

Case challenges trend to training over handouts: Redrawing social policy [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

The Supreme Court is weighing constitutional arguments in favour of a guaranteed income just as governments around the country -- and the industrialized world -- are redrawing social policies to emphasize individual effort over entitlement.

The conspicuous absence of the federal government from the list of intervenors in the case of Louise Gosselin comes as senior policy makers are turning away from traditional notions of social assistance. Subsidized skills training, child care, and tax credits for the working poor, are seen as superior policies to straight cash benefits to the poor.

"We are at a stage now where we have to rethink what the state owes citizens and what citizens owe the society or the state," says Judith Maxwell, president of the Canadian Policy Research Networks, an influential policy think-tank in Ottawa.

Ms. Gosselin's arguments that a minimum income is a constitutional guarantee appears to strike at the heart of the thinking behind the ongoing wave of social policy redesign.

Quebec's attempt to make full welfare benefits conditional on participation in training was part of a trend that continues to reform social policy across Canada.

The approach is gaining ground among both the political right and left, said Ms. Maxwell.

"The point of convergence is around reducing dependency on the state and encouraging self-reliance," she said. "There is variation on strategy."

Whether the policy is one of "work-fare" and tax breaks or subsidized day care, the focus is on getting people to work -- and dismantling the barriers that prevent or discourage people from earning a living.

"It's a different kind of debate than the one that framed the whole foundation of social policy in the post-war period," said Ms. Maxwell. "All those early entitlement programs were structured around need that was very much defined in terms of personal circumstances. This person is blind, or this person is a widow ... And did not look at the person in terms of their potential," she said.

"If the widow was given access to child care, for example, she could have been a nurse or a teacher and earned her own way," she said.

Illiterate adults, unemployed aboriginals, disabled people and single parents are no longer assumed to be dependent on the state, but are seen as potential contributors to a shrinking labour force, given the right government help.

The approach is reflected, for example, in the government's "innovation agenda," which would fund skills training, adult education and technological infrastructure, to bolster workers' "employability."

The philosophy is shared by governments of the so-called "Third Way" -- the Canadian, British and continental European effort to find a middle ground between socialism and laissez-faire capitalism. "In welfare and employment policy, the Third Way means reforming social security to make it a pathway into work," Tony Blair, the British Prime Minister, has said.

Since 1996, the United States has been "abolishing welfare as we know it" and replacing it with work training programs, and tax credits for low-income working families to encourage work and, in some states, subsidized child care and health insurance.

If the Supreme Court accepts Ms. Gosselin's argument of a guaranteed cash income as human right, it will create "a very serious challenge for governments," and "would force them into a universalist approach," Ms. Maxwell said. "The question is, who is responsible for allocating resources in society?"

"Is it the political system or is it the courts?"

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