

Safety nets for the 21st century [CA]^[1]

Author: Goar, Carol

Source: Toronto Star

Format: Article

Publication Date: 9 Aug 2004

AVAILABILITY

See text below.

EXCERPTS

Going where Canada's politicians feared to tread, the Institute for Research on Public Policy has launched the social policy debate that was missing from this spring's election.

The principals of the Montreal think-tank were disappointed by the lack of any serious discussion of child poverty, family policy or income polarization on the campaign trail. So they invited some of the country's leading social policy thinkers to sketch out their visions of the post-welfare state.

The results, published in the institute's monthly magazine, *Policy Options*, are far from comprehensive. But the 12 essays highlight some of the choices Paul Martin's newly-formed government will face.

All of the authors start from the premise that the welfare state, which reached its zenith in the late 20th century, is irretrievably gone. Vestiges remain - medicare, a downsized employment insurance program, a fraying welfare patchwork - but Canada no longer has the capacity nor the collective will to protect its citizens from all types of hardship.

That is not an entirely bad thing, argues Ottawa social policy consultant Havi Echenberg.

The welfare state was designed for an industrial society in which men were the breadwinners, women stayed home to raise children, marriages were relatively stable and most immigrants came from Europe and the United States.

But governments have yet to find the policy instruments to respond to the challenges of the 21st century, she says. They have retrenched haphazardly, leaving Canada with an income support system that is half outdated and half dismantled.

As she looks ahead, Echenberg can see social policy evolving in one of three ways:

- Under her first scenario, Ottawa and the provinces would carve out separate roles. The federal government would use the tax system to provide income support directly to families and individuals and the provinces would develop and deliver social programs.

- Under her second scenario, the primary responsibility of government would be to ensure that every able-bodied individual had an opportunity to work. Social benefits would be targeted to those deemed incapable of earning a living, chiefly the elderly, children and the severely disabled.

- Under her third scenario, Ottawa and the provinces would move toward a guaranteed annual income for children. This, coupled with affordable child care, would help break the intergenerational poverty cycle.

Hugh Segal, president of the Institute for Research on Public Policy, goes further, advocating a guaranteed annual income for all Canadians. "Our next social policy frontier should be a regional income floor that pulls welfare, GST rebates, child tax rebates and universal family allowances into one cohesive guarantee, endorsed and backstopped by provincial and federal governments," he says.

This would cost no more than the existing array of social programs, Segal argues. And it would prevent benefits from going to those who don't really need financial help.

Thomas Courchene, professor of economic and financial policy at Queen's University, makes the case that Canada is at "an historic crossroads" where economic and social policy meet. In today's knowledge-based economy, the key to achieving a higher and more equitable standard of living is to invest in citizens' education and skills, he submits. And the place to start is with early childhood development. He believes every child, regardless of family income, should be entitled to high-quality preschool care.

He also thinks cities, as the country's dynamic centres of knowledge, talent and innovation, will have to play a more active role in shaping socio-economic policy.

Antonia Maioni, director of McGill University's Institute for the Study of Canada, agrees that reform is needed, but urges policy-makers not to lose sight of the "ideal of social citizenship that remains embedded somewhere deep in the Canadian imagination."

Tom Kent, who was instrumental in writing Canada's social contract in the 1960s, calls for an overhaul of the immigration system, giving preference to young families and child refugees from deprived parts of the world. Not only would this be a humanitarian approach, he

contends, it would be a practical one for a country with an aging workforce. Children are the most adaptable immigrants.

There are important issues — from affordable housing to disability rights — that receive scant mention in the survey. But compared to what Canadians heard on the hustings this spring, it is a thought-provoking roundup of fresh ideas, substantive proposals and forward-looking analysis.

If Martin is smart, he will encourage a similar debate within his government.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

Related link: [Social policy in the 21st century](#) ^[2]

Region: [Canada](#) ^[3]

Tags: [economics](#) ^[4]

[federalism](#) ^[5]

Source URL (modified on 27 Jan 2022): <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/04/08/safety-nets-21st-century-ca>

Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/04/08/safety-nets-21st-century-ca> [2] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/online-documents/04/08/social-policy-21st-century> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7864> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/economics> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/federalism>