

*"Full Speed Ahead,"*  
continued from page 35.

The second problem stems from the Klein government's ongoing commitment to public consultation. While this government is by no means reluctant to move, it is reluctant to do so without at least the veneer of public consultation and input. The problem on the national unity issue is that it is clear what Albertans will say if they are consulted. They will recommend an early referendum in Quebec (tomorrow would be just about right) and they will recommend, even demand, a straightforward, three word referendum question: in or out?

Thus, if Klein government goes to the public, its position on national unity issues will be highly constrained and will be seen in the parts of the country that count (Ottawa, Montreal, Toronto) as being unreasonable, even bigoted. Therefore, the government is paralyzed; it has little that is "constructive" in any event, and if it engages in public consultation, it may have even less to say.

It is for these reasons that the current Alberta scene is somewhat contradictory, combining an aggressive provincial agenda with a standpat, low-key national agenda. In the months ahead, the Klein government can be expected to keep a relatively low profile on national unity issues while at the same time arguing that its deficit reduction model is one for all Canadians. Whether the first strategy will be successful, and whether the second will be believed, remain to be seen.

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## THE DE-RE-GENDERING OF SOCIAL POLICY

by Janine Brodie and Leah Vosko

Feminists have long argued that state discourses and practices around social welfare are critical to understanding the character of gender relations during any period of structural transformation and the way in which women both identify with and mobilize in politics. The welfare state, for example, represented a marked departure from the rigid boundary between the public and private spheres that was enforced by the laissez-faire state. It also altered the character of the gender order and women's place within it. It presumed a stable middle-class nuclear family that contained a male breadwinner, a dependent wife, and children that relied on the unpaid domestic labour of women. Through the protection of unionization and collective bargaining rights and through social policy, the welfare state ensured that there would be a family wage. The individual male worker was expected to bring home an adequate enough income to care for his family. To the extent that the welfare state spoke to women, it spoke to them as mothers. Indeed, it readily transferred money from working women who did not fit this dominant cultural model to women who did — mothers.

Of course, the structural foundations for this particular model of social welfare provision and the post-war gender order have long passed. The branch plants have closed and the concept of a family wage is now premised on two parents working in the labour force and not one. More than this, the model post-war family is being replaced by alternative families and, in particular, the spectacular rise of lone-parent (read women-headed) families.

### NEO-LIBERAL NEWSPEAK

How then does Human Resource Minister Axworthy's discussion paper, *Improving Social Security in Canada* (ISSC), recast the welfare provision, the gender order, and women's place within it? In short, it first degenders women, making them employable individuals instead of mothers; it is hard to find women in this discussion paper even though we know that the provision of social welfare is highly gendered. Second, it regenders them as welfare dependants in need of therapeutic and educational interventions. For example, some 60 percent of single mothers live below the poverty line and this group, in particular, finds strong representation among the ranks of welfare recipients.

Finally, the problem of lone-parent poverty is no longer identified as a common phenomenon among women. Instead, single mothers are cast as employables — potential workers — who are a burden on the state. The poverty of single mothers is divorced from the poverty of their children: children are the new "vulnerable" poor, and "deadbeat dads" become the cause of their poverty. As the discussion paper explains, "one key reason why there is such a close link between poor children and lone-parent families is inadequate, unreliable, or unpaid child support payments." Axworthy's document sees the lone-parent family as a gender-neutral one when, in fact, we know the vast majority of these families are female-headed.

Instead of recognizing the highly gendered division of the labour force both in the work force and the home, the government proposes to help

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"people" find work, to help "people" develop their skills, and to help "people" devise their individual action plans. The discussion paper is intended to send the clear and unequivocal message that being a social welfare client or an unemployed worker is an "individual" problem first and foremost. As well, it sends the message that if individuals were willing to take "lesser jobs," unemployment and poverty would be lower. Perhaps most distressing and disingenuous, however, is that it has embraced the neo-liberal rhetoric about welfare dependency — that there are plenty of jobs if government could only break the habit of the welfare recipient or the "frequent user" of unemployment insurance.

The idea of dependency stigmatizes the poor and the unemployed and makes them appear to be personally to blame for their condition. The term is a metaphor for drug addiction — again something that is judged to be an individual and moral shortcoming, blameworthy and avoidable. The term dependency raises the spectre of the pathological and dysfunctional that is, in turn, treatable through selective and corrective intervention. In the case of the government's proposals for social security reform, this involves identifying the diseased, the dependants, and the otherwise employable, and subjecting them to treatments such as retraining and counselling or creating disincentives to break their habit in the form of workfare — "the dignity of work" as the report would have it, or restrictive and declining benefits. The latter is the rationale underlying the proposed two-tiered UI system that would pay the so-called "frequent user" (the addict) lower insurance benefits than the so-called "occasional user" (the recreational user).

To this point in our reading of Axworthy's discussion plan, the de-

re-gendering of social welfare provision is only implicit. But the discussion paper goes further to draw the links between social assistance, dependency, personal culpability, gender, and the necessity for individual therapeutic intervention. At one point, it suggests that the problem of UI dependency is more pronounced among particular groups such as women, members of visible minorities, persons with disabilities, and aboriginal people. And, at another point, it suggests that single mothers should be encouraged to "leap successfully from social assistance to the independence of a job — even a low paying one," essentially so that they do not transmit their pathologi-

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cal behaviour onto their children. As the discussion paper puts it, "the price of staying on welfare is high ... children who grow up on society's sidelines, risk the continuation of a cycle of low achievement and joblessness."

The Axworthy plan fits comfortably into the newspeak of neo-liberal governments that attempt to make structural inequalities invisible and, in the process, silence groups that protest these inequalities. Instead, it conveys a message of "mutual responsibility" — that it is up to every "good" individual to become more flexible and self-reliant and to make fewer demands on

the state. But a deeply entrenched and unequal gender order, by definition, means that women can only be gendered individuals. As much as this newspeak tries to cast women as individuals detached from a deeply gendered social order, it must then necessarily recast them as "bad individuals" — the ones who are different, dependent, and blameworthy for not successfully leaping into independence. This is the gendered message that shines through the optimistic lines of the Axworthy discussion paper.

The fact is that one study after another shows that the present period of restructuring is increasingly characterized by the "feminization of poverty." Axworthy's vision of the "individualization of poverty" attempts to deflect us from making claims on the state precisely because of women's unequal and structural relationship with poverty. This vision must be rejected.

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