New Century, New Risks: Challenges for Social Development in Canada
November 18, 2004 - Montreal, QC
Conference report by Angela Briscoe – December 2004

The Opening Plenary featured panellists Céline Le Bourdais (McGill), David Green (UBC) and Peter Hicks (Social Development Canada) who spoke on the themes of labour market risks, family risks and exclusion risks.

Céline Le Bourdais' presentation focused on the policy implications of the changing nature of the family given the prevalence of common-law unions and reconstituted families, and the new socio-economic realities they present in many policy areas. The new family model presented in Le Bourdais' talk was that of a dual income household made up of two adults (i.e. a heterosexual couple) with children from either or both of their previous relationships. According to Le Bourdais, this poses new challenges for policy-makers who must respond to a different model of family in which there is no longer a single (male) breadwinner, and in which:

a) relationships are less stable given that common-law unions are increasingly the norm and have a higher probability of break-up than marriages;
b) couples are more likely to share domestic and childcare responsibilities but are less likely to share their financial assets; and
c) children are the responsibility of more than two parents, which has introduced new conditions and demands on the social institutions responsible for their care and development.

David Green's presentation provided a critique of the human capital approach to wealth redistribution (as reflected in policies such as 'learning for life') by presenting data from his work on the impact of technological change on wage structure (in B.C.?). He argues that explaining the rise in income or economic inequality in terms of high job-turnover is not supported by his employment data. On the contrary, he showed that job retention has increased since the 1990's and longer-term job stability is now more common. He suggests that the increased polarization of rich and poor, and the reduced probability of moving across the divide (up or down), is related to the increased disparities in levels of education which are also being observed. Green went on to point out that this increased gap in education is frequently cited as an argument for the importance of education policy as a solution to income inequality.

Green's work challenges the rationale in human policy that a more educated workforce benefits both upper and lower income groups by keeping upper-income levels competitive and by reducing competition for lower skilled jobs. He showed that having a larger population with higher education has not benefited the lowest income groups (those with high school only) as expected because, in fact, the wages of low income groups have dropped since the 1990's. Ultimately, higher education has not brought the expected benefits to the lower classes. Later during the discussion, Green added that it is reasonable for policy-makers to expect that higher education will be judged as a risky investment for people with low incomes because there is no guarantee that they will get a worthwhile return on their investment, i.e. that going into debt will pay off through well remunerated employment. (Green began his talk by relaying the Henny Penny cake-making story, the moral of which is that if you are willing to work and invest you will enjoy the benefits, which is the underlying incentive in human capital theories of education and training.) According to Green, this points to the need to turn the concern for wealth redistribution away from an emphasis on human capital, where all individuals are expected to maximize their own skills and potential, and toward new discussions about how the resources of the "haves" can be redistributed to protect the interests of the "have nots". He frames this as a shift away from the old question "How do we use human capital policy for wealth redistribution?" and toward the new question "How do we do wealth redistribution in a way that both poor and wealthy consider fair?"

Peter Hicks' presentation addressed the issue of identifying and responding to the needs of five groups at risk of persistent, long-term poverty: 1) people with disabilities, 2) Aboriginal groups, 3) single mothers, 4) recent immigrants, and 5) 50-64 year olds who are not attached (without spouse or dependents). He identifies the distinction between low-paid workers, the working poor, and low income families, pointing to the fact that the minimum wage would have to be doubled in order to bring the poor out of poverty – even at $12 per hour people would still be poor. This is due primarily to the fact that the main determinants of poverty are the number of incomes and the number of children in a given household. Hicks concludes that policy-makers should focus on the vulnerability of workers by developing policies that are informed by life-stages and family conditions. That is, they should be attentive to the conditions of increased vulnerability for middle-aged persons living alone, and those related to social and economic instability in contemporary families, recognizing the interdependence of family stability and workforce stability. He also suggests that the concept of poverty should be reflected on critically for the fact that it is measured in relation to a norm of a dual income family, which is not the rule for many groups within Canadian society.

As the provocateur for this panel, Jean-Pierre Voyer introduced several issues of concern to policy-makers which had not yet been addressed in the presentations, such as the impact of tensions between home and family on youth and students; issues related to an aging population (also raised by Jane Jensen during the question period); managing diversity and multiculturalism; and rising religious fundamentalism. In response to David Green's critique of the human capital approach, Voyer pointed out that it is important to consider whether the policy concern is for 'equal opportunity' or for 'equal outcomes'. (The focus on equal opportunity strikes me as very neo-liberal and meritocratic, and relates to the distinction between what Green termed the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor, where the former are those who did not take advantage of opportunities, and the latter are those who somehow did not succeed in spite of their best efforts.) Another point raised by Voyer is that educational attainment is not a straight correlate of literacy, knowledge and skills. It is subject to wide variations in the quality of education received within schools and universities, and in the range of learning that occurs outside of those institutions.

COMMENTS

Throughout the presentations and discussion there were allusions to the dual income family as the "new model" which strikes me as very surprising. It seems counter-intuitive, at least based on my experience, because almost every adult couple I've known in my lifetime have needed both partners to work in order to maintain a lower- or middle-class standard of living, and because it seems that divorce, separation and single-parent families are on the rise.

With respect to the second point about separation, Le Bourdais' presentation did suggest a high tendency for singles to join new partnerships and form reconstituted families, which explains why two breadwinners is the norm, but I still do not understand how it could still be considered 'new' since women have been well integrated into the workforce for over fifty years. This may be a false perception on my part; maybe there are still many families that have remained traditional in the gender roles until recent years. Whether due to traditional gender roles or instances of divorce, separation or having children outside of a partnership, Hicks did point out that many households rely on a single income and that this should be reflected in policy-makers definition and reflections on poverty.

David Green's presentation made me wonder about the impact of life-long learning and human capital policy on rural communities. It would seem that the new economy, the knowledge economy, would focus on continuing education and this is clearly reflected in the human capital approach to policy-making. So I wonder then, whether one would find traces of the impact of this policy approach since the emergence of the knowledge economy and corresponding changes in rural communities. Is the emphasis on human capital a feature of the differences between generations of rural residents? If so, what social implications does this have for relations between generations, among peers, and in the individual life trajectories of rural youth? It may have some bearing on patterns of youth out-migration, but this would need further investigation since out-migration has been observed since at least the seventies (Johansen and Fuguitt, 1984), pointing to the effects of factors other than human policy thinking and discourse. An interesting question, however, is what role the policy and discourse could play in promoting rural youth retention or return-migration.

Breakout Session B – Family Risks - was led by Sarah Fortin (Institute for Research on Public Policy) and Jennifer Sinclair (First Nation Child and Family Caring Society).

Sarah Fortin began the break-out session by identifying a series of risks and conditions relevant to family policy: single-parent families, dual income families, fewer children, cultural diversity, and new types of families, especially reconstituted with children from multiple parents. Another consideration that Fortin raised is that women form the majority of the population with BAs and MAs, and soon to be PhDs. This has significant implications for family structure and the balance between work and home in the context of the knowledge economy. The aging population and cultural diversity pose specific challenges for family policy as well. According to Fortin, another important policy challenge is the new vision and changing role of the state in social policy. Family policy features new public/private boundaries wherein children are the new target for policy-makers, instead of the male bread-winners/heads of household that have been the focus up to now. The implications of this new focus is a need for attention to the issue of balancing work and the family, and the issue of childcare and early childhood education, or education care. Fortin concluded by asking participants to consider the relationship or dichotomy between the family/labour market transformation and the ideological shift in the vision of the role of the state.

Jennifer Sinclair began her talk by drawing attention to the fact that twenty-eight communities in northern Ontario have declared states of emergency because of the high rates of youth suicide. She went on to describe the initiatives that have been undertaken by community members in order to respond to the crisis at the grassroots level - without waiting for outside solutions – although they are in need of additional resources to support their efforts. Sinclair reported that although First Nations children account for one third of the Canadian population under the age of 18, children on reserves receive 22% less funding through child and family services. These are statutory programs, not optional, yet INAC's response to requests to bring funding to an equitable level consistent with off-reserve funding was that no additional funding would be provided due to "competing priorities" in the department. This suggests a need to revise policy to ensure that communities are in a position to allocate resources in accordance with their priorities and needs. The other aspect of policy development which Sinclair highlighted was the need for ownership, control, access and protection (OCAP) in research for and about First Nations communities. Sinclair concluded by asking participants to consider how to bridge the divide between First Nations and the mainstream of Canadian society.

One of the participants during the discussion was a First Nations chief from western Canada. According to him, the answer lays first and foremost in the need for economic development in First Nations communities. He explained that it was only in 1961 that 'Indians' got the right to vote, and since then there remain many impediments to active civic participation. For one thing, band councils own the homes on reserves so that property cannot be put up as collateral for loans. This is only one way that Indian Act policy impedes economic development. Furthermore, banks are in the business of making profit, not investing in small-scale ventures of the sort that First Nations on reserves can undertake while supplementing their revenue with other sources of employment. Also, in one community where diamond mining is a source of revenue, Aboriginal communities appear to have big per capita incomes on paper but there are other social impacts related to the migrant workforce and the eventuality of the mine closing which are not accounted for in assessing economic well-being. Another participant in the discussion suggested that First Nations communities seek funding and support from NGOs and benevolent foundations rather than government agencies.

Another question raised during the discussion concerned the issue of how to address diversity in policy-making, and the debate over whether there can be one policy for all Canadians. The speaker gave the example of First Nations to show the need for consideration of differing and unequal conditions. Ironically, a major part of the inequality experienced by First Nations is a direct result of how the Indian Act discriminates against them. The issue of diversity and national policy-making is revisited in the comments below.

COMMENTS

With regards to Fortin's concerns about the implications of women being more educated than men and the corresponding implications for balancing personal and professional demands under the conditions of the new economy, I think it is important to reiterate the need for social research and policy to ensure balanced attention to the implications for men and women alike. The increased demands on women as a result of their increased levels of education and responsibilities in the public sphere should be reflected in social policy, particularly for single-mothers and to the debt burdens that come with increased education. However, the correspondent changes in the social and economic characteristics of men deserve equal attention. There are already sociological phenomena being observed among men (such as higher drop-out and suicide rates) which require further research and eventual policy consideration to guard against negative effects for both men and women, of the increased capacity of women to "do it all" independent of men (or at least the perception of this).

The issue of diversity and policy-making is consistent with the NRE project's findings, which show that rural communities are diverse and complex, arguably like most other spheres addressed by social policy and research. The dilemma over Canadian diversity and unity is addressed on a website called "Canada Revisited"[1] where an argument is presented for why Canada should be reorganized into states that reflect the majority population interest groups in different regions of the country. This relates to Judith Maxwell's presentation (see Tara Lyons' conference report) in which she also draws attention to the policy challenges created by federalism. The proposed model goes a long way to acknowledging First Nations occupancy in many areas of the nation. It also has implications for reconciling the challenges implicit in Canadian rural policy by suggesting regional policy-making to represent geographic areas of similarity.

[1] http://members.shaw.ca/jamesdahl/canada.html

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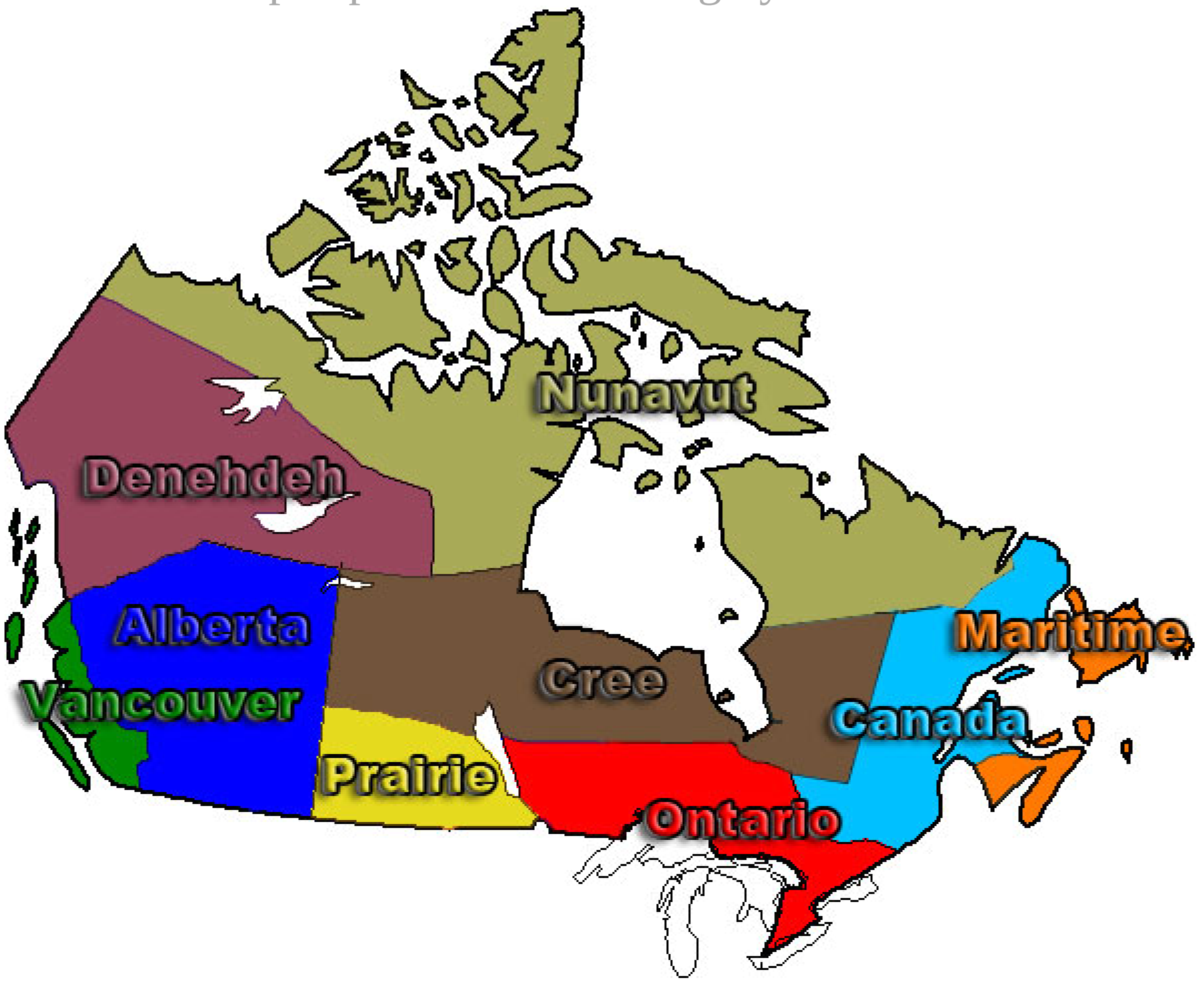
Canada Revisited

A new perspective on sovereignty and federation



Canada's provincial borders, to be honest, make no bloody sense at all. The only province with borders that make eminent sense is Prince Edward Island. And only because it's a tiny, tiny island. This is mainly because the borders were drawn up arbitrarily and for purposes of efficiency and simplicity, not for any regard towards sensibility.

In defence of our political forebearers, that was the style at the time. After all, the Americans were carving square, arbitrary States out of the western territory, why

The Deneh, along with the Slavey and various other northern Na-Dene speakers, actually do dominate their respective provinces (the Yukon and Northwest Territories) yet have little say in the running of their own land. Why?

I propose a change.

Canada should be divided into 'States'. And no, I don't mean glorified provinces re-named, I mean the classic definition. These States would have their own criminal codes, convene shouldn't they? In addition, the borders of aboriginal nations didn't count for anything at the time either. After all, they're just savages right?...

However, as aboriginals realize their rights, and as Canada's population both increases and becomes politically aware (and in some cases, reactionary) to the realities of modern Canada, it is becoming painfully clear that the current system of a Provincial administration of a polyglot, sprawling populace, tied to tight Federal purse-strings has several glaring weaknesses and more than a few unfair aspects.

One of the largest weaknesses is inter-provincial political struggles. For instance, the vast majority of British Columbia's interior is made up of cattle herders, orchard farmers, vinters, foresters, and rural types. Despite the fact that they are overwhelmingly conservative, the government of British Columbia is consistently centrist or left-of-center. This is because the coast is the polar opposite, being primarily either city dwelling businesspeople, hippies, fishermen, workers and yuppies. Thus, every election for the last 50 years has been the coast vs. the interior, and the coast always wins. This is unfair, the interior should be able to pursue its own interests. Why should chain smoking lumberjacks in Peace River be forced to abide by the ban of cigarettes from bars, despite the ban's popularity on the coast?

For another example, half of Quebec, Manitoba, Labrador, Saskatchewan and Ontario are inhabited almost entirely by either Aboriginals or Inuit. They are however overwhelmingly outnumbered by non-Aboriginals and non-Inuit in these provinces. Why do they have no political representation whatsoever?

their own legislatures, and have complete autonomy in all areas.

These states would share a currency and economy as the European Union does today, and military assets would be placed under a unified Canadian high command.

Each of these states would have their own seat at the United Nations, and could choose which Canadian alliances they wished to adopt. Each state would in turn subdivide their land into provinces, with premiers. Each state would choose their head of state, whether to maintain the Queen as the head of state, or choose a new head of state.

Transfer payments would be replaced by voluntary development aid to the "Have-not" provinces.

This change would be good for the people currently without representation in Canada. It would be good for those people who take offense at the Queen being their head of state either through colonization or conquest. It would be good for people who take offense at their natural wealth being frittered away on causes they have nothing but contempt for. It would localize the top-level decision making of the state, allowing the country's leaders to make local decisions that would have the greatest benefit, as opposed to universal decisions that would merely shift the benefits from one group to another.

Most of all, it would give people in Canada hope in their political process, as they could actually shape their country, instead of being a voice in the wilderness.