

**THE EVOLUTION OF SOCIAL POLICY IN CANADA
AND THE EXPRESSION OF CANADA IN SOCIAL POLICY**

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Introduction

Thank you for the kind invitation and for the opportunity to speak to you today.

What makes modern Canada tick? This was the basic question presented to me as a speaker in this series on understanding our country.

The guidelines for my lecture were to address:

- welfare
- federal-provincial fiscal arrangements
- Canada Pension Plan
- post-secondary education and, if that wasn't enough,
- Health care!

In tackling this range of policies, and linking them to the theme of this series -- understanding Canada -- I propose to examine, in a highly selective manner, some interconnections between major social programs and societal institutions in the country.

Social Policies as Political Activities and Cultural Experiences

I wish put to forward the idea that social policies, in addition to the provision of benefits and services, are also political activities and cultural experiences.

In other words, social policies, among other things, are expressions of public purposes and public powers.

Seen as political and cultural affairs, what do social programs tell us about who we are, and how we relate to each other?

What is Canadian about Canadian social policies and programs?

How do social policies and politics and culture interact?

A popular view that you will hear expressed in the media, the academy, and certain political circles, is that our social policies help define us as a people and, not only that, they help to distinguish us from other nations. In that regard, the other country most frequently mentioned and that it is often believed we are starkly different from because of our social policies, is the United States.

The assumption, of course, is that we have a more comprehensive and more generous set of health and social services and protections than do our southern neighbours.

While Canada has public health insurance for virtually the whole population, a universal child care allowance, and an equalization to assist less-well off provinces, the United States has none of these social policies. We could also note differences between Canada and the United States in gun control, the death penalty, and same sex marriages, among other issues.

So, social programs are highly relevant to understanding Canada because they are held by many people to contribute to the definition of who we are as a nation.

But, how many social initiatives were created explicitly as expressions of national identity, as a means to promote Canadian nationhood? Many people would identify the CBC, created in 1936, maybe the Trans-Canada Airlines in 1937, the forerunner of Air Canada. Maybe also the National Film Board, the National Gallery, National Museums, and the National Library and Public Archives of Canada?

A few others possibly can be added to this list, yet, beyond these are hundreds if not thousands of programs and services that were created for less nationalistic and less obvious nation building reasons. Many social programs are formed in response to human needs, widespread deprivations, group demands and claims, social risks and community emergencies. This does not make them any less cultural, any less significant in defining community and citizenship.

As well, all major social policies in Canada carry a “political and historical legacy,” that is, an inheritance of ideas, bargains, tradeoffs, choices, real and apparent winners and losers, and thus interpretations of the past, expectations for the present, and maybe aspirations for the future.

At the same time, I want to suggest that in some respects our social policies make us less distinctive than many people often assume. This is can be due to misconceptions or myths we have about the actual nature of social services in Canada.

And, in other respects, some of our social programs contain features that are distinctive, but most of us do not know about these features or, perhaps, if we know they exist, we don't appreciate their significance in reflecting our political life and social values.

Consider this view of Canadian politics as being about principles and ideological beliefs, as expressed by Edwin Black (1975: 3):

“Canadians spend as much or more time as do other peoples in major debates about ends and means, about rich and poor, about freedom and equality, and about change and the status quo. But they do so in the strange vocabulary of the political elites, in terms of changing the structures and responsibilities of their systems of federalism.”

Black further writes:

“Federal or provincial responsibility? That question has distinguished Canada's domestic politics even more than the relationship with the United States has marked her foreign politics. Federal or provincial responsibility is much the same question as “to be or not to be,” for it together with its many responses illuminates the country's character just as the soliloquy does Hamlet's.”

In order to comprehend Canada, Professor Black's advice is that one must examine the complex, intricate and drawn-out world of intergovernmental relations.

In this vein, to appreciate Canada requires understanding social policies.

And to understand social policies as cultural expressions requires recognizing our metaphors and stories.

Why? Because stories and metaphors are a central ingredient of our political language. They allow the unfamiliar to be couched in terms of the familiar.

Social Policy Stories and Metaphors

Our understandings of social institutions, whether federalism and parliamentary government or education and health care systems, are shaped by a combination of public stories and personal experiences.

Consider, for example, the education system. How each of us thinks and feels about education is influenced by our own experiences in school and of those immediately around us at the time, and by the stories we hear, read and see in the media, locally, provincially, nationally and perhaps internationally.

With metaphors we draw comparisons between human inventions such as welfare or pensions and other objects and ideas. Metaphors are a common way of thinking and talking about issues, criticising certain measures, and advocating preferred solutions.

We use metaphors in Canadian social policy, when we talk about:

- safety nets (benefits for low income seniors or unemployment insurance),
- social engineering (no smoking laws),
- social investments (early childhood development services),
- cradle to grave (a full array of services through the life course),
- a patchwork (meant either as positive or negative remark), and
- Social contract (a set of mutual obligations and rights across generations).

Other social policy metaphors have a directional motif, and include:

- trickle down effect (from housing re-developments),
- a person down and out (unemployed or homeless),
- people falling through the cracks (people ineligible or unable to access services),
- a hand out (welfare support),
- a hand up (training) and,
- Social trampoline (apprenticeship or hiring schemes) to help people “bounce back.”

Some metaphors that describe the social role of government draw from literature. So we hear about government as:

- Robin Hood (progressive taxation),
- Santa Claus (generous cash transfers),
- Ebenezer Scrooge (mean spirited and miserly provision of services), and
- Big Brother (a person or group who exerts dictatorial control and maintains a constant watch over others, often while portraying a caring image).¹

As an aside, it is striking that most of these are from Victorian era English fiction. What does this tell us? Are there no Canadian literary metaphors for the way we talk about social policy?

Given the recurring attention to the issue of Canadian unity and identity (some might say it is an obsession), some metaphors depict social policy in relation to national politics. In this frame of mind, we speak of social policy as:

¹ A term coined by the English author George Orwell in his 1949 novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Other metaphors that personify the social role of government include the nanny state, your brother's keeper, and Cinderella.

- a railway with ties that bind a diverse and dispersed people across a large continent,
- a social union or saying medicare is the societal glue and, in grander rhetoric, and
- the bonds of nationhood or, in the words of Brian Mulroney, a scared trust.

Evolution of Social Policy

Let me turn now to discuss the evolution of social policy in Canada, touching on welfare, federal-provincial financial relations, pensions, education and health care.

Often the history of social policy is discussed in relation to a period of time that begins in the 1940s and unfolds in the post-war decades that followed. This is the story of the so-called welfare state, the modern array of health care, income supports, education and social services. At times, this social policy history is traced a bit earlier to the late 1800s and early 1900s, with the introduction of modern social insurance for unemployment and industrial injuries in some countries.

Welfare

A decisive fact about Canadian social policy, especially as it concerns welfare programming still today, is that in the 16th and 17th centuries, from the times of Shakespeare in England, a system of beliefs and administrative practices regarding the unemployed and destitute, persist and shape our policies today. In other words, some core policy values are quite old; they are not that distinctive or distinguished.

Fiscal Federalism

If there is a subject in Canadian political science more grim or tedious than federal-provincial relations, it must be federal-provincial financial relations. This subject has a technical and arcane language of tax points, equalization formula, and per capita cost sharing agreements, and debates over vertical and horizontal fiscal imbalances.

Behind all this mind-numbing jargon are fundamentally important ideas in Canadian society: the division and sharing of public powers; the commitment to some sharing of public resources, from the federal level, across provinces to provide public services to their residents.

Equalization

Out of the harsh depression times of the 1930s, came the idea of equalization, an idea put into formal policy in the 1950s by the Diefenbaker government, adapted over the years following, and recognized as a principle in Part III, section 36 of the *Constitution Act, 1982*.

There it states that Parliament and the provincial legislatures, together with federal and provincial governments, are committed to

- a) promoting equal opportunities for the well-being of Canadians;
- b) furthering economic development to reduce disparity in opportunities; and

- c) providing essential public services of reasonable quality to all Canadians.

In addition, this section says that the “Parliament and the government of Canada are committed to the principle of making equalization payments to ensure that provincial governments have sufficient revenues to provide reasonably comparable levels of public services at reasonably comparable levels of taxation.”

This strikes me as quintessentially Canadian wording. We don’t have here the cry of equality of the French revolution, nor the brave words of ‘give me liberty or give me death’ of the American revolution. Instead, *we* have the phrase “reasonably comparable levels” of public services and taxes. Perhaps this is the best working definition there is of the phrase in the *Constitutions Act 1867*, section 91 that gives parliament authority “to make laws for the peace, order, and good government of Canada.”

Health Care and Post-Secondary Education

This directly relates to the areas of health care and education, both vast policy areas with long and complex histories which I cannot begin to do justice here this morning.

I will make just two brief comments about health care and education. In Canada, both of these vital policy areas are primarily provincial responsibilities under our constitution. Both figure large in provincial politics, public services, and provincial budgets.

Yet, as you all know, the federal government is involved in both. Again, it is through the world of intergovernmental financial arrangements that this policy relationship and the associated politics play out. So we return to the issue of federal and provincial roles and resources.

A notable difference exists in the way the federal government exercises a role in health care as compared to education. In health care, we have the *Canada Health Act, 1984* which sets out several key principles for federal funding of provincial health care systems. These have taken on a quasi-constitutional status, an exalted place among virtually all politicians who regularly engage in a “medicare mantra” expressing their commitment to the principles.

In contrast, there is no equivalent legislation on post-secondary education at the federal level in Canada, which distinguishes us from many other industrial nations.

Canada Pension Plan

The story of the Canada Pension Plan is interesting for several reasons. First, it was introduced in the mid 1960s; three decades after the Americans introduced their equivalent social security program. So, here is case where the Americans were ahead of Canada in a major piece of social legislation by a number of years.

Second, it was introduced only after an amendment was made to the Canadian constitution in 1964, with all provinces agreeing on this constitutional change that enabled the federal government to share authority with the provinces in this policy field.

Third, it is an example of what came to be called asymmetrical federalism, whereby Quebec exercised the right of a province to opt out of the federal pension plan and establish its own parallel plan. So, we have the CPP for most of the country and Quebec has its own plan, and the two have stayed in more or less harmony of most key features over the past 40 years.

Fourth, the CPP is a pay-as-you-go social insurance program. This means it is funded by premiums paid by working Canadians today, from payroll deductions. This was to instil a sense of personal responsibility in the financing of the program as well as establish a sense of entitlement or earned right to the benefits, rather than a sense of welfare or handout from other kinds of old age assistance plans of the past.

Fifth, the influence of capitalism or private sector values is evident in the CPP in the sense that the level of benefit intended from the CPP is to provide a minimal floor (or safety net), so as to leave lots of room for the private pension industry and financial counselling sector.

Sixth, and finally, the CPP benefit levels are among the lowest of the major industrial nations of the world. And, for disability benefits provided through the CPP, Canada has the highest rejection rate of applications for disability benefits.

Conclusions

So, to sum up: the evolution social policy in Canada offers an inside look into who we are, into what makes the country tick.

Social policies are never neutral or value-free.

By looking at social policies we see the expression of Canada, the value choices made, the attitudes and beliefs expressed, the judgements made by countless people.

In doing so, in making social policies and implementing them every day, and through the years, we establish certain boundaries of care, assistance and community.

We participate in an ongoing process of deciding the roles and relationships among families, charities, private sector businesses and public sector agencies and services.

A key question is: where does each of these social institutions end and the others begin?

In searching for answers to this, we reveal, though never resolve once and for all, the issue of who are the people in Canadian social policy.

Thank you.