

“Services Rendered, Rearing Children For The State”: Mothers’ Pensions in British Columbia 1919-1931

MEGAN J. DAVIES

On July 17th, 1920, an MLA penned a letter to the Superintendent of Neglected Children: “There is a widow here with four young children who is making a good fight and if anyone is deserving a pension, I think she should be.”¹ The legislation to which the MLA was referring had been proclaimed law just seventeen days previously. Mothers’ pensions were to be made available to women with more than one child under the age of sixteen whose husbands were unable to support them.

The 1920 legislation followed a provincial Commission on Health Insurance which took place from the fall of 1919 through to the following spring. Hearings held by the Commission illustrate both the wide public support for mothers’ pensions in BC and the progressive *milieux* characteristic of the era. The report submitted at the close of the hearings is a general indication of government views towards disadvantaged mothers. Eleven years later, the 1931 Public Service Commission Mothers’ Pensions Report called for a severe reduction in services, tighter regulations and budgetary restraint. Thus, mothers’ pensions underwent significant changes in the years between 1919 and 1931; furthermore, a comparison of BC’s program with those implemented in other Canadian provinces, using these two documents as primary pieces of evidence, is instructive.

Mothers’ pensions can be seen in either of two ways. On the one hand, the 1920 Act can be perceived as a piece of pioneering social legislation. Now, women were to be paid for their work as homemakers and mothers. Here was a new role for the state; early social welfare programs like mothers’ pensions paved the way for greater participation by the state in the private domain of home and family. On the other hand, mothers’ pensions appear to have been a means by which the middle-class and the state imposed their vision of familial relations upon the working-class of British Columbia. To be a woman and in need was not sufficient criteria for receiving state assistance. By awarding

pensions solely to needy mothers, the state implicitly reinforced the traditional stereotype of woman as child-bearer and homemaker. For the many women who fell outside this category, the state offered nothing.

BC's Mothers' Pensions Act fit well into the progressive era of the early twentieth century. Across North America members of reform groups such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union and, locally, the New Era League, used their talents, time and financial resources in the drive to create a healthy productive and morally pure society. In Canada, members of such groups were characteristically middle-class, Anglo-Canadian, and associated with the social gospel movement. Confident in their vision of a finer Canada, members of the progressive movement provided the original impetus behind the social legislation of the inter-war years.² Neil Sutherland has identified three separate groups of reformers within the progressive movement: Christians, middle-class reformers, and professionals involved in public health.³ The 1919 hearings, however, present a somewhat more complex range of support for mothers' pensions.

Most numerous among the groups in favour of mothers' pensions in 1919 and 1920 were reform groups. Among those endorsing the proposed legislation were the WCTU, the New Era League, and the Salvation Army.⁴ Professional groups were also well represented at the hearings: in Vancouver, the Teachers' Association, the Victorian Order of Nurses, and the Graduate Nurses' Association of BC expressed their support for mothers' pensions.⁵ The Church, in comparison to the professionals and reformers present, was a minor voice throughout the hearings. Nonetheless, the Ministerial Association of Victoria passed a resolution in 1920 congratulating the government for bringing forward the Mothers' Pensions bill.⁶ Patriotic organizations such as the Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire (IODE) were vocal in their support of mothers' pensions throughout the hearings. Mrs. J.C. Kemp, president of the Wives, Widows and Mothers of Great Britain's War Heroes, indicated that her organization believed that the major group of beneficiaries would be war widows; that mothers' pensions were, in part, a tribute to British Columbians who had sacrificed their lives for the Empire.⁷

Organized labour also attended the public hearings to add its voice in support of mothers' pensions. In Vancouver, the Trades and Labour Council of the One Big Union (OBU) sent a representative and Exhibit Number Thirty contained an endorsement from organized labour to Victoria.⁸ Matters has argued that, "Unions favoured the plan because they believed that wages were depressed by large numbers of women and children in the labour force."⁹ Certainly, post-war unemployment would have given labour ample reason to support legislation designed to limit the labour pool, particularly women and children who were a traditional source of cheap labour. However, labour may have had more noble intentions; a glance at the Victoria delegates for the hearings brings to light that both the Metal Trades Council and the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners had established Special Committees on Social Welfare.¹⁰

It is interesting to consider the part which women played in promoting mothers' pensions during the 1919-1920 hearings. Female members of reform

groups like the WCTU were generally maternal feminists; as such, these women believed that pensions were important because they recognized the value of a woman's role as mother and would allow more women to remain at home with their children.

What is intriguing, however, is the apparent recognition by other participants in the 1919-1920 hearings that mothers' pensions were the particular concern of married women, albeit middle-class women. In Princeton, when asked to comment on mothers' pensions, the Reverend Robert Hebison replied, "I think that women should speak on that subject."¹¹ Organizations with both male and female membership, like the Trades and Labour Council, often sent a married woman as their representative to the hearings.¹² The Commission itself was chaired by four individuals, one of whom was a married woman.¹³ Amongst the support for mothers' pensions during the hearings, women constituted a major voice. Significantly, the men present believed women were justified in being this visible.

Early welfare programs in Canada were influenced, to a considerable degree by programs and policies being implemented in the United States and elsewhere: "...foreign and particularly American models, examples and statistics made up much of the literature of Canadian public health, welfare and education, and trips abroad for observation and study were routine."¹⁴ In fact, the 1920 Mothers' Pensions Act was rationalized, in part, as an example of an international reform. A speech made by the Hon. J. McLean, Provincial Secretary cited mothers' pensions legislation that was in effect in thirty-nine of the United States as well as in New Zealand and in parts of Australia.¹⁵

The plan for change which reform groups advocated called for a systematic approach to social injustice. Pensions for mothers reflected the belief that preventative measures, administered by efficient personnel, were the most effective means of reforming society. Accordingly, in mothers' pensions legislation and in government policy toward women, stress was placed on the importance of regulations and supervision, of classifying the individual into a specific category. "During the period 1910 to 1920, the piecemeal, voluntary approach to such services began to give way to a more comprehensive, government-supported system."¹⁶ The Vancouver Children's Aid Society, for example, received funding from both municipal and provincial governments for the services it extended to orphans, abandoned children and those children whose parents were unable or unfit to care for them.¹⁷ But, by 1919, institutions were no longer considered to be the best place for disadvantaged children. With a pension, a mother could keep her children at home with her. Mrs. J.A. Gillespie of the WCTU reflected a prevailing attitude when she spoke in front of the Health Insurance Commission, stating, "We feel the place of the mother is in the home with her child..."¹⁸

Government policy toward disadvantaged mothers, as expressed in the report written following the hearings, is best described as liberal paternalism. Referring to the proposed legislation, the report stated, "The very fact, however, that our health laws are being gradually extended is evidence that our Governments are becoming more humanized, and by being humanized they are naturally reaching out to assist and protect the sick of the

community."¹⁹ Mothers' pensions corresponded well with some social legislation passed in BC under John Oliver's Liberal regime. By 1924, Oliver's government had, in addition to the Mothers' Pensions Act, introduced an Adoption Act, a Deserted Wives' Maintenance Act, and extended the Minimum Wage Legislation.²⁰ Yet, the provincial government's motivation behind instigating mothers' pensions may well have gone beyond paternalism. In political terms, mothers' pensions made good sense in 1920. Oliver may well have been attempting to pacify both the socialist and the working class.²¹ Mothers' pensions may also have been perceived by Oliver as an enticement to a new group of voters - women.²²

The 1931 Public Service Commission Mothers' Pensions Report shows how political and social alteration had resulted in a call for a more conservative government policy toward disadvantaged mothers. In 1931, the Conservative Party under Dr. Simon Fraser Tolmie was in power. Tolmie had strong links with business and commerce; social legislation was not a priority. The emphasis on budgetary restraint in the 1931 report may also be an indication that, with the Depression, there simply was not as much money available for the mothers' pensions program.

The biggest shift in government policy toward disadvantaged mothers during the period under study was in the idea of how long aid should continue. In 1920, no mention was made of the length of time mothers were expected to receive pensions, the implication being that as long as women continued to care for their children, they were entitled to a pension. In contrast, the 1931 report clearly indicated that aid to needy mothers was to be a temporary measure: "...the whole plan...is the development of initiative and self-reliance and independence at the earliest possible date, and to such degree and strength as to avoid future dependency."²² The 1931 report also advocated that the name of the program be changed from mothers' pensions to mothers' allowances.²³ This name change reflected the new view of aid as temporary. The word "pension" implied a long-term, perhaps even life-time payment for a service done for the country. Conversely, an allowance was most often a temporary measure: maybe just pin money.

The period from 1919 to 1931 also witnessed the rise of a new group of professionals to administer and champion the fledgling social welfare programs which were introduced during the time. Sutherland sees the shift from amateur to professional control as characteristic both of child health and welfare during the inter-war period.²⁴ Without doubt, the mothers' pensions program in BC changed in the manner Sutherland described. Local boards to administer mothers' pensions were made up of volunteers in 1920, but they were composed of paid professionals by 1931. Similarly, the 1931 Public Service Commission Report argued that to be economically viable and successful, the mothers' pension program had to be staffed by skilled professionals.²⁵

The number of mothers receiving pensions increased considerably during the decade under study. Table #1 shows that the total number of cases more than doubled between 1920 and 1930. In September 1920, 656 women were involved in the program compared to 1488, ten years later. With the

exception of 1922, Table #1 shows a steady increase in aid given through mothers' pensions.

TABLE 1

YEAR April - March	Number of cases on allowance - Sept.	Number of children	Distribution of children/family
1920 - 21	656	2068	3.25
1921 - 22	846		Not available
1922 - 23	771	1978	2.56
1923 - 24	785	1990	2.54
1924 - 25	847	2240	2.64
1925 - 26	943	2348	2.70
1926 - 27	986	2723	2.76
1927 - 28	1100	3050	2.77
1928 - 29	1233	2747	2.23
1929 - 30	1370	3028	3.21
1930 - 31	1488	3229	2.20

Source: 1931 Public Service Commission Mothers' Pensions Report

The average number of children per familial group throughout the period ranged from a low figure of 2.23 in 1928 to a high of 3.25 during the first year that the program was in operation. The number of one-child families on mothers' pensions increased considerably during the period under study; in 1921, 23.9% of assisted families had only one child, while in 1930 the total had risen to 37.6%.

Changes occurred from 1920 to 1930 both in the marital status of women the program supported and in the circumstances in which women turned to mothers' pensions for help. Widows, meant to be the primary group of beneficiaries, comprised 64.5% of those receiving pensions in 1921, a figure that remained relatively constant until at least 1924. In the latter half of the 1920s, however, the percentage of widows in the total number of mothers' pensions cases dropped. By 1930, only 48.5% of mothers participating in the program were widows.²⁶ This alteration may simply reflect the fact that there were fewer widows with young children in BC in 1930. Women who had been widowed during World War I and the Spanish Flu Epidemic may have remarried by 1930 or, with children now grown and self-supporting, become ineligible for a mothers' pension.

How did BC mothers' pensions program compare to those implemented in other provinces across Canada? Table # 2 shows that, when compared to Saskatchewan, in 1931 the BC government gave pensions to a higher number of families per capita. The Saskatchewan government's allowance to mothers was at the bottom of the scale with a thirty dollar per month maximum. This may simply indicate a lower cost of living in Saskatchewan, but it is possible that a lower allowance meant that the government was able to assist a greater number of mothers and still remain within the budget. In British Columbia,

by contrast, disadvantaged mothers received a monthly allowance of \$57.50 which compared favourably with monthly allowances given in Alberta, Manitoba and Nova Scotia. Thus, it is hardly surprising to find, in a comparison of total expenses of each province, that BC's total of \$835,095.71 for April 1930 through March 1931 was second only to Ontario's which, with a significantly larger population, showed a much greater total expenditure for the year. Other provinces whose populations approximated that of BC's, spent considerably less on their mothers' pensions programs during the same year. For example, Alberta with a population of 657,242 compared to BC's 597,000, spent a total of \$446,835.76 -- almost one-half of BC's expenses.

TABLE 2

Prov.	Population	Allowances only	Salaries	Total expenses	No. of cases
Alta.	657,242	-	-	446,835.76	1270
BC	579,000	816,262.24	18,833.47	835,095.71	1468
Man.	663,200	465,739.02	31,651.52	479,390.54	1051
Ont.	3,313,000	2,292,881.27	84,116.73	2,376,998.00	6712
Sask.	885,000	-	-	544,250.00	2659
NS	550,400	310,303.31	22,437.77	332,741.08	913

Prov.	No. of cases per 100,000 pop.	No. of children	Average family size	Amount of allowance
Alta.	193.3	3409	2.68	\$60.00/mo.
BC	245.9	3229	2.20	57.50/mo.
Man.	158.5	3330	3.17	65.63/mo.
Ont.	202.6	19620	2.9	40.00/mo.
Sask.	255.2	6590	2.9	30.00/mo.
NS	165.9	-	-	60.00/mo.

Source: 1931 Public Service Commission Mothers' Pensions Report

The percentage of incapacitation cases (mothers receiving pensions because their husbands were too ill to work) increased from 14.8% to 25.7% during the period under study.²⁷ The 1931 report maintained that this increase reflected a growing tendency to use mothers' pensions as a temporary sickness benefit, an explanation which seems plausible.²⁸ It is likely that more families became aware that the pensions program could be used in this fashion.

The 1931 report cited the number of unmarried mothers receiving pensions as the "highest relative increase", a point that appears rather overstated in light of the figures. Among the total recipients in 1930, 4.97% were not married, compared to less than 1% in 1920.²⁹ This may have reflected relaxed moral standards which are popularly considered characteristic of North America during the 1920s. More likely, however, the increase was due to a growing tendency to use the Act's discretionary clause to give aid to single mothers.

The number of divorced mothers receiving pensions also appeared to be on the increase during the 1920s, although there are no early figures with which to compare the 1930 figure of 4.97%.³⁰ The 1931 report also revealed the use of mothers' pensions by the elderly and the unemployed, uses for which it was not originally intended. The report pointed to "Scores of cases which revealed a wide use of the allowance really as a form of unemployment relief, in families where there might be several older children, married and unmarried, the latter, and sometimes the former, living at home, and only one child under sixteen years of age."³¹ Mothers' allowances, the report stated, were also being used by families in which the male wage earner was "prematurely senile".

The BC government's more liberal attitude is also evident in a provincial comparison of the regulations and conditions governing the disbursement of mothers' pensions. All provinces were willing to give pensions to mothers whose husbands were either ill or dead. While some of the regulations set out by other provinces showed a degree of tolerance, BC appears to have been more lenient more often. BC was willing to give aid to foster mothers³² and was the only province to permit divorced mothers to receive a pension.³³ Like Saskatchewan, BC had a provision for women whose husbands were in jail while only Ontario included deserted wives in their regulations for mothers' pensions.³⁴

In an analysis of the Canadian social service structure, Howard Buchbinder argues that a fundamental purpose of the system is the maintenance of civil order through state control.³⁵ The application of this concept to mothers' pensions in BC raises a number of interesting possibilities. Aid given in this fashion might well have created a more docile working class: a group that regarded the state as a figure of benevolent paternalism. Children raised in such an environment, one might assume, would have been more ready to abide by regulations imposed without explanation, and would have been more willing to accept unquestioningly the authority of a figure invested with the power of the state -- be it a police constable or social worker. Buchbinder also argues that social welfare programs "socialize the costs of providing a fit work force and thereby subsidize the private sector at public expense."³⁶ By providing mothers' pensions to working class families throughout the 1920s, the BC government helped to bear the costs of raising a generation of future workers for provincial industry.

The mothers' pensions program set up a specific relationship between the working class of British Columbia who received assistance and the state distribution apparatus. Apparently, the provincial government perceived its relationship with pensioned mothers as a contractual one: "It is a payment for services to be rendered, of a certain quality, along certain lines and payable only so long as the standard of service given is acceptable."³⁷ This contract, however, was scarcely an agreement between two equal parties; the government was now in the position of judging whether needy mothers were fit to be entrusted with the care of their children. The state was beginning to take a more direct role in the lives of young children within the home.

It is important to make clear the link between the middle-class and the social legislation that was implemented in BC during the inter-war years:

⇒ “Such supervision constituted an extension through the state apparatus, of the middle-class’ ability to control the behavior and development of working-class Canadians.”³⁸ With the exception of organized labour, a relatively minor voice during the 1919-1920 hearings, the initial legislation was formed by the middle-class. Both the Liberal Party, led by Oliver, and the Conservative Party, in power throughout the decade, were fundamentally of the middle or upper-class. Social workers and other professionals who found employment in the new social services offered by the government clearly represented these social *milieux*.

The 1920 Mothers’ Pensions Act addressed a number of concerns which had become increasingly important to reformers. World War I had brought unprecedented destruction and loss of life; surely a better society should be the result of such sacrifice.³⁹ The new Canada, built by the efforts of middle-class reformers, was to be the antithesis of war; chaos, disease and ruin would give way to a well-disciplined, healthy, and prosperous society.

Yet these reformers did not spend all their time looking at Canadian society through rose-coloured spectacles; social legislation enacted immediately following World War I was also the result of fears about the stability of the province’s society. Massive unemployment, created by the influx of returning veterans, had not been remedied by the soldier settlements situated in rural areas.⁴⁰ Working-class militancy appeared to be on the rise.⁴¹ As well, the triumph of the Bolsheviks in Russia fostered, in the minds of middle-class reformers and politicians, grim thoughts of proletarian revolution. Measures such as mothers’ pensions may well have been
→ considered a necessary expedient to pacify a potentially dangerous working class.

Public health became an increasingly prominent issue to both voters and government after World War I. The 1919 report, in presenting a case for mothers’ pensions, referred to the loss of human life through World War I and the subsequent Spanish Flu Epidemic, stating, “At no time in the history of this country has its man power been at a lower ebb.”⁴² According to the report, 6,000 BC males were killed during World War I;⁴³ 16,000 were wounded, and a further 8,560 men were listed by the military in a substandard medical category.⁴⁴ This report concluded on a more pragmatic note: “The more we spend in the interest of public health, the less we will need to spend in charities and correction.”⁴⁵ Mothers’ pensions were not only necessary; it would seem they were also economical.

Services for children were a key aspect of public health policy throughout the early twentieth century. By 1918, the Child Welfare Association of BC had evolved from the earlier Vancouver Child Welfare Association. In 1920, The Canadian Council on Child Welfare was established. Mothers’ pensions, because they focused on the needs of the child, fell within this spectrum of public health. At the 1918 convention amidst a variety of resolutions passed which related directly to children, was a resolution calling for mothers’ pensions in BC.⁴⁶

Social legislation, like mothers’ pensions and the Deserted Wives Maintenance Act, showed that British Columbians, in the period following

World War I, were uneasy about the stability of working-class families. Certainly, casualties inflicted by World War I and the subsequent Spanish Flu epidemic may have given cause for concern. As well, the resource-based, seasonal nature of BC's economy meant that working-class families often lacked the opportunity to accumulate sufficient savings to survive an economic crisis brought about by sickness, unemployment or death. As the State Health Commission Report for 1919 and 1920 argued: "A very large percentage of the workmen in this Province, even those in comparatively well-paid occupations, must live with a narrow margin between their incomes and the cost of living. The fact is that they have a "hand to mouth" existence, and only about one in fourteen carries any form of Benefit Insurance at the present time. Consequently, when the burden of sickness falls on the workman or his family, he is ill-prepared and generally unable to bear it."⁴⁷ Desertion appears to have been another common problem among working-class families in BC. Often a husband would go to another part of the province or even to the USA in search of work and simply disappear, leaving a destitute family behind.⁴⁸

The politicians, reformers and professionals who instigated mothers' pensions in BC saw the family as a crucial base for a stable society.⁴⁹ A stable home would produce upstanding, productive Canadians, argued the 1931 report, adding, "these children will thus become desirable citizens, and social assets within the community."⁵⁰ Hence, mothers' pensions constituted an investment in the future of Canada.

In the years following World War I, a new emphasis was placed on the importance of the home environment in the raising of young children. As Veronica Strong-Boag points out, this process focused attention on the ability of the Canadian mother and made important the growing number of professional childcare workers. "Experts' insistence on close attention to early child development, the value of a pragmatic morality, and the systematic regulation of mental, emotional, and physical processes was preached in advice literature and nursery schools."⁵¹ Mothers' pensions, it was believed, would produce higher quality home care for children. Those supporting mothers' pensions in 1919 and 1920 argued that poor home environments produced criminals and communists, "The bolsheviks of today are mainly the neglected children of yesterday."⁵²

Mothers, then, were pivotal to the development of a finer breed of future Canadian citizens. Mrs. W.T. Norton, representing the Pioneer Political Equality League at the 1919 hearings, expressed a sentiment, that while rather grandiose in tone, was nonetheless common to the proceedings: "...by recognizing the value of the mother and helping and encouraging young wives to become mothers...the time will come when all people will recognize the bearing and rearing of children as the highest aim of the woman and of the human race."⁵³ Disadvantaged mothers, therefore, were not to be kept from their important task of childraising; mothers' pensions recognized that these mothers were performing a valuable service for the state.

Mothers' pensions clearly reflected the specific ideological place women occupy within capitalist society. The home was perceived as a haven from the harsh world of industry and commerce. Within the familial group were to

exist the feelings of collectivity, love and long-term stability and security; values that are replaced in the world of commerce by individualism, alienation and the drive for profit. Women and children belonged within the former sphere: men were to go forth to conquer the outside world.

Without a doubt, a tidy dichotomy like this does not really exist, yet it was this vision, in part, which resulted in the implementation of mothers' pensions in BC. A provincial police report of 1919, investigating a potential candidate for a mothers' pension, outlined desirable feminine qualities, "This woman seems very respectable and feels her position very keenly...she is very low in health, as she is giving all she can get to her small family, and doing without herself."⁵⁴ Qualities of thrift, industry, self-sacrifice and a high sense of morality, all fundamentally middle-class values, were praised. Liaisons between a recipient and a man other than her husband were not tolerated; in 1927, a woman who dared to have a sexual relationship with her Italian lodger, had state assistance immediately terminated.⁵⁵ By the time of the 1931 report, the state saw fit to ban male boarders entirely and questioned whether divorced women were the kind of mothers that the public should support.

The case of unmarried mothers is an interesting and somewhat difficult question amidst the morally upright proclamations of those who formulated government policy toward disadvantaged mothers. The 1919-1920 hearings elicited support for unwed mothers from a wide range of groups. The chairman of the Commission appeared to favour pensions for unwed mothers, if his questions were an indication of his personal bias: "Then why not apply it to unmarried mothers -- why should her child be deprived of her love and care...?"⁵⁶ Those groups who articulated their support of the idea (the Vancouver Women's Forum, the Trades and Labour Council of the OBU, Organized Labour in Victoria, the Salvation Army, the New Era League, the Graduate Nurses' Association of BC and the WCTU) would all have been well aware of the plight of unmarried mothers at that time. Indeed, the Salvation Army itself ran one of the two homes for unwed mothers in Vancouver.⁵⁷

No direct provision was made for unmarried mothers in BC when the 1920 Act was passed. Of the other Canadian provinces to pass mothers' pensions legislation, Manitoba and Ontario were the only provinces to include a common-law wife provision. The concern evident in BC during the Health Commission hearings on the subject of unwed mothers may, however, explain BC's inclusion of a discretionary clause within the mothers' pension legislation.⁵⁸ Under this discretionary clause, unique to BC's legislation, any mother whose case was deemed appropriate for assistance could receive a pension, regardless of whether she fit the conditions set by the Act. According to the 1931 report, this clause was frequently applied to single mothers.

An analysis of mothers' pensions in BC necessitates a discussion of the specific productive roles fathers, mothers and children had been assigned within the capitalist family. As Dorothy Smith argues, the family under modern capitalism is structured around the earning power of the male, the reproductive, house-keeping and childcare tasks performed by the female, while the child, as a student, is a noncontributor.⁵⁹ Most significant in relation to mothers' pensions is the inevitable economic dependence of mothers and

children upon the male wage-earner. Economic dependence of women upon men within a marriage means that when male wage-earners are no longer contributing to the family income, women and children are left in a precarious position: "The role of women in the family within capitalism is structured so that the removal of male patronage leaves her exposed and terrified."⁶⁰ Thus, a mother left without male support in BC during the 1920s, was limited both by an economic structure which offered such women a limited number of low-paying jobs and by a culture which perceived the employment of married women outside the home as undesirable.

X What mothers' pensions did was replace the male wage-earner with the state, thereby allowing the triangular family structure to survive, regardless of the fact that it was missing one member. But, more importantly, mothers' pensions perpetuated an image of disadvantaged mothers as victims. However, the implication that comes through most strongly is that these women were powerless victims who, lacking male support, needed the government to step in as a benevolent figure of authority.

The image of the disadvantaged woman as victim, which the legislation infers, is somewhat contradicted by an examination of fourteen case histories found among the files of the Provincial Secretary.⁶¹ What is significant about these women is that they often appeared to have responded to their situation in an assertive manner, making good use of the limited number of options available. Few of the fourteen women were docile victims within their domestic situation. If they were deserted, they appeared to be more than willing to help government agencies track down their errant spouse. One woman, when she was asked for information about her absent husband, complied with the request on the condition that "she was not compelled to live with him again."⁶² Most of the women faced life without a male wage-earner in a resourceful fashion. Requests for aid were frequently made following a crisis in which the mother's slim means of support had been cut off. Six of the women had been, or were, working part-time when they applied for a pension. A widow or a woman whose husband was incapacitated might manage to provide for her family by doing laundry for a few bachelors or cleaning the local school house, only turning to the government when she could not find employment. A mother who in turn became ill might also request a pension, as did one of the cases among the fourteen. One mother asked for a pension when the tent in which she and her children lived was destroyed by fire. She had no need for supplies, she said, because she was presently working for her board but needed enough lumber to build a small house for her family.⁶³

In conclusion, what was the legacy of the early mothers' pensions program? Perhaps one should begin with a lesson learned. The case of mothers' pensions in BC illustrates the uncertainty of freedom gained for women through economic compensation for their traditional tasks as mothers and homemakers. "Wages for housework" were revolutionary in the sense that they offered disadvantaged women money that was their own, not their husbands'.⁶⁴ Yet the impact of change was modified by the fact that, ultimately, mothers' pensions were for children, not for mothers.⁶⁵ Furthermore, a woman receiving a pension was also accepting that the state had the right to judge her abilities as a mother and a homemaker, so there

were negative implications in women obtaining payment from the state for their work in the home.⁶⁶

Elizabeth Janeway points out that the attitude of relief agencies toward their beneficiaries is inevitably paternal; the basic assumption made is that the recipients, "don't know what they want and couldn't meet their needs even if they knew."⁶⁷ In 1919, neither the reformers nor the politicians thought to ask those women who were to receive assistance what they considered appropriate for their needs. The same holds true today.

The main issue, however, relates to economics as well as to attitudes. The most fundamental question - why are families who lack a male wage-earner poor? - was never directly addressed by the mothers' pensions legislation. Mothers' pensions in the 1920s attacked the symptoms rather than striking directly at the cause of the problems.

By 1931, it appears that the government had chosen to deny the economic insecurity of a mother forced to support her family alone, and to ignore the fact that such women had little hope of achieving more than a subsistence level of living.⁶⁸ Instead, government policy in 1931 unrealistically expected mothers on pensions to become independent and self-reliant.⁶⁹ Grace McCarthy's words, articulating current government policy toward female-headed families during the 1980s, are profoundly reminiscent of the 1931 report: "Our aim is to help employable people achieve independence and avoid the sad cycle of welfare and dependency...they can become productive, contributing members of society."⁷⁰

During the 1920s the mothers' pensions program fostered the continued placement of female-headed families at the very foot of the socio-economic scale. By focusing on an idealized vision of what role the family was meant to play in Canadian society, the state chose to sidestep, rather than confront, the vulnerable economic position occupied by self-supporting women in capitalist society. Ultimately, then, this legislation served to perpetuate, rather than eradicate, the sex/class bias within BC's social order.



Footnotes

I would like to thank Dr. Chad Gaffield, Cheryl Coull, John Lutz, Brenda Davies and Jim Boothroyd for their help with this essay.

1. PABC, Provincial Secretary, Correspondence inward and outward and inter-departmental memos, Originals, 1918-1926, GR 344, p.123.
2. D.L. Matters, "The Development of Public Welfare Institutions in Vancouver, 1910-1920", Honours Essay, University of Victoria, 1973: 1.
3. Neil Sutherland, *Children in English-Canadian Society: Framing the Twentieth-Century Consensus*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976): 236.
4. PABC, Commission on Health Insurance, 1919-1921, GR 706, Book #1, pp. 706, 506, 520.
5. *Ibid*: 506.
6. PABC, Provincial Secretary, Correspondence inward and outward and inter-departmental memos, Originals, 1918-1926, GR 344, Box #1, File #2: 43.
7. PABC, Commission on Health Insurance, 1919-1921, GR 706, Book #1: 54.
8. *Ibid*: 640.
9. D.L. Matters, "Public Welfare Vancouver Style, 1910-1920", *Journal of Canadian Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Spring, 1979): 9.
10. PABC, Commission on Health Insurance, 1919-1921, GR 706, Book #1: 642.
11. PABC, Commission on Health Insurance, 1919-1921, GR 706, Book #2: 2.
12. PABC, Commission on Health Insurance, 1919-1921, GR 706, Book #1: 506.
13. PABC, Provincial Secretary, Correspondence inward and outward and inter-departmental memos, Originals, 1918-1926, GR 344, Box #1, File #2: 34.
14. Sutherland, *Children in English-Canadian Society*: 233.
15. PABC, GR 344, Box #1, File #2: 35.
16. Matters, "Public Welfare Vancouver Style, 1910-1920": 3.
17. *Ibid*.: 10.
18. PABC, GR 706, Book #1: 706.
19. PABC, GR 706, Book #1: 96.
20. Margaret Ormsby, *British Columbia: A History* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1958): 424.
21. *Ibid*.: 409.
22. PABC, GR 100: 1.
23. PABC, GR 100: 49.
24. Sutherland, *Children in English-Canadian Society*: 231.
25. PABC, GR 100: 26.
26. *Ibid*.: 9.
27. *Ibid*.
28. *Ibid*.
29. *Ibid*.: 10.
30. *Ibid*.
31. *Ibid*.
32. *Ibid*.: 50.
33. *Ibid*.
34. *Ibid*.
35. Howard Buchbinder, "Inequality and the Social Services", in Allan Moscovitch and Glenn Drover, eds., *Inequality: Essays on the Political Economy of Social Welfare* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981): 355.
36. *Ibid*.: 354.
37. PABC, GR 100: 22.

38. Veronica Strong-Boag, "Wages for Housework, Mothers' Allowances and the Beginning of Social Security in Canada", in Linda Kealey, ed., *A Not Unreasonable Claim: Women and Reform in Canada, 1880s-1920s* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1979): 28.
39. Sutherland, *Children in English-Canadian Society*: 229.
40. Ormsby, *British Columbia: A History*: 407. John Oliver established soldier settlements at Merville on Vancouver Island and at Creston in the Kootenays in the period following World War I.
41. *Ibid.*: 409.
42. PABC, GR 706, Book #1: 47.
43. *Ibid.*: 44.
44. *Ibid.*: 47.
45. *Ibid.*: 97.
46. Sutherland, *Children in English-Canadian Society*: 237.
47. PABC, GR 100: 23.
48. Among the limited number of case records remaining (PABC, GR 289, Boxes 1-3) are a total of fourteen cases of women who received mothers' pensions. Of the fourteen, four husbands had died, four were ill, and six had deserted their families. These cases range throughout the 1920s.
49. Sutherland, *Children in English-Canadian Society*: 237.
50. PABC, GR 100: 23.
51. Veronica Strong-Boag, "Intruders in the Nursery: Childcare Professionals Reshape the Years One to Five, 1920-1940", in Joy Parr, ed., *Childhood and Family in Canadian History* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982): 178.
52. PABC, GR 706, Book #1: 94.
53. *Ibid.*: 529.
54. PABC, Provincial Secretary, Correspondence Pertaining to the Care of Destitute Persons, 1910-1925, GR 150, Box #3.
55. PABC, Provincial Secretary, Indigent Fund, 1914-1933, GR 289, Box #2.
56. PABC, GR 706, Book #1: 720.
57. Matters, "Public Welfare, Vancouver Style, 1910-1920", see Table 11: 7.
58. PABC, The Mothers' Pensions Act, Chapter 61, Statutes of BC, 1920, NW 348.711 B862 1920: 319-321.
59. Dorothy Smith, "Women's Inequality and the Family", in Allan Moscovitch and Glenn Drover, eds., *Inequality: Essays on the Political Economy of Social Welfare* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981): 180.
60. Sheila Rowbotham, *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World*, (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1973): 57.
61. These women first came into contact with the government through the office of the Provincial Secretary when they were given aid through the provincial indigent fund. They were subsequently admitted to the Mothers' Pensions Program.
62. PABC, GR 150, Box #1.
63. PABC, GR 150, Box #1.
64. Veronica Strong-Boag, "Wages for Housework, Mothers' Allowances and the Beginning of Social Security in Canada": 31.
65. *Ibid.*: 31.
66. For contemporary examples of support for wages for housework see: Lorénne Clark, "The Wages for Housework Perspectives", in *Status of Women News*, Vol. 6, #2 (Toronto, 1980), and Judith Ramirez, "Housework, For Love or Money", in *Canadian Women's Studies Journal*, Vol. 1, #2, (Winter, 1978-79).

67. Elizabeth Janeway, *Powers of the Weak* (New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1981): 56.
68. Advisory Council on the Status of Women, *A Position Paper on the One-Parent Family*, cited in Megan J. Davies, "Single Mothers: an Honest Lullaby", *The Martlet*, October 21, 1982: 11.
69. PABC, GR 100: 1.
70. Grace McCarthy, cited in Megan J. Davies, "Single Mothers: an Honest Lullaby": 11.

Bibliography

- Davies, Megan J. "Single Mothers: an Honest Lullaby", *The Martlet*, University of Victoria newspaper, October 21, 1982.
- Fry, John Allan, ed. *Economy, Class and Social Reality*. Toronto: Butterworth, 1979.
- Janeway, Elizabeth. *Powers of the Weak*. New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1981.
- Kealey, Linda, ed. *A Not Unreasonable Claim: Women and Reform in Canada, 1880s-1920s*. Toronto: Women's Press, 1979.
- Lewis, Norah L. "Creating the Little Machine: Child Rearing in British Columbia, 1919-1939", *BC Studies* No. 56, Winter 1982-83.
- Matters, D.L. "The Development of Public Welfare Institutions in Vancouver, 1910-1920", Honours Essay, University of Victoria, 1973.
- Moscovitch, Allan and Glenn Drover, eds. *Inequality: Essays on the Political Economy of Social Welfare*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981.
- Ormsby, Margaret A. *British Columbia: A History*. Toronto: Macmillan 1958.
- Parr, Joy, ed. *Childhood and Family in Canadian History*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982.
- Provincial Archives of British Columbia, GR 100; GR 150; GR 289; GR 344; GR 706; NW 348.711 B862 1920.
- Rowbotham, Sheila. *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1973.
- Sutherland, Neil. *Children in English-Canadian Society: Framing the Twentieth Century Consensus*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976.