ago. Wages for housework or state salaries for women were inextricably connected to a narrow vision of human potential. The fact that the state chose to recognize needy female citizens almost solely in their capacity as mothers reflected how far women had yet to go. Today's welfare mothers are, at least in part, the direct casualties of society's failure to distinguish between the cause of women and that of children. To transfer from dependence upon one man to reliance upon a male-dominated state is not liberation, as Stephen Leacock knew well, but merely the familiar dependence in a new form.

NOTES

1. For a more extended treatment of the issues examined in this article see "'Wages for Housework': Mothers' Allowances and the Beginnings of Social Security in Canada," Journal of Canadian Studies, Summer, 1979.
2. See N.L. McClung, "What Will They Do with It?" Macleans (July, 1916): 36-8 for her support for mothers' allowances and her In Times Like These (Toronto, 1972) for a more extended discussion of women's superior qualities.
3. See S. Leacock, The Social Criticism of Stephen Leacock, edited and introduced by A. Bowker (Toronto, 1973), p. 60.
4. See R.C. Brown and R. Cook, Canada 1896-1921 (Toronto, 1974), pp. 222-223 and V. Strong-Boag, The Parliament of Women (Ottawa, 1976), pp. 323-324.
5. McGill University, School of Social Work, Greater Victoria Survey Committee, Problems in Family Welfare, Relief and Child Development (c. 1931), p. 5.
6. Quebec, Royal Commission on Social Insurance, Memorandum on Child and Family Welfare in the Province of Quebec (exclusive of any references to the fields of Public Health or Child Hygiene) (March 1931), p. 8.
7. See Provincial Archives of Ontario, Papers of the Department of Labour, General Subject Files 2, File "Mothers' Allowances 1919," "Mothers' Pension Allowance. Hamilton Inquiry (February 20, 1919).
8. Ontario, Mothers' Allowances Commission, Annual Report (1924-5), p. 11.
9. Charlotte Whitton, Report of the New Brunswick Child Welfare Survey (1929) p. 193.
10. Ontario, "Mothers' Allowances Commission," Annual Report (1924-25), p. 12.
11. British Columbia, "Mothers' Pensions Act," Annual Report (1929), p. 1.
12. W.C. Kierstead, "Mothers' Allowances in Canada," Canadian Congress Journal, IV, 7 (July 1925): 27.
13. Alberta, Superintendent of Neglected Children, Annual Report (1918), p. 8.
14. Provincial Archives of Ontario, Papers of the Department of Labour, General Subject Files 2, File "Mothers' Allowances 1919," W.A. Riddell, "Report on Mothers' Allowances," p. 9.
15. Rose Henderson, "Pensions for Mothers," Social Service Congress, Report of Addresses and Proceedings (Ottawa, 1914), p. 110.