

Gendering Democracy, Democratizing Social Policy

Tammy Findlay

There has been a lot of talk from governments about the need for greater ‘citizen participation,’ ‘civic engagement,’ and ‘public dialogue.’ Superficial commitments have been made to involve citizens in the social policy process, such as in the neoliberal/New Public Management-inspired Social Union Framework Agreement (SUFA) and through ‘partnerships’ with the voluntary sector. But the pressing need for genuine democracy continues to be painfully evident in recent social policy debates, especially for under-represented groups.

There are countless examples where feminist voices in social policy are ignored, marginalized, and silenced. Unsurprisingly, these instances have multiplied as the capacity of communities to engage in public debate has been purposefully undermined by funding cuts to things like Status of Women Canada and the Court Challenges Program and by the general prohibition against advocacy.

WOMEN WARN AGAINST CORPORATE CHILD CARE

Australia provides a rather perverse illustration of disregard for women’s social policy knowledge. There, the federal government undertook a disastrous course of allowing public funding to subsidize private, corporate child care chains. Advocates, based on their experience in the field, warned that the consequences would be grim: low wages for child care workers, poor quality of services, lack of equitable access, and weak accountability for public money. They were ignored. Then women in the child care community and their allies began to question the fuzzy accounting practices of the major child care chain, ABC Learning Centres. They were ignored. Last November, ABC went bank-

rupt and parents and child care workers in Australia are dealing with the fall out. Even now, calls for public ownership and control of the services, from those who know the most about child care, have yet to be heeded and the marketization of social services has still not been rejected by the Rudd government.

One of the lessons to be learned from Australia is that not only does women’s marginalization represent an affront to democratic sensibilities, it leads to bad public policy. Hopefully the same mistakes won’t be made here in Canada, but the potential seeds have already been planted by the Harper government. Its approach to child care (which actually has very little to do with child care), centered on cash transfers to parents and to the provinces has been roundly criticized by activists (mostly women), including the mass coalition, *Code Blue for Child Care*, to no avail. Provincial governments have also failed to take a strong stand against ‘big box’ child care, despite broad-based campaigns in Ontario and British Columbia.

Unfortunately, two recent opportunities for substantive consideration of feminist input into social policy demonstrate little reason for optimism.

ALL-DAY KINDERGARTEN IN BC

In 2008, British Columbia announced it would consider extending half-day kindergarten to full day for 3-5 year olds. Last year, the Early Childhood Learning Agency was created to conduct a feasibility study and to engage in public consultations. Parents, advocates, child care workers, researchers and unions in the province responded, citing overwhelming evidence, and their own experience, that reinforce the need for: direct public funding; non-

profit services; community ownership and control; inclusion; universal access and legislated entitlement; decent wages and benefits; and support for parents, particularly women, in the labour force.

The results of a legitimate consultation process would reflect the wide consensus that these are the fundamentals of an early learning and child care program and that government can no longer avoid providing these services to families. However, it is now clear that this will not be the case, at least not any time soon. The Early Childhood Learning Agency report, expected in December 2008, has still not been released and signs of backtracking by Education Minister Shirley Bond re-ignited the fears of a community who had little trust that the Campbell government would actually make the investments, given its record on child care. They were right to worry. Even as the BC Liberals have embraced deficit-spending in the 2009 provincial budget, kindergarten has quietly slipped off the agenda. This was a lost opportunity for the BC government to save community faith in the process and to demonstrate that participatory democracy can work.

GENDERING RESPONSES TO THE FINANCIAL CRISIS

Another democratic opening for feminist analysis exists, strangely, amid the financial crisis. For months, feminist criticism has pointed to the male bias in proposals for economic stimulus in Canada and the U.S. that seem oblivious to the reality of sex segregation and to the need to promote gender equality. It has been argued that investment in ‘infrastructure’ has been interpreted very narrowly to include repairing and constructing roads, bridges and buildings, and bailing out the Detroit Three. Without discounting the importance

of these projects for economic recovery, many have noted that Obama's promised job creation will be concentrated largely in construction, auto manufacturing, engineering, and forestry. In other words, it amounts to 'jobs for boys,' or what feminist economist Randy Albelda calls a "macho stimulus plan."

Also indicative of the gender bias built into the discourse around the American rescue package is the moral and political outrage mobilized against House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. When she dared to suggest that protection of women's reproductive rights matters to the economy, she was met with a wave of anti-feminist and anti-choice vitriol and dismissed as an outlandish feminist fanatic. So a perfectly reasonable strategy to improve women's economic security and access to basic health care (the family planning provisions were part of a proposal for Medicaid expansion) was sacrificed by President Obama who quickly dropped it from the agenda.

At the same time though, the economic situation has created space for progressive arguments about the relationship between the state and the market and for a more expansive understanding of infrastructure. In Canada, organizations, such as the Ad Hoc Coalition for Women's Equality and Human Rights, the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC), the Canadian Federation of University Women (CFUW), Feminists for Just & Equitable Public Policy, the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada (CCAAC), the Canadian Feminist Alliance for International Action (FAFIA), the New Brunswick Coalition for Pay Equity and BC CEDAW, have called for investment in *social infrastructure* like health, education, social work, housing, child care, pay equity, Employment Insurance, anti-poverty measures and supports for Aboriginal communities. In fact, the Ad Hoc Coalition outlined such concerns in an Open Letter on the Budget to Prime Minister Harper and the NWAC presented their submission at the January 15, 2009 First Minister's Meeting. Did anyone listen this time?

Not really. The Federal budget (or "Canada's Economic Action Plan") released on January 27, 2009 indicates that

the Harper government didn't quite get the message.

THE 2009 FEDERAL BUDGET

In the budget, there was some very limited attention to Employment Insurance, post-secondary education, the Child Tax Benefit, and social housing. Yet amid repeated dubious assertions from the mainstream media that there was 'something for everyone,' in many ways, the Tory budget promises much that feminists have cautioned against. It provides \$5.9-billion in income tax and corporate tax cuts just for 2009-2010, even though it has been shown time and time again that the benefits go disproportionately to men and that the lost revenue further limits women's access to social programs and public sector jobs. Eligibility for Employment Insurance has not changed, even though women continue to have unequal access to benefits. The attack on pay equity persists, even though it was one of the most problematic aspects of the December Economic and Fiscal Statement, and the U.S. is finally moving in the opposite direction. There were no investments made in child care services, even though Canada ranks last among industrialized countries on supports to families according to both UNICEF and the OECD and it is absolutely essential to gender equality. The budget has been panned by numerous feminist organizations commenting on the glaring absence of equality measures.

This was rather predictable. Just look at the Finance Minister's Advisory Council that Flaherty appointed in December 2008. Although the Harper Conservatives claimed that they engaged in broad budget consultations, not a single member of the social policy community sat on the Advisory Council. Instead, it was a collection of corporate CEOs, a former BC Finance Minister, and a CD Howe Institute fellow. These are the opinions that count in the Conservative government.

However, the opposition parties are hardly better. There was amazingly little that was concrete in terms of social policy in the December 2008 Liberal-NDP coalition agreement. And feminist analysis seems to have made barely any impact on

the Liberals, except to fuel their hollow rhetoric about women's equality during Question Period. Their apparent outrage at the silence on gender equality did not stop them from supporting the Conservative budget, and in some cases, even taking credit for it.

GENDERING DEMOCRACY AND DEMOCRATIZING SOCIAL POLICY

All of this speaks to a profound failure of democracy and to the success of neoliberal marginalization of feminist input. The representation of women and other marginalized groups in the policy process has been systematically shut down.

The only way to fundamentally transform the social policy landscape in Canada is to create a *participatory infrastructure* that makes community involvement central to governance at all stages of policy-making. This requires public resources and funding for social policy advocacy, an open and on-going method of engagement, and real accountability to the public, including mandatory gender and diversity responsive budgeting. Let's hope that the flurry of feminist mobilization around the federal budget's gender insensitivity is the beginning of a movement to gender democracy and to democratize the social policy process. **R**

Tammy Findlay is a researcher on gender and child care policy at the University of British Columbia. She has a PhD from York University.

