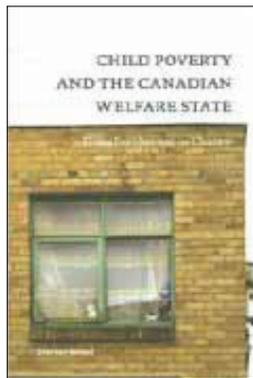
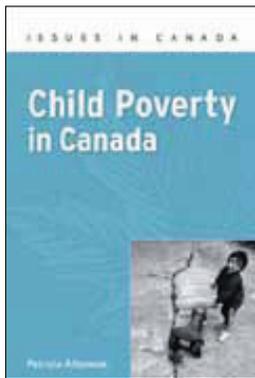




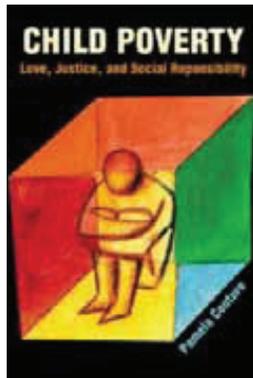
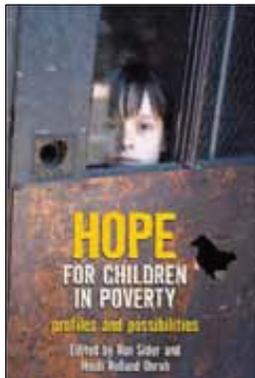
REVIEW



DO WE NEED A WELFARE NET OR FLOOR? DEBATING CHILD POVERTY IN CANADA

James R. Vanderwoerd

“If you’re holding a hammer,” goes the saying, “every problem looks like a nail.” If we paraphrase this aphorism for poverty in the Western world in the twenty-first century, it might go something like this: “If you’ve got the infrastructure of a welfare state, every poverty problem can be solved with one more government program.”



If your reaction to this admittedly simple analogy is either mostly negative or mostly positive, then you are typical of the way approaches to poverty for most of the past half century have divided across a familiar fault line. On the one hand, some support extensive and continually-expanding

governmental responsibility for addressing poverty through the “cradle to grave” welfare state. In opposition are those who advocate for a return to a charitable model in which families, churches, and community groups voluntarily step up to help one another. The latter approach is perhaps best exemplified by Marvin Olasky’s influential *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, which provided the theoretical ammunition to start a domino effect in which welfare systems were revamped in states and provinces all across North America.

Policy analysts and academics have devoted remarkable resources to studying the way Western industrialized countries fall along a continuum of welfare states. Swedish researcher Gosta Esping-Andersen touched off a long-running academic debate about how to categorize welfare states with his 1990 book *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*. Esping-Andersen identified three welfare state “regimes”: liberal, conservative/corporatist, and social democratic.

Implicit in Esping-Andersen’s analysis, and much of the subsequent

analyses by other researchers, is that the social democratic regime (best exemplified in the Scandinavian countries) represents the “gold standard” against which all others should be measured. What all of these debates seem to assume is that the state is the primary institution that should be considered when analyzing how nations cope with pressing social problems such as poverty. Even further below the surface lies another set of assumptions that often go unexamined: that society is on an upward trajectory of increasing civilization, marked by economic progress that is fuelled by continuing advancements in science and technology. Two key ingredients are assumed to be inevitable and necessary to this steady progress: secularization and the continuing expansion of government. As poverty historian Alice O’Connor has argued, “Poverty knowledge rests on several characteristic commitments and beliefs . . . [including] a belief that the state, in varying degrees of cooperation with organized civil society, is a necessary protection against the hazards of industrial capitalism and extreme concentrations of poverty and

wealth . . . [and] a distinctly secular faith in human progress.”

But despite all of this work, advocates on either side continue to preach to their own choirs, seemingly unaware of the work of those on the “other” side. The result is a failure to take seriously the approaches offered by others, and to caricature—and thus misunderstand—the nuances and complexity of the problem of children who are poor, and what to do about it.

Four recent books on child poverty in Canada and the U.S. demonstrate the disconnect between these disparate perspectives. Advocating the “gold standard” of the Scandinavian social democracy approach, Patrizia Albanese (*Child Poverty in Canada*, 2009) and Shereen Ismael (*Child Poverty and the Canadian Welfare State*, 2006) provide similar overviews of child poverty in Canada. The authors of both books lament what they view as the decline of Canada’s welfare state. By contrast, Ronald Sider and Heidi Unruh (*Hope for Children in Poverty: Profiles and Possibilities*, 2007) and Pamela Couture (*Child Poverty: Love, Justice, and Social Responsibility*, 2007)

offer upbeat accounts of grassroots, ministry-based efforts that have been successful in addressing poverty in the U.S.

The subtitle of Ismael’s book—*From Entitlement to Charity*—captures the ideological perspective on which her analysis rests: what she calls social democratic liberalism. Ismael opens her book by describing in a preface that she “did not appreciate [Canada’s welfare state] until it was gone” (ix). Thus, her book is an attempt to trace and explain the shift from a welfare state characterized by entitlement to a welfare state characterized by charity. It becomes clear to the reader that “entitlement”—represented by an extensive social democratic welfare state—is good, while “charity”—described as resting on liberal individualism—is bad. Ismael is dismayed by what she depicts as the shift from a humane to an efficient capitalism. In her view, the decades immediately following World War II represented Canada’s social welfare golden age in which “the social policy reform agenda promoted by ethical liberalism promised to make capitalism more humane.” But she laments Canada’s failure

to complete this project. Instead, she argues, Canada's resolve began to weaken under sustained attack from the right, and "the transition from entitlement to charity ensued as the Canadian social safety net was dismantled in the name of reform."

Ismael's analysis and description is framed as a story of good versus evil. In her telling, the nuances and complexity of different policy options are collapsed into a simplistic dichotomy: either entitlement (good) or charity (bad). Thus, her conclusion reads less like policy analysis and more like a dire and dramatic obituary for the welfare state:

The welfare of poor children is a casualty of the ideological war on the welfare state launched in the liberal right-wing's counter-offensive against the liberal left-wing's war on poverty . . . The 1989 resolution was the last hurrah for the welfare state, as the liberal right had rewritten the policy blueprint and seized the opportunity afforded by the resolution to initiate reform of the social safety net.

Dismantling of the remaining vestiges of the welfare state social policy framework ensued . . . With the launching of the V[oluntary] S[ector] I[nitiative] in 2000 to mobilize private sector voluntary social services, the residual model of welfare was complete.

It is not hard to see from Ismael's reading that only one policy option is viable: continued expansion of the welfare state. This is consistent with the social democracy/democratic socialist ideology within which she places her analysis. In this analysis, her use of terms is loaded: "residual," "civil society," "voluntary sector," and "charity" are all code words to describe the evils of welfare state retrenchment, compared to "entitlement," "institutional," "social citizenship," and "equity."

Patrizia Albanese's *Child Poverty in Canada* offers a similar, though more muted, reading of Canada's approach to child poverty. Albanese's book is part of Oxford's "Issues in Canada" series, which Oxford describes as "short books about the challenges facing Canada

today.” Published in small pocket-book format, *Child Poverty in Canada* is intended as an accessible entry into the problem of child poverty and its solutions. While cut from the same ideological cloth as Ismael, Albanese offers a somewhat more balanced approach. This is most evident in her exploration of the causes of child poverty, which she groups into three areas: family and neighbourhood factors, economic changes, and policy contexts. The second and third set of causes fit well with the social democratic approach and thus point predictably to welfare state expansion as the primary solution.

Interestingly, Albanese gives time to explore more immediate and local factors of family and neighbourhood, but does not follow up with much in the way of policy recommendations to address these factors. Most noteworthy is her investigation of the evidence of the impact of single parenthood on child poverty. Here she reluctantly acknowledges that single parenthood is one of the most important factors associated with child poverty. Nevertheless, the policy recommendations that Albanese offers reveal that her

analysis is also situated squarely within the social democratic approach. Noticeably absent is any recommendation that addresses single parenthood, even though she earlier identified this as a key factor. Policy proposals to support and maintain healthy marriages have been a substantial component of recent U.S. approaches to child poverty, but they are vilified by many Canadian poverty advocates. So, while Albanese is willing to identify single parenthood as a factor in child poverty, she is quick to explain that it is other factors that are really the cause of poverty: “Clearly, it is not lone parenthood but rather lone parenthood in conjunction with other broader social factors including limited economic opportunities and rigid or limited family and social policies that contribute to higher than average poverty rates in Canada.”

Not surprisingly, these other factors are ones that lead to welfare state expansion as “logical” solutions. Albanese concludes with recommendations for a “radically reformed social welfare system” that includes familiar components

proposed by other poverty advocates: a universal system of child benefits and child care, increases to the Working Income Tax Credit, a national housing strategy, and increased eligibility and benefits from provincial welfare assistance programs. In other words, Albanese ends at the same place as Ismael: a lament for the lost golden age of the welfare state and a plea for its restoration.

Sider and Unruh's *Hope for Children in Poverty* is a contribution that is most clearly aimed at a very different audience. They unashamedly explore and celebrate the potential of Albanese's dreaded "voluntary sector"/"civil society" with feel-good stories about the efforts of a sampling of local collaborative programs—local people partnering with others to touch the lives of poor children and families right in their own neighbourhoods. It is hard to imagine that such a book would even be taken seriously by

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poverty advocates in Canada, and would more likely be denounced as another "right-wing assault on the welfare state." And yet, Sider and

Unruh offer these examples in good faith; they assume that churches, local groups, communities, and families all have a role to play. Even one of their contributors who

is most clearly committed to a strong governmental role acknowledges that the welfare state cannot do it all: "Progress in reducing child poverty will require both government action and engagement from the private sector . . . Where government is limited is in educating and inspiring people in their obligations to one another, directing their attention away from the self-interest and materialism inherent in a society that celebrates individual freedom."

Pamela Couture's *Child Poverty: Love, Justice, and Social Responsibility* is the most balanced of these four books on child poverty. Like Sider and Unruh, she targets an

American Christian audience, and she too gives serious attention to the potential and possibilities for locally-based community approaches to poverty. Unlike Sider and Unruh, however, Couture does a commendable job of surveying the landscape of overlapping contexts that give rise to child poverty rates in the U.S. (which are worse than most other Western industrialized democracies). Granted, her book cannot provide detailed analyses of all of these factors, but she does offer a critical engagement with the complexity of this problem by addressing what she calls the “unnamed children’s issues.” The five issues she identifies reveal the breadth of the forces that operate to make children—both in the U.S. and globally—vulnerable to poverty. As might be expected, she includes U.S. social policy and global economic trends, but three other issues are unique to her analysis: human rights of children; environmental depletion, and the effects of war. Couture shows how each of these three areas are implicated in the constellation of factors swirling around the poverty-stricken child.

Couture asks: “Can families with children survive our [American] social policies?” Her answer is that they cannot. Here she echoes the complaints that come from other social democrats who criticize America’s so-called reluctant welfare state. And compared to Canada’s, it does come off poorly. But Couture’s response is not simply an argument for welfare state expansion. Rather, she acknowledges the complex balancing act that is necessary in order for a society to generate sufficient surplus wealth to afford social programs. In her analysis of the global economic context, she draws on a wide selection of interdisciplinary research which shows that the most generous welfare states have only been possible within the context of capitalist market economies that generate a surplus. Worldwide, countries that have adopted market economies have seen decreases in child poverty and related social measures, such as infant mortality and illiteracy. Although she seems hesitant to say so directly, the conclusion one must draw from this is that the capacity for a welfare state depends on prosperity. While Ismael and

Albanese lambaste the right for its focus on efficiency over welfare, Couture’s analysis acknowledges that equity and efficiency must be balanced.

And yet there are some important features of a welfare state that ought not to be minimized. What both Albanese and Ismael show is that on a variety of measures of child poverty, neither Canada nor the U.S. fare particularly well, compared to other industrialized countries—despite the fact that both countries are economically wealthy.

A welfare state softens the sharp edges of capitalism and smoothes out the hills and valleys of inequality. Those on the right might cringe at the redistributive aspect of reducing inequality, but there are particular characteristics of poverty that ought to give us pause. If poverty were randomly distributed across the population, perhaps we might feel more justified in allowing greater inequality to exist as the expected cost of prosperity, and explain it as the appropriate consequence of varying individual effort, risk and ability. But poverty remains

stubbornly over-represented in the same groups: single women, recent immigrants, persons who are disabled, and Aboriginal Canadians. When persons from these groups “play by the rules”—that is, practice thrift, work hard, attempt to get an education—the payoffs are not as high. And worse, the costs of failure are greater. As Pulitzer

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Prize-winning author David Shipler observed about working poor families in America, “Their personal mistakes have larger consequences, and their personal achievements yield smaller returns.”

I would argue that the lessons from these four books call for a careful and balanced approach: while rejecting a government-dominated expansion of the welfare system, we can affirm the importance of a social safety net. The metaphor

of a net suggests an appropriate balancing of various institutions sharing responsibility. A market economy rewards risk, but when you take risks, make an effort, step out and try something, you could fall; a net exists in case you fall. In a just society, the risks of falling ought not to be borne disproportionately by a few. A society with a social welfare state net acts as a safety mechanism to support all of its citizens to fulfill their own responsibilities.

That net is different than a floor—sometimes articulated as a guaranteed annual income or a social minimum. A welfare floor holds everyone up, but does not require any effort from anyone; after all, one could just lay there on the floor. Albanese and Ismael can be read as arguing for a welfare

state with a floor, but do not take seriously enough the responsibilities of others in a diverse society. Sider and Unruh, and Couture to a lesser extent, gloss over the serious holes that exist in the U.S.'s safety net, which has gaps that are simply too big to catch the most vulnerable. Their stories of the possibilities of churches, community groups, and innovative social service agencies are inspiring, but in the end, also unrealistic.

A serious and genuine look at child poverty requires balancing two seemingly opposed sentiments. A welfare state might be a dirty word for a capitalist, but we need it. And, a market economy might be a dirty word for anti-poverty advocate, but we need it, too.

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