

**Productivity and Popular
Attitudes Toward Welfare
Recipients in Saskatchewan,
1970-1990**

by Dr. Robert Wardhaugh

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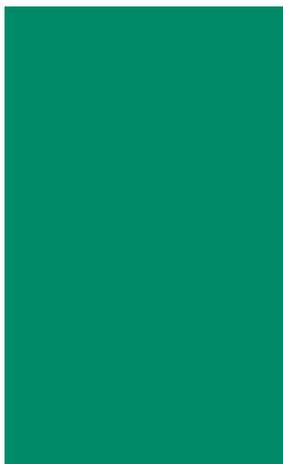
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Saskatchewan Institute of Public Policy
University of Regina, College Avenue Campus
Gallery Building, 2nd Floor
Regina, Saskatchewan • S4S 0A2



General Inquiries: 306.585.5777

Fax: 306.585.5780

Email: sipp@uregina.ca

Internet: www.uregina.ca/sipp

**Productivity and Popular Attitudes Toward Welfare
Recipients in Saskatchewan, 1970-1990**

*SIPP Public Policy Paper No. 14
April 2003*

Dr. Robert Wardhaugh, Post-Doctoral Research Associate (SIPP)

Foreword

This paper examines popular attitudes toward welfare recipients in the province of Saskatchewan from 1970 until 1990. Rather than analyzing government policy, it uses as its primary sources the two largest and most significant newspapers in the province - the *Regina Leader-Post* and the *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*. In particular, the paper focuses on the issue of "productivity" and how this notion has entered the welfare debate in order to further "value" the contribution of welfare recipients to society.

Introduction

The language used to describe welfare recipients in Canada has not changed significantly in the last half century. Descriptors, such as ‘lazy’, ‘bum’, ‘irresponsible’, ‘useless’, and ‘unproductive’ continue to frame popular perceptions. Yet, while the language itself has not altered over the years, the context for the use of the language has undergone changes that relay revealing transformations within our society, particularly in the way we perceive and communicate these perceptions about the poor. As Jean Swanson has recently pointed out, ‘the special language of poor-bashing disguises the real causes of poverty, hurts and excludes people who are poor, cheapens the labour of people who have jobs, and takes the pressure off the rich.’¹ But how have these perceptions changed?

Samuel Beer claims that

Concern for the poor has fallen off since the 1960s....In the early sixties faith in the economy and in government was high. We had only recently realized how rich we were. Our newly discovered affluence assured us that we had the means to fight poverty and challenged us to do it. Government had led us out of the Great Depression and through the war with Hitler, and in the postwar years it had presided over the longest boom in the history of capitalism....Since then the performance of the economy has taken the bloom off rosy expectations of easy material progress. Periods of slow growth have been bracketed by stubborn recessions. A sense of straitened resources has dampened enthusiasm for social spending. The confusion of economists trying to explain what has happened and how to remedy it has been matched by doubts among other social scientists that government programs can control outcomes.²

When Canadians look at Saskatchewan, they often perceive the nation’s leader in social-democratic initiatives, medicare being the obvious example. Michael O’Sullivan and Sandra Sorensen argue that it was the political tradition of regional alienation in the province that placed Saskatchewan ‘in the forefront of innovative social policy’ and into a

¹ Jean Swanson, *Poor Bashing: The Politics of Exclusion* (Between the Lines, 2001)

² Samuel H. Beer, ‘Foreword: A New Look at Poverty,’ Manuel Carballo and Mary Jo Bane (eds.), *The State and the Poor in the 1980s* (Auburn House Publishing Company, 1984) v

position to be ‘more generous to its less advantaged citizens.’³ But the authors go on to point out that ‘too much has been made of this latter point, to the extent of creating a myth about a socialist island in the Canadian capitalist sea.’⁴ According to Gerard Boychuk, provincial social assistance programs differ widely in Canada, and indeed, these systems are aimed towards qualitatively different ends as regards the market and family. Yet, even within the same province, radically different approaches can be taken toward social assistance programs by different governments.

This paper examines popular attitudes toward welfare recipients in the province of Saskatchewan from 1970 until 1990. Rather than analyzing government policy, it uses as its primary sources the two largest and most significant newspapers in the province- the *Regina Leader-Post* and the *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*. In particular, the paper focuses on the issue of “productivity”. This term, loaded with meaning, often appears in the debate around welfare. For example, the first phase of the welfare reforms ushered in by the Devine government in 1982 were based on a report entitled ‘A Productive Welfare System for the Eighties.’ As economic retrenchment came to dominate social policy, the term ominously crept into the debate, becoming a catchword for the need to streamline the welfare system, force recipients into the workforce, and formulate a more efficient notion of the welfare state. In the minds of policy-makers, ‘the relationship between the welfare state and market efficiency is assumed to be zero-sum.’⁵ In the world of the ‘post-welfare state,’ western

³ Michael O’ Sullivan and Sandra Sorensen, ‘Saskatchewan’ in Jacqueline S. Ismael and Yves Vaillancourt (eds), *Privatization and Provincial Social Services in Canada: Policy, Administration and Service Delivery* (The University of Alberta Press, 1988) 75

⁴ Sullivan and Sorensen, ‘Saskatchewan,’ 76

⁵ Gerard Boychuk, *Patchworks of Purpose: The Development of Provincial Social Assistance Regimes in Canada* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1998) xviii

countries have sought to ‘restructure their welfare and income-assistance programs, building exits to welfare and incentives to remain in the “productive” labour force.’⁶

According to traditional definitions of productivity (the amount of output produced by each unit of input, where outputs and inputs are measured in physical units), welfare recipients are obviously viewed as completely “unproductive”. But within the confines of this narrow and patriarchal traditional definition, as Marilyn Waring has made so clear, even the work of women in the household, such as ‘the cleaning, decoration, and maintenance of the dwelling occupied by the household; the cleaning, servicing, and repair of household goods; the preparation and serving of meals; the care, training, and instruction of children; the care of the sick, infirm, or old people; and the transportation of members of the household or their goods,’ counts for nothing. Women, for example, who remain in the household to raise children are viewed as *reproductive* not *productive*.⁷ According to Karen Seccombe,

Women’s roles are now in a state of flux, and poor women are no longer excused from work in order to care for their children. Our society values their cheap market labor more than it values their labor in the home. We demand that they fill the growing number of low tier service sector jobs that pay only minimum wages and offer no benefits, such as health insurance or subsidized child care, and ignore the fact that employment of this nature does nothing to lift women and children from poverty. Because of the insecurity of these jobs, poor women have on-again off-again bouts with welfare.⁸

Yet, while the notion of productivity remains confined to traditional economic output, and refuses to consider other forms of household or voluntary service, the term

⁶ Luc Theriault and David Rosenbluth, ‘Moving from Welfare to Work: Saskatchewan Social Assistance Applicants in Perspective,’ *Prairie Forum* (27, no. 1 Spring 2002) 59-82

⁷ See Marilyn Waring, *Counting for Nothing: What Men Value and What Women are Worth* (University of Toronto Press, 1999) xxv-xxvi and Nancy Folbre *The Invisible Heart: Economics and Family Values* (The New Press, 2001); SSHRC Collaborative Research Grant, *Redefining Productivity to Enhance Social Development and Well-Being*, University of Regina.

⁸ Karen Seccombe, “So You Think I Drive a Cadillac?”: *Welfare Recipients’ Perspectives on the System and its Reform* (Allyn and Bacon, 1999) vii

“unproductive” does indeed carry additional derogatory meaning. Welfare recipients are viewed as not only failing to contribute or “produce” anything of value to the economy, they are also perceived as failing to offer anything of value to society as a whole.⁹ To be a productive member of society, or in other words a productive citizen, translates to having a job in the formal economy. Ironically then, society refuses to broaden the traditional definition of productivity when it comes to household production, yet it does expand the definition in order to further stigmatize and de-value those at the bottom of the economic ladder.

The National Context

The 1960s were, for the most part, good for Canada, its economy, and the nation’s burgeoning social safety net. The federal Liberals under Lester Pearson returned to office in 1963 with the reform wing of the party in a dominant position. As Alvin Finkel points out, ‘the tide of public opinion was clearly in favour of social programs.’¹⁰ Ottawa and the provinces were relatively slow to react to the increasingly visible issue of poverty, but the issue was ‘exploding into public consciousness.’ American President, Lyndon Johnson’s ‘unconditional War on Poverty,’ announced in his 1964 State of the Union Address, resonated in Canada. Statistics were increasingly available on poverty but the argument that held most weight was that the number was consistently growing in an age of prosperity. ‘The feeling of disquiet over this seeming paradox,’ Dennis Guest points out, ‘surfaced in the mid 1960s, at a time when Canadians rediscovered poverty in their midst.’¹¹ Social commentators seemed to realize that for the first time in its history, Canada had the means

⁹ *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, 17 March 1976

¹⁰ Alvin Finkel, *Our Lives: Canada After 1945* (James Lorimer & Company Ltd., 1997) 134

¹¹ Dennis Guest, *The Emergence of Social Security in Canada* (University of British Columbia Press, 1980) 166

to eliminate mass poverty completely: 'Affluence, in short, made the continued existence of poverty intolerable.'¹²

The Canada Pension Plan (CPP) and the Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS) were adopted by the federal government by the end of the 1960s; Medicare was phased in; the Canada Assistance Plan (CAP) was introduced to aid most categories of social assistance recipients. By 1966, with unemployment insurance, family allowances, old age security and pensions, workers' compensation, social assistance, medicare, and the minimum wage, the main pillars of the welfare state were in place. Reformers moved their attention both to improved benefits within these programs and to new programs such as a national daycare program and a guaranteed annual income.¹³

But the reforms of the late 1960s reflected more than the benefits of economic prosperity trickling down to the poor. Reports by such groups as the Economic Council of Canada, the Canadian Welfare Council, and the Special Senate Committee on Poverty revealed a troubling level of poverty existing across the nation. The identification of the working poor marked what Guest describes as 'a milestone in Canada's social security history.'¹⁴ It highlighted the essential link between low or intermittent earnings and poverty while also marking an attempt to define a new Canadian standard of social minimum. The poor of the 1960s were different from those who suffered the Great Depression because they suffered from 'relative deprivation.' They were 'victims of the same automation, technological changes, and new methods of production that were delivering affluence to the general population.' The new poor, then, 'were the victims not simply of scarcity, but of a

¹² James Struthers, *The Limits of Affluence: Welfare in Ontario, 1920-1970* (University of Toronto Press, 1994) 214

¹³ Finkel, 138

¹⁴ Guest, 167

rising sense of expectations and entitlement.’¹⁵ At the same time, the reports demonstrated the disturbing relationship between poverty and racial and gender discrimination. The poor were a marginalized and increasingly self-contained population: the elderly, the underemployed, the widows, single mothers, the disabled, the sick, the mentally ill, the small farmers and the migrant workers, the First Nations and the new immigrants. Their children were trapped within a self-perpetuating culture of poverty. Passive victims of progress and traditional notions of what defined a productive member of society, it was increasingly recognized that they could not simply ‘pull themselves up by their own bootstraps.’¹⁶ Canada’s own ‘War on Poverty’ was officially launched in the 1965 speech from the throne.¹⁷

By the early 1970s, the Liberal government of Pierre Trudeau seemed intent on living up to its reformist promises. Canada was at the end of a period of exceptional economic growth. Existing social programs were supported and a variety of reforms were implemented, such as extensions to unemployment insurance in the form of increased maternity benefits (ease of access, duration of benefits, etc.). But the Trudeau government was very concerned with rising inflation that was showing signs of threatening the well-being of middle-class Canadians. Unemployment, which had averaged 4.4 percent in 1969, averaged 5.7 percent the following year and 6.3 percent in 1971 and 1972. The following budgets were more expansive, the money supply was allowed to grow, and in 1973 and 1974 the rate of unemployment fell to 5.3 percent.¹⁸ But the Arab-Israeli War in the fall of 1973 sent oil prices spiralling upward and inflation climbed to over ten percent in both

¹⁵ Struthers, 214

¹⁶ Struthers, 215

¹⁷ Tom Kent, Pearson’s policy secretary and key advisor, came up with the idea and drafted the speech.

¹⁸ Finkel, 142-4

1974 and 1975. When it came to welfare policy, Graham Riches notes that, ‘after the oil crisis of 1973 we entered a different world.’¹⁹ By 1975 price and wage controls, along with a tight monetary policy, were imposed in an attempt to control inflation. Unemployment continued to rise, and after posting either small surpluses or deficits from 1970 to 1974, the government began to post larger deficits.²⁰

Yet, advocates of social security had reason for optimism. The period since the end of the Second World War had seen marked progress not only in the establishment of a social security system but also in the thinking behind such programs. According to Guest, the most significant development was ‘the gradual shift from a residual, limited approach to social security, involving discretionary, means- or needs- tested programmes of an “emergency” nature, to an institutional or comprehensive approach which emphasizes the right of people to receive the help they require in a manner that is not demeaning.’²¹ In the early 1970s, the government had pursued talks with the provinces on the implementation of a guaranteed annual income (GAI) as a way of dealing with poverty. In April 1975, the welfare ministers of all provinces agreed to a two-tier system for a GAI, with unemployables and those unable to find work in one tier and the working poor dealt with separately. The federal government suggested a scaled-down version of the program limited to families with children and people aged fifty-five to sixty-five. This would cost \$240 million as against the \$2 billion required for the program approved by the provinces the year earlier. Despite the fact that Ottawa was far from actually adopting the plan, Ontario balked at the federal proposal and the GAI was shelved.²²

¹⁹ Riches, 4

²⁰ In 1975 the deficit was \$3.8 billion and in 1978, it reached \$10.9 billion. Finkel, 148

²¹ Guest, 203

²² Finkel, 152

By 1980 poverty groups in Canada had little reason for optimism. “Stagflation”, a term designed to describe an economy with high rates of both inflation and unemployment, characterized both the American and Canadian economies for much of the 1970s and early 1980s. Unemployment stood at 7.3 percent for 1975-9, a rate three percent greater than the average for the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries.²³ Monetarists and neo-conservatives claimed that the post-war welfare state had created a society of complacent individuals who took security for granted and therefore had little incentive to be entrepreneurial; social programs reduced productivity by destroying individual initiative and the traditional work ethic.²⁴ They called for a shrinking of the money supply to wring inflation out of the economy. This included reducing government expenditure and offering tax cuts for business. The result would be a temporary increase in unemployment but a long-term freeing of capital and a resulting higher and more stable growth pattern for the overall economy.²⁵

The period of post-war economic growth was clearly at an end. Critics of the welfare state proclaimed that Keynesian economic policies were collapsing in on themselves. Notions of minimum wages, guaranteed pensions, and social assistance fell prey to a revitalization and a transforming of *laissez-faire* ideas. In an era of declining economic performance, the ideas of the “New Right” attracted growing support while the “Left” commenced a long retreat. The Right spoke in terms of the “globalization” of capital

²³ Finkel, 146

²⁴ *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, 2 February 1982

²⁵ Finkel, 146-7

and the limits this imposed on the ability of national governments to control the pace and character of economic development. It drew attention to the real problem of mounting debts that nations like Canada were accumulating in an effort to maintain social programs in an era of declining government revenues. At the same time, it argued that capital, increasingly able to move where it wished, would favour countries and regions with low rates of inflation, minimal government debt, privatization, minimal government intervention, and low taxation.²⁶

In May 1979 the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher came to power in Britain and commenced a campaign of slashing social spending; the Republican government of Ronald Reagan followed suit in the United States in 1980. By 1984 the Progressive Conservatives were in office in Canada under Brian Mulroney. Annual debts had been building for the last nine years of Liberal rule in Canada; spending increases exceeded growth in the sluggish Canadian economy; unemployment reached a post-war high in 1982 of 12.9 percent. Canada was in recession. The Mulroney government cut what were viewed as the wasteful and inefficient Family Allowance benefits and then eliminated them altogether in 1993, trading the universal program for a child tax credit. Amid a vast range of deficit-controlling cuts to government spending, Ottawa slashed grants to the provinces. The federal government focussed primarily on the national deficit but the costs of unemployment insurance and social assistance ballooned in the face of increasing unemployment. Attitudes hardened toward those on government assistance; it was increasingly argued that the army of unemployed who had become the front line against inflation were the cause of economic problems, particularly alleged government over-

²⁶ Finkel, 281-3

spending. There were increasing complaints about individuals who did not want to work and were becoming dependent on social assistance. The formation of the Reform Party in 1987 played on this anger and frustration, calling for a massive reduction in federal spending as part of a campaign to rid the country of its national deficit. The Reform Party focussed on social problems as the root cause of national economic problems. Too many people, allegedly, were relying on the government rather than on themselves to put bread on the table.²⁷

The Situation in Saskatchewan

By 1970 Saskatchewan was just beginning to feel the effects of increased welfare demands. A particularly conservative administration in Saskatchewan, under the Liberal government of Ross Thatcher (1964-71), did leave a 'positive legacy' in the form of the Saskatchewan Assistance Plan Act (1966).²⁸ The SAP was an attempt to harmonize existing provincial programs to take advantage of the cost-sharing structure of the CAP. Inflation was on the rise, however, and federal officials became increasingly concerned with achieving stable prices rather than social security. A debate was underway in Ottawa with the Trudeau government preparing a White Paper on Social Welfare and a Senate Committee reporting on Poverty. The debate focussed around questions of a guaranteed annual income plan but was based on the need to reform the welfare system across the country. Criticism in the two leading Saskatchewan newspapers- The *Regina Leader-Post* and the *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix* was aimed at an inefficient system that produced 'great waste' rather than at those relying on it.²⁹ It was argued that the various programs 'overlap

²⁷ Finkel, 284-91

²⁸ Sullivan and Sorensen, 'Saskatchewan,' 76

²⁹ *Regina Leader Post*, 23 July 1970

on the one hand, leave serious gaps on the other, and do not do the job.’ Welfare programs had to offer more than a guaranteed income plan; they had to be accompanied by measures that actually enabled those in poverty to escape:

Money only relieves the hardships of poverty but does not eradicate it. Programs are needed which will retrain adults and give children a boost early in life so that the poverty sector of society can rise and compete on a fair basis with the rest of the country. If poverty were only a lack of funds, it would be simple to combat. Instead, poverty is a condition and a result of having less ability or less opportunity to handle the tools to earn the necessities of life.³⁰

Popular opinion recognized the need for generosity in welfare policy tempered by a consideration of taxation burdens. A clear distinction was made, however, between “productive citizens” and those on welfare, the “deserving” and the “undeserving” poor: ‘Even an affluent society, such as Canada,’ an article in the *Star-Phoenix* noted, ‘needs to maintain a balance between its productive and its welfare sides. For, in the final analysis, the producers as workers and as contributors to the various schemes, pensions and the rest, determine the extent of welfare.’³¹

Newspaper articles in the early 1970s noted that the demand for welfare assistance was increasing and that it was particularly an urban problem, ‘most apparent’ in the cities of Regina and Saskatoon. Liberal Welfare Minister, C.P. Macdonald, admitted that cost estimates could well reach \$1 000 000 more than originally forecast because there were so many first-time applicants. The increase was blamed on persons moving in from rural areas seeking jobs ‘to supplement their income.’³² Macdonald was opposed to ‘the concept of universality’ being put forward increasingly by Ottawa.³³ The National Welfare Council, an

³⁰ *Regina Leader Post*, 26 November 1970

³¹ *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, 4 December 1970

³² *Regina Leader Post*, 9 January 1970

³³ *Regina Leader Post*, 1 December 1970

advisory body established by the federal government, was critical of Saskatchewan's 'special rules' written into its welfare programs to exclude single unemployed men under the age of 30 from gaining assistance or curtailing that assistance. The province refused to support 'able-bodied men' until they were 'pushed to exhaust every possible opportunity before they are given food and accommodation allowances.'³⁴

Popular opinion, however, was moving in the opposite direction. Commentary in the newspapers pointed to a more sympathetic view of welfare recipients:

Society must find new points of view, new values for classifying the poor. There are many prejudices in this field. One of the main prejudices is that anybody who wants to work can find work, which evidently is not true....Our society must change its attitude to the poor and find ways for better understanding problems of poverty without any old prejudices.³⁵

Newspaper stories describing the particular plight of welfare recipients, for the most part, met with sympathetic responses, albeit with a tone of mild lecturing. The overriding message was that the plight of society's unfortunate elements was not their own doing. In part, this sympathetic response emerged because the notion of the "welfare bum" was a relatively new phenomenon; there was, as of yet, no perceived "welfare culture." It was often argued that a 'new breed' had indeed arisen, and this group had 'no qualms about living off society,' but these were the politicized youth of the "hippy generation" who were seeking ways to resist 'the establishment.'³⁶ Instead, responses to the "less fortunate" were reminiscent and even conditioned by experiences of the Great Depression of the 1930s. Often, those writing the commentaries reflected back on their own experiences in the Depression, thereby eliciting a sympathetic response because it was generally accepted that

³⁴ *Regina Leader Post*, 8 October 1970

³⁵ *Regina Leader Post*, 4 February 1970

³⁶ *Regina Leader Post*, 30 August 1971

the suffering during this crisis was unavoidable. By the early 1970s it was also recognized that that post-war boom was over. While the province and nation were likely in for good economic times, trends in the global economy were indicating that they would not support full employment. As a result, welfare rolls and costs would inevitably rise.³⁷

The provincial welfare department was congratulated in a *Regina Leader-Post* editorial in January 1971 for its ‘forward-looking approach.’ New regulations allowed single-parent families and partially employable persons to keep up to \$75 a month in earnings without deductions being made from welfare allowances. Formerly, 50 per cent of casual earnings were deducted. The provincial Liberal government was praised for ‘exhibiting a more generous and more realistic attitude towards the recipients.’ There was little fear, the editorial argued, that the welfare rolls would become ‘swollen by persons with jobs deciding they can live better on welfare than from gainful work. Nearly everyone except chronic welfare cases-- who are usually unemployable anyway-- prefers even a poor job to placing himself and his family on welfare.’³⁸ It was often repeated that while there were always a few who took advantage of a generous system, ‘employable persons are a minority of those on welfare.’³⁹ The thrust of the editorials was not to force “undeserving” recipients off the welfare rolls. Instead, the role of government was to provide incentives in order to ‘encourage’ recipients to seek employment ‘so they can improve their standard of living.’ Eventually, they would become independent and move off the welfare lists.⁴⁰

The NDP defeated Ross Thatcher’s Liberals in Saskatchewan and were elected to office in 1971 under Allan Blakeney. The new premier was intent on extending public

³⁷ *Regina Leader Post*, 27 March 1971; 10 December 1971

³⁸ *Regina Leader Post*, 27 January 1971; 17 March 1971

³⁹ *Regina Leader Post*, 30 August 1971

⁴⁰ *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, 22 January 1971

enterprise. As a result of improved economic factors in the province, the government was able to implement a system of increased social services. The NDP government's major policy instrument for enhancing the status of the economically disadvantaged and alleviating the extremes of income inequality was through the SAP (Social Assistance Plan) and the legislation administered under SAP. There were eight separate Acts under the auspices of this assistance plan, and during its tenure the NDP added the Department of Social Services Act (1972), the Human Resources Development Act (1972), the Family Services Act (1973), the Children of Unmarried Parents Act (1973), and the Community Services Act (1974).

The reaction to the increased social spending was immediate. O.J. Keehr, Vice-President of the Saskatchewan Chamber of Commerce, publicly labelled the welfare state as a 'crime against humanity' because it encouraged sections of society to be less than they could be. 'Productivity is the password and it is sadly lacking....,' Keehr noted, 'the code word is work.' The solution lay in a 'change of direction, a return to a work-oriented philosophy.'⁴¹ At times, editorials echoed these sentiments of middle-class respectability by playing upon the main popular criticism of the welfare state: 'The fact is that some people just don't want to work.' Welfare recipients, it was charged, deliberately took on 'scruffy appearances' so perspective employers would refuse to hire them. The result was hurting the average taxpayer:

Welfare parasitism is much more comfortable, and sometimes the money is better. They are not bothered by the fact that the allowances they get come out of the pockets of taxpayers. But as the cost of welfare continues to rise, more of the taxpayers are beginning to feel that the welfare parasite's right to avoid work by looking repulsive somehow must be thwarted.⁴²

⁴¹ *Regina Leader Post*, 7 November 1970

⁴² *Regina Leader Post*, 8 January 1972

But even these criticisms were balanced by the acceptance of the necessity of social assistance: ‘The welfare game goes on, and hurt in the process are those whose needs for welfare are genuine and deserving.’⁴³ The vast majority of public responses in the letters sections of the *Regina Leader-Post* and *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix* were even less harsh. The dominant response first reflected the need for government financial aid to the downtrodden and less fortunate, and *then* reinforced the merits of the traditional work ethic. Commentaries called for contributory programs, based on the unemployment insurance and old-age pension model, rather than ‘money for nothing.’ If money was to be ‘dolled out [sic]’ to the poor, it was not to go to those who were ‘capable of working.’

We are going too far out on a limb for welfare. Giving young, healthy people welfare only tends to demoralize them. We are duty bound to keep the crippled, sick and the elderly, but giving it to young people who won’t work is a mistake and costly. There are a lot of jobs going begging, and an appalling shortage of domestic help. There is no need for any healthy young person to be out of a job.⁴⁴

The traditional work ethic did seem under assault and the public sensed that the usual appeals to this ethic, based on guilt and shame, no longer held the same resonance: ‘The so-called work ethic, once used to measure a person’s worth in the community no matter his income level or social status, has been eroded steadily in recent years.’⁴⁵ If this indeed was occurring, what would be the result? What type of society would emerge? How would

⁴³ *Regina Leader Post*, 8 January 1972

⁴⁴ *Regina Leader Post*, 10 October 1975

⁴⁵ *Regina Leader Post*, 24 February 1972

society continue to be productive? If the work ethic continued to be eroded, one *Leader-Post* editorial pondered,

Would all men and women be content to just loaf? Surely it goes against the basic tenets of nature, for man, for all his vaunted intellect and upright posture and technological marvels, is still driven in the unconscious reaches of his personality by the same drives that motivate the impala to graze while the lion growls, and the wolf to hunt. Zoologists believe that if the impala and the wolf could survive without eating, they would still feel a powerful compulsion to continue some sort of purposeful activity. Movement is life, and life is movement. And there is much evidence that purposeful work, hopefully in some occupation that contributes value to society, is necessary for human fulfillment, if not mental health, quite apart from the resulting remuneration.⁴⁶

But these same commentaries repeated the assertion that, other than a few exceptions, people would not voluntarily choose a life on welfare. Arguments that welfare recipients should be put to work by government on public projects were rejected because it was generally accepted that those on public assistance were unemployable. Many single mothers were on social assistance and the financial aid at least allowed them to remain at home to raise their children. Regardless, solutions to problems of ‘welfarism’ were ‘too complex to be solved by simple expedients.’⁴⁷ One story called for holidays to be provided for welfare recipients. It cast aside the typical refrain that welfare recipients should not have holidays because they were not working by pointing out that a life on welfare was work itself. Having a holiday meant more than being off work; it meant ‘getting away from your troubles and the battles from day to day.’ Mothers on welfare had to take care of their children, wash clothes, and cook meals. Was that not work, the story asked?⁴⁸

Much of the reason for critical perceptions of welfare recipients rested upon dominant ‘myths’ that not only pervaded societal attitudes but were groundlessly repeated

⁴⁶ *Regina Leader Post*, 20 March 1973

⁴⁷ *Regina Leader Post*, 24 September 1971; 24 February 1971

⁴⁸ *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, 3 August 1972

again and again. The *Star-Phoenix* reported the findings of an American report in the summer of 1973 that dealt with popular opinion of welfare recipients: ‘The report states unequivocally there is no truth in the belief welfare families generally require incentives to induce them to work....What distinguishes the employed from the non-employed poor at any point in time is not work ethic but a combination of job opportunities and demographic problems.’ The report concluded that a concerted effort was required by government ‘to convey the realities of welfare to the public and avoid the perpetuation of misconceptions about the causes of poverty and dependency.’⁴⁹

Another reason for the relatively sympathetic response to the welfare issue was the increasingly active and vocal poverty groups across the province and nation. Poverty groups joined what was already a growing chorus of public criticism aimed at welfare policy. In October 1971, a ‘provincial poor people’s council’ was established in Regina. ‘For the first time, the poor seemed about to make their own suggestions on how to improve what one Regina organizer called the “fuzzy jungle” of Saskatchewan’s welfare system,’ the *Leader-Post* reported.⁵⁰ By the end of 1972, the Saskatchewan Council of Anti-Poverty Organizations was pressuring government for welfare reform, and in particular to begin ‘recognizing the human elements of poverty.’⁵¹ In the face of increased spending on social assistance by the NDP government, the Liberal opposition argued that if elected, it would ‘de-emphasize’ welfare payments. Yet even this opposition reflected the prevailing softer attitudes toward recipients. The Liberals admitted that ‘abuses of the

⁴⁹ *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, 9 July 1973

⁵⁰ *Regina Leader Post*, 15 January 1972

⁵¹ *Regina Leader Post*, 29 September, 1972

welfare system are only a small part of the problem.’ Instead, the onus of the dilemma rested with the need to ‘encourage self-sufficiency in order to break the poverty cycle.’⁵²

From 1972 until 1976 the basic SAP allowance increased substantially and these increases remained significantly above the rise in the cost of living. The Blakeney government took pride in such increases as a 15.4 percent rise in spending between 1972 and 1973, while at the same time pointing to Saskatchewan’s unemployment rate, which was the lowest in the nation (just over half the national average).⁵³ By 1975, however, the emphasis on social assistance was diminishing significantly, and after 1977, the growth in benefits started to decline.⁵⁴

The Blakeney government focussed its energies on economic policy, such as uranium and potash initiatives, and fell into line with its 1976 budget of ‘responsible restraint.’ The Family Income Plan (FIP) was eroded by inflation and became simply a welfare supplement, rather than an income supplement to the working poor modeled on the Guaranteed Annual Income proposal advocated at the time by National Health and Welfare Minister Marc Lalonde.⁵⁵ The NDP broke its promises to provide 13 500 day-care spaces by 1979, and ended up with a worse record in the day-care arena than that in many other provinces. According to Judith Martin, ‘the belief that a woman’s right to be productively employed is conditional, tends to result in a selective rather than a universal approach to the

⁵² *Regina Leader Post*, 9 December 1974

⁵³ *Regina Leader Post*, 7-9 December, 1972

⁵⁴ Gordon Ternowetsky, ‘Income Inequality, 1971-82: The Saskatchewan Case,’ in Harding (ed.), *Social Policy and Social Justice*, 154; Sullivan and Sorensen, ‘Saskatchewan,’ 84

⁵⁵ Sullivan and Sorensen, ‘Saskatchewan,’ 77

public funding of day care.’⁵⁶ Despite the socialist rhetoric surrounding the NDP, the Blakeney government demonstrated a strong and consistent preference for non-governmental organizations (NGO’s) to handle the delivery of personal social services. It was the policy ‘that many services, from daycare to special homecare, were best provided by the nonprofit private sector with a level of provincial funding.’⁵⁷ It is generally argued, however, that the NDP government did keep its promises in terms of improving and extending the benefits of social welfare programs and that Saskatchewan continued to be the most generous province in the country with respect to social assistance benefits.⁵⁸ Yet, as the province’s GDP increased, the proportion spent on health, education, and social services actually declined.⁵⁹

The public’s appetite for increased social spending, while at the same time its sympathy and tolerance for the poor, was diminishing. The perception remained that since the end of the Second World War, all levels of government had been pouring vast amounts of money into the social security system. Yet, poverty and income distribution had remained the same. ‘The facts haven’t changed,’ an editorial in the *Leader-Post* remarked, ‘but public perceptions have. Middle-class Canadians now are convinced they are hard done by. They are fed up with paying ever-higher taxes to support welfare bums. They are outraged by unemployment insurance rip-offs (no matter what the apologists say, almost everyone knows someone who has cheated the scheme.)’ The public increasingly believed

⁵⁶ Judith Martin, ‘The Continuing Struggle for Universal Day Care,’ Jim Harding (ed.), *Social Policy and Social Justice: The NDP Government in Saskatchewan during the Blakeney Years* (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1995) 17-51

⁵⁷ Sullivan and Sorensen, ‘Saskatchewan,’ 80

⁵⁸ Graham Riches and George Maslany, ‘The Shift to Joint Ventures in Social Services: Personal Social Service Spending in Saskatchewan, 1971-81,’ Harding (ed.), *Social Policy and Social Justice*, 131; Sullivan and Sorensen, ‘Saskatchewan,’ 77

⁵⁹ Riches and Maslany, 132

that it had been ‘taking part in a gigantic charade.’ Rather than working to provide genuine solutions to social problems, the government had been ‘trying to smother problems with a bit of conscience money.’ The criticism, then, was aimed at the bureaucracy and the politicians, as well as those taking advantage of the system: ‘The money goes up, down, and around. Nothing changes, except that everyone now is tired.’⁶⁰

By 1976 newspaper editorials were pointing to ‘a retreat to the old welfare gospel.’ In 1966 the Canada Assistance Plan led the federal government to pay half the costs of provincial welfare programs on the condition that these programs operated on the basis of defined standards for determining eligibility and benefit entitlements and that unsuccessful applicants had a right of appeal to an independent tribunal. It took a decade for all the provinces to fall into line but in Ontario and British Columbia new welfare ministers were ‘preaching the gospel of welfare workers’ discretion.’ They were ‘turning back the clock’ and providing welfare workers with discretionary powers to refuse welfare ‘to those who are employable and to young people, employable or not.’ Welfare workers were being directed to refuse assistance to employable recipients who failed to conform to ‘suitable’ dress and grooming standards. Because those on welfare were not viewed as ‘productive citizens,’ they did not seem to hold the same rights and liberties as other Canadians.⁶¹

Newspaper stories increasingly focussed on social assistance abuse cases. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, most of these cases and stories dealt with unemployment insurance fraud.⁶² But the number of people claiming welfare in Saskatchewan was increasing and this would soon turn the ire of a populace, already reeling under the effects

⁶⁰ *Regina Leader Post*, 14 June 1976

⁶¹ *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, 19 May 1976

⁶² *Regina Leader Post*, 8 March 1978; 14 March; 5 April 1978; 22 May 1980; 6 June 1980; 24 October 1980

of inflation and unemployment, onto this group. Newspaper stories began reporting statistics that revealed that the welfare figures for the 18-29 age group was ‘uncommonly high.’ Explanations for the increase were placed on the growing ‘transient’ population moving into the city from the rural areas, as well as an increase in the number of ‘second-generation welfare families.’⁶³ Young people responded in the letters sections of both newspapers with claims that they were willing to work but there simply were not enough job opportunities. They denied that a cycle of dependency existed. The stigma of being on welfare was so depressing because it made them feel so useless and without purpose. It was claimed that at times young women would get married or have children simply to be given ‘a role to play’ in society.⁶⁴

Economic statistics by the mid to late-1970s supported the criticisms being aimed at those individuals not participating in the work force. Productivity numbers were employed to demonstrate that while the economy was slowing down and work output was declining, the demands for wage increases continued. ‘Productivity in Canada is in a sorry state,’ an editorial in the *Leader Post* announced. ‘Canadians are being paid, or asking to be paid more for producing less, and that can only lead to increased inflationary pressures and maybe even higher unemployment.’ Statistics demonstrated that Canada’s productivity levels among workers was second from the bottom in the OECD and only “socialist” Sweden was in a worse state (particularly when compared with Germany and Japan). The Economic Council of Canada did not shy away from making the connection: the need to increase productivity rested on the need to get more Canadians into the work force.⁶⁵

⁶³ *Regina Leader Post*, 15 June 1978

⁶⁴ *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, 18 February 1982

⁶⁵ *Regina Leader Post*, 10 April 1978

Canada's social programs were a disincentive to work, another editorial claimed, and this had a direct effect on productivity numbers. In particular, unemployed employables were placing a serious drag on economic recovery. They were 'unproductive' because they did not work, and therefore were not producing, but they also drew money from social programs that could be spent elsewhere. As a result, they were "doubly unproductive."⁶⁶

The election of Grant Devine's Progressive Conservative Party in 1982 turned Saskatchewan, 'long regarded as a laboratory for social democracy,' into 'a hotbed for neo-conservatism.' The Devine Tories commenced a massive sell-off of publicly owned assets, turning privatization into a 'veritable crusade.' The government also began an attack on labour unions as well as the welfare state, arguing the latter was 'anti-family and detrimental to individual initiative.' According to Jim Pitsula and Ken Rasmussen, the result was 'the erosion of social services and the virtual breakdown of the public welfare system.'⁶⁷

It should be pointed out, however, that the economic boom of the 1970s was undoubtedly over. Potash and uranium prices fell dramatically as did oil prices subsequently. Investment dried up, government revenues decreased dramatically, and unemployment rates increased with unfortunate results for social assistance. With unemployment reaching over 10 percent in the early 1980s, up from 4 percent a few years before, the number of claimants and their dependents on social assistance went from a decade low of 36 000 in 1976 to a 1985 high, slightly in excess of 61 000.⁶⁸ In such a dismal atmosphere of economic recession, public attitudes became increasingly critical

⁶⁶ *Regina Leader-Post*, 22 July 1976; *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, 12 March 1984

⁶⁷ James M. Pitsula and Ken Rasmussen, *Privatizing a Province: The New Right in Saskatchewan* (New Star Books, 1990) 2

⁶⁸ Sullivan and Sorensen, 'Saskatchewan,' 84

toward social assistance recipients. The Progressive Conservative government played upon the growing disenchantment, in the province generally, with the idea of the welfare state, now often regarded as a 'trough'. Policies were based on the assumption that 'the welfare state in general and social assistance in particular have been largely responsible for creating a dependent, work-shy nation in which people's productive and entrepreneurial spirit has been sapped.'⁶⁹ The connection between low productivity in the economy and high social service spending was made to seem obvious.

In 1982, Gordon Dirks, the new Conservative Minister of Social Services, ushered in the first phase of the Devine government's 'welfare program' by commissioning a comprehensive internal review of the Saskatchewan Assistance Plan. This study, 'A Productive Welfare System for the Eighties: A Review of the Saskatchewan Assistance Plan,' provided the basis for far-reaching changes based on a philosophy that spoke of establishing 'increased efficiency,' and of providing 'productive opportunities' to clients.⁷⁰ The central idea to emerge from the Review was to attack the perceived dependency of those on social assistance and to return them to the labour market. Inherent in this thinking, as well as the growing public perception, was that those on welfare were there for no other reason than a desire to 'sit on their fannies.' They were completely "unproductive," not only in relation to the work force and economy, but as citizens in society. The fact that many of them were caretakers within the home, for children or the elderly, held little merit; the fact that most did not choose a life on welfare was ignored. In response to a provincial request for submissions to the comprehensive review of the Saskatchewan Assistance Plan, the Saskatoon city council asked the provincial government 'to find a more productive role

⁶⁹ Graham Riches, 3

⁷⁰ Sullivan and Sorensen, 'Saskatchewan,' 82

for Saskatchewan's welfare recipients...to find a way for those receiving assistance to make positive social contributions.' It was noted that the review was launched 'following widespread concern about the work ethic of assistance recipients and the program's bureaucracy and non-productiveness.'⁷¹

The SAP was, in essence, viewed as 'non-productive.' Severe unemployment was becoming an increasingly explosive political issue and the government had to demonstrate action. The neo-conservative belief that the poor were receiving too many incentives to remain on welfare rather than incentives to work led the government to reduce those incentives by lowering the benefits. The best way to reduce poverty was to dismantle the welfare provisions that burdened the economy and only benefited 'meddlesome bureaucrats and welfare spongers.'⁷² According to Dirks, 'the average people out there agree that government should assist people, but don't go overboard, don't provide too much because they know what human nature is like. That too much government help can be a disincentive for initiative.'⁷³

The Devine government focussed on what it perceived as the distinction between the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor and took full aim at single "employables". The "undeserving" poor were subject to the newly created Saskatchewan Employment Development Program (SEDP), which was an attempt to brand this group as fraudulent spongers whose poverty resulted from laziness. According to Riches, 'the stick was to be preferred to the carrot.'⁷⁴ Under SEDP, fully employable social assistance recipients who had been on welfare for three months had to register with the Assessment Placement Unit

⁷¹ *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, 19 April 1983

⁷² Pitsula and Rasmussen, 202

⁷³ As quoted in Pitsula and Rasmussen, 203

⁷⁴ Riches, 3

(APU) of the Department of Social Services. The APU then referred them to jobs, sponsored by SEDP and a parallel program, the Saskatchewan Skills Development Program (SSDP), providing “meaningful work experiences” (what one *Leader Post* writer noted, ‘translated into the Protestant work ethic⁷⁵), lasting between 20 and 26 weeks. According to Pitsula and Rasmussen, ‘that would be just enough to qualify someone for unemployment insurance benefits, which were 90 percent paid by Ottawa, and get them off welfare, which was 50 percent paid by Ottawa. Saskatchewan’s poor might still be out of work, but at least they would be less of a burden on Devine’s provincial budgets.’⁷⁶

The program was designed to categorize social assistance recipients as “employable” and then place the onus on them to prove they were otherwise. At the same time, it created low-wage jobs in the private sector. In an effort to give single employable people the “necessary spur” to get off welfare, their household and clothing allowances were eliminated, which represented a 41 percent cut in benefits covering basic needs.⁷⁷ A further \$100 was cut from their accommodation allowance. Supplemental dental care was not available for the first six months because, as the minister claimed, ‘some people are going on welfare simply to get their teeth fixed.’⁷⁸ The traditional work-ethic was being reintroduced; the system was being remodelled on the basis of “efficiency and productivity”. When faced with criticism, Premier Devine argued that ‘there is nobody in need in Saskatchewan who is unable to obtain assistance....The government is working to help people on welfare by taking steps to stimulate economic growth.’⁷⁹ According to one

⁷⁵ *Regina LeaderPost*, 9 May 1984

⁷⁶ Pitsula and Rasmussen, 204

⁷⁷ Pitsula and Rasmussen, 204

⁷⁸ As quoted in Sullivan and Sorensen, 84

⁷⁹ *Regina Leader Post*, 14 April 1983

article in the *Star-Phoenix*, 'as the province opens for business, it closes for people.'⁸⁰

Sullivan and Sorensen claim that

this approach constituted a decisive break with the previously dominant ideology of universalism and was a throwback to the approach taken prior to the reform period of the mid 1960s. For this reason the provincial welfare reform can be seen as a reactionary program in the literal sense, that is, it rolled back social progress in Saskatchewan.⁸¹

Even prior to 1960, however, attitudes toward the poor were not as harsh and critical as they were to become in the 1980s.

In May of 1984, Don Johnson, a freelance writer and former *Leader-Post* copy editor, attempted to find out what it would be like to live on the money then paid to a single, employable welfare recipient. In a series of four articles in the *Leader-Post*, he outlined his experiences and impressions and ended up engaging in a sparring match with Gordon Dirks. Johnson discovered that the vast majority of his time was focussed on stretching the thin budget in order to feed himself and maintain a roof over his head. He discovered that his poor diet led him to be much more fatigued than usual and that it also sapped any energy and initiative he would otherwise possess. His emotional state, even for the brief period of the eight-day experiment, was a 'roller-coaster.' He came face to face with society's perceptions of welfare recipients and the fact that those on social assistance are viewed as "worthless". 'Work is both good and honest,' Johnson wrote, while 'lethargy, which is seen as laziness, is bad, must be punished-- it is, after all, a sin.' While society was directing its criticisms at welfare recipients for not working, and therefore not contributing to society in any meaningful way, this motivation was low on Johnson's list, after such necessities as food, drink, shelter, protection, and community. Dirk's response was to focus

⁸⁰ *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, 23 April 1984

⁸¹ Sullivan and Sorensen, 84

on the fact that Johnson was not spending his 'time' looking for work.⁸² The dominant perception was a return to an old and brutal theory: 'welfare for the young must be made so unattractive and so far below the level of living possible on the minimum wage that young "employable" welfare recipients will be "motivated" to seek any work.'⁸³

Single employables in Saskatchewan saw their monthly benefits fall from \$522 in 1983 to \$345 in 1985. When lost purchasing power as a result of inflation was calculated, this represented a cut of 41.9 percent. Saskatchewan fell from first to seventh place with respect to the level of payments to this category of welfare recipients.⁸⁴ Although families and seniors on social assistance received modest increases, Saskatchewan became the only province where family allowances were deducted from social assistance cheques; the income tax exemption for the renter's property tax credit and property improvement grants were eliminated; and the amount of money a social assistance recipient was allowed to have in the bank was reduced.⁸⁵ Whereas social assistance rates were 10 percent below the poverty line in 1978, after the welfare reforms of 1984, they dropped to 50 percent below the poverty line for single people and 30 percent for a single parent with one child.⁸⁶ No other categories of recipients other than single employables had their long-term benefits cut, but because rates had been frozen since 1983, inflation was taking its toll.⁸⁷ Between 1981 and 1986 the number of Saskatchewan families living in poverty increased by 15.3 percent from 36 900 to 42 600. This represented 16.4 percent of Saskatchewan's 259 000 families in 1986. Nearly 70 percent of Saskatchewan children living in female-headed

⁸² *Regina Leader Post*, 9-12 May 1984

⁸³ *Regina Leader Post*, 5 November 1986

⁸⁴ Sullivan and Sorensen, 84

⁸⁵ Pitsula and Rasmussen, 204

⁸⁶ Pitsula and Rasmussen, 205

⁸⁷ Sullivan and Sorensen, 84

single parent families were poor. The number of poor children in the province during these five years increased by 12.8 percent. By 1988, there were 60 292 men, women, and children receiving social assistance. This figure demonstrated a 5.8 percent reduction from the 1985 figure of 64 040 but it was 24 percent higher than the 1982 figure of 48 396.⁸⁸

When responding to such figures as well as the criticism of the NDP, Dirks argued that reforms to the welfare system, including efforts to provide training and education to people on social assistance, and to encourage people “capable” of working to find employment, had been a marked success. He regularly cited statistics demonstrating that there were fewer single people capable of working on welfare.⁸⁹ As one article in the *Star-Phoenix* observed, welfare was designed to help poor people; the present reforms, however, were clearly aimed at punishing poor people for not producing: ‘We presently deal with welfare as a disease and try to treat the disease in isolation from the rest of society that treats workers as replaceable parts of the production machine.’⁹⁰ According to Dirks, the NDP’s welfare approach had been ‘to simply hand out a cheque and then walk away.’ As a result, the Progressive Conservatives inherited a welfare system which was ‘unproductive, inequitable, and inefficient.’⁹¹ Letters in both newspapers often echoed the sentiment that society should not ‘reward the irresponsible’ who fail to live up to expectations as ‘productive and efficient contributors.’⁹²

Possibly more damaging to the social assistance recipients of the province was the odious “blame the victim” campaign perpetrated by the Devine government. This

⁸⁸ Graham Riches, ‘Child Hunger and Family Poverty in Saskatchewan: Broadening the Debate,’ Graham Riches and Gordon Ternowetsky, *Winning and Losing at Welfare: Saskatchewan and Canada, 1981-1989* (Social Administration Research Unit, Faculty of Social Work, University of Regina, 1989) 1

⁸⁹ *Regina Leader Post*, 16 January 1986

⁹⁰ *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, 1 May 1984

⁹¹ *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, 2 June 1984

⁹² *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, 6 June 1985

campaign, headed by the Social Services Minister, Gordon Dirks, included public statements about the need to catch welfare cheaters as well as the establishment of a “fraud squad” to monitor social assistance recipients. Newspaper stories also picked up the charge with such headlines as ‘Welfare fraud claimed costing taxpayers millions.’ NDP MLA, Ned Shillington, argued that \$3.5 million in welfare payments went to ‘unneeding’ recipients in the 1980-81 fiscal year.⁹³ The criticism was aimed at cuts to the numbers of welfare workers, but the impact upon perceptions of welfare recipients was inevitable. Another story in the *Star-Phoenix* reported on a man’s complaints as to how easy it was to obtain food from the foodbank. ‘If someone wanted to abuse the system, they could,’ the report noted.⁹⁴

The criticisms, however, were only beginning. Dirks arrived for a television interview carrying grocery bags and proceeded to lecture his listeners about how smart shopping should allow welfare recipients to live comfortably: Every prejudice the middle class have towards the poor was appealed to in this campaign and according to Sullivan and Sorensen, it constituted ‘a clear example of disempowerment.’⁹⁵ The belief was perpetuated that every one on welfare was a ‘scrounger’ and out to ‘milk the system.’ Despite the fact that studies showed that welfare abuse was minimal, the allegation of fraud proved a highly successful method for convincing the public that benefits were too high and welfare spending in need of slashing. In addition, it reinforced the idea that the poor were to blame for their own misfortune and punishment was in order. It therefore became a useful device

⁹³ *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, 2 March 1983

⁹⁴ *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, 21 March 1985

⁹⁵ Sullivan and Sorensen, 85

for persuading financial aid workers that their central task was to screen people out rather than help them claim their legitimate entitlements.⁹⁶

The 'blame the victim' campaign resulted in considerable criticism and opposition, and the public debated the issue with expected emotion in the letters section of the newspapers. Often people simply pleaded with the system to be more sympathetic:

I am asking, in the name of people who are in a financial situation over which they have no control, that the department's staff treat these people with at least human dignity and respect; that they have proper training and understanding of the cultural backgrounds of the people they are supposed to serve. The people who are forced to seek social assistance are humiliated enough...In the name of common humanity, it should not be necessary to degrade them further.⁹⁷

While the campaign pandered to the mounting anger and frustration toward a deteriorating economic situation, it seemed to go too far for the majority of public opinion. 'I am sick to death,' one letter complained, 'of misinformed, misguided attacks on those most victimized in our society, the poor....The social atmosphere is ripe for kicking the vulnerable.'⁹⁸ The *Star-Phoenix* advised the social services minister to 'keep things in perspective' as it pursued so-called "welfare cheaters". While it was recognized that the government 'should weed out what abuse it can,' it seemed that Gordon Dirks was 'close to letting such a goal become an obsession.' The minister should be careful, the editorial warned,

not to presume recipients guilty until proven innocent, lest he reinforce the unfortunate, but popular, stereotype that welfare clients are responsible for their plight and deserve to live in poverty....A wholesale attempt to tighten the welfare system should keep compassion for, and service to, the recipient uppermost in mind. No one is getting rich on welfare cheques.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Riches, 'Welfare Reform in Saskatchewan: Implications for the Poor, Labour and Social Work,' 41

⁹⁷ *Regina Leader Post*, 1 June 1983; *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, 26 January 1985; *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, 2 February 1985; *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, 7 February 1985; *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, 16 February 1985

⁹⁸ *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, 24 May 1985

⁹⁹ *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, 4 April 1986

The marked shift in government policy toward welfare reform was met more by moderation and calls from the public to overhaul the system, rather than destroying it. The sagging economy of the early 1980s had placed the social contract on the table for discussion, it was argued: ‘Inflation, a battered economy, hardening attitudes of taxpayers, and the needy’s escalating expectations have eroded the old consensus on social spending, if it ever existed.’ The confidence of Canadians in their “affluence” had been jarred and the result was a re-examination of popular views of the role of welfare in society. An article in the *Star-Phoenix* argued that until the 1970s, welfare supported mainly the severely handicapped and people who otherwise could never work, regardless of how many jobs were available: ‘Today, the welfare rolls are loaded with able-bodied people who for the most part want to work but cannot find jobs.’ The article raised a question that was becoming increasingly commonplace: ‘At what point do the needs of the poor come into conflict with the current need for governments to exercise restraint.’¹⁰⁰

As Pitsula and Rasmussen argue, however, the first wave of welfare reform ‘paled’ beside what happened in the government’s second term.¹⁰¹ After the re-election of the Progressive Conservatives in 1986 (and the defeat of such key cabinet ministers as Gordon Dirks), Grant Schmidt was put in charge of a new super-ministry called Human Resources - an amalgam of Social Services, Labour, the Employment Development Agency, the Women’s Secretariat, and the Native Affairs Secretariat. Schmidt frequently expressed the view that poverty resulted from personal moral failure and that those who applied for social assistance were likely to be lazy cheaters: ‘The problem was not the scarcity of jobs, but the

¹⁰⁰ *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, 4 May 1985

¹⁰¹ Pitsula and Rasmussen, 205

moral inadequacy of the unemployed.’¹⁰² And Schmidt’s views expressed the general sentiment of the Progressive Conservative party. At the annual party convention early in 1987, various delegates offered up comments that were then reported in the newspapers: ‘Anyone in good shape who can’t find a job should be required to join the military....As well, to keep their benefits, welfare recipients should be required to perform community work, keep their children in school and only use public transportation.’ Weaknesses in the family unit were given as primary causes of welfare dependency, in addition to laziness, a general lack of morals, poor examples offered by parents, and a socialistic education system.¹⁰³ After forcing welfare recipients to pick up their cheques instead of receiving them in the mail, Schmidt called for changes in his department after 500 cheques were not collected during a postal strike in the summer of 1987. ‘With fraud investigations now going on,’ Schmidt charged, ‘the department is wondering whether those 500 people even exist. Until an investigation is complete, Social Services won’t be mailing out any more cheques to those people, saving the department \$200 000 a month.’¹⁰⁴

Despite the fact that a report from the National Council on Welfare stated that, in 1988, 19.8 percent of the population of Saskatchewan was living below the poverty line (which put the province second only to Newfoundland in the country), Schmidt claimed that ‘there is no poverty in Saskatchewan.’¹⁰⁵ If people were homeless, he went on, they

¹⁰² Pitsula and Rasmussen, 207

¹⁰³ *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, 9 March 1987

¹⁰⁴ *Regina Leader Post*, 24 July 1987

¹⁰⁵ *Leader-Post*, 8 June 1989; Pitsula and Rasmussen, 207

were homeless by choice.¹⁰⁶ That choice, for Schmidt, came down to an unwillingness on the part of social assistance recipients to budget properly. Because poverty was perceived primarily as an urban problem, Schmidt (who represented the rural riding of Melville) put the blame on the ‘character of the people and what they can do with their dollar.’ He often lauded the moral fortitude of his own rural constituents, as well as himself and his family: ‘My wife insists she could feed our family on what I pay on welfare....I haven’t put her to the test yet but she insists she could do it.’¹⁰⁷ Schmidt made similar comparisons when his department placed a cap on the amount of money given to social assistance recipients to pay for utilities and when the government forced recipients to do menial work.¹⁰⁸

By 1986, one in six families lived in poverty in Saskatchewan, and this statistic did not include Native peoples on reserve. The situation for single-parent families headed by women was especially alarming. Nearly 70 percent were living below the “low-income cut-off” (LICO) line, compared with the national average of 56 percent. In 1988, the LICO line for a single parent and two children was \$19 343 per year, but in Saskatchewan such a family was entitled to just \$11, 640 in social assistance. If the single parent happened to be employed and earning minimum wage, his or her annual earnings would be \$9 331. By comparison, the LICO for a single person was \$10 984 a year, and his social assistance entitlement a meagre \$4 500. Between 1981 and 1988 the number of unemployed increased from 21 000 to 37 000. From 1971 to 1981, an average of 9 100 new jobs were created in Saskatchewan each year. In the period 1981 to 1988, the figure was only 3 714.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ *Leader-Post*, 4 May 1998, 11 February 1988

¹⁰⁷ *Leader-Post*, 8 June 1989; 28 February 1987

¹⁰⁸ Pitsula and Rasmussen, 208; *Regina Leader-Post*, 11 December 1987; 12 December 1987; 15 April 1987

¹⁰⁹ Pitsula and Rasmussen, 209

The second phase of welfare reform focussed on further curtailing benefits to welfare recipients. Taking inflation into account, the real value of benefits paid to single employables declined 64 percent between 1981 and 1988. For welfare families with dependent children, the decline was 28 percent. The \$27 per month transportation allowance was cut in 1987. Schmidt explained that people on welfare 'should be able to walk within the city....From what I know of the city of Regina, food is always available within walking distance.'¹¹⁰ Welfare cheques were no longer mailed to people unless they were physically disabled. This way, recipients were forced into further humiliation and required to come to a government office in person to collect their allowance. If they failed to do so by the end of the month, the benefit was cancelled.¹¹¹

The tightening of restrictions on welfare recipients was accompanied by an even stronger anti-fraud campaign conducted by the newly formed Entitlement Control Unit. The eighteen-person special investigative unit made up of former RCMP officers was instructed to place under surveillance selected social-assistance recipients. Neighbours were encouraged to provide information about the personal lives and spending habits of people on welfare. Although Schmidt estimated welfare fraud at \$20 million or about 10 percent of the \$200 million social assistance budget, most figures for inappropriate payments in 1988-89 estimated \$1.3 million.¹¹² Newspaper commentaries by the end of the 1980s often dealt with stories of social assistance fraud, employing such headlines as

¹¹⁰ *Leader-Post*, 23 December 1987; Pitsula and Rasmussen, 210

¹¹¹ Pitsula and Rasmussen, 211

¹¹² Pitsula and Rasmussen, 212

‘Welfare Cheats’ which offered stories of individuals on welfare willing to come forward and detail how they ‘cheated’ the system for years.¹¹³

A central feature of welfare reform was “workfare”. When Schmidt took over the Department of Social Services in 1986, he discovered that there were more people on welfare than when the Tory government had taken office. He made it a priority to reduce the welfare rolls, and in 1987 launched “Saskatchewan Works”, a program paying minimum-wage level subsidies to anyone who would hire a welfare recipient for 18 to 20 weeks. Most of the jobs were community-based: maintenance of skating and curling rinks, snow removal for senior citizens, building golf courses, road construction in northern Saskatchewan, and so on. Those who refused to participate were threatened with a ‘review’ of their benefits,¹¹⁴ despite the fact that according to the Canada Assistance Plan (which paid half the costs of social assistance), welfare recipients could not be forced to perform work in exchange for benefits. When denounced as an illegal “work-for-welfare” program, Schmidt responded that it was “work-in-lieu-of-welfare” because no one was forced to work to receive a cheque.¹¹⁵ When accused of demeaning welfare recipients through such workfare projects as clearing brush, Schmidt responded, ‘I cut my grass the other day and I didn’t consider it demeaning.’¹¹⁶ Between 1985 and 1988, the Saskatchewan government spent \$25 million creating 4 893 job placements for people on social assistance. This represented an average of only 16 percent of recipients who were fully employable in those years. The majority of jobs subsidized under workfare were short-term, lasting 20 to 23

¹¹³ *Regina Leader Post*, 12 April 1988; 21 April 1988; *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, 30 April 1988; 6 February 1989

¹¹⁴ Pitsula and Rasmussen, 213

¹¹⁵ *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, 9 June 1987

¹¹⁶ *Regina Leader Post*, 15 April 1987

weeks, just long enough for the individual to qualify for unemployment insurance benefits, and therefore being pushed onto the rolls of the federal government.¹¹⁷

The First Nations population, perhaps surprisingly, had never become part of the official welfare debate in the Saskatchewan newspapers. Despite the fact that the same dominant stereotypes used to label individuals on welfare were constantly and openly used to characterize the Indigenous population, and despite the fact that Native peoples were increasingly coming to form a dominant percentage of the numbers on welfare, they were rarely mentioned in news reports, letters, or editorials. Clearly, First Nation welfare issues were viewed as separate from the dominant society. It seems that the welfare issue within the First Nations context was kept within this “racialized” context, built upon the structures of colonialism. When newspapers were discussing the welfare issue, they were referring to non-Aboriginal issues.

Another likely explanation for the exclusion of the Aboriginal population from the debate was the relationship between the First Nations and Canadian federalism. ‘Indian Affairs’ are clearly within the realm of federal jurisdiction and even though welfare is a provincial issue and certainly affects a large segment of the Aboriginal population, jurisdictional lines seemed to superficially remove this segment of the population from the debate. It is also true that by 1970 the First Nations populations were only just beginning to migrate in significant numbers from the reserves into the urban environments, and as a result onto provincial welfare rolls. Still, by 1990, this trend was well underway and it is surprising that its ramifications for welfare perceptions did not spill over into the newspaper debate.

¹¹⁷ Pitsula and Rasmussen, 214

In 1986 the *Star-Phoenix* ran a series of six reports on ‘Welfare in the North’; these reports dealt with Aboriginal peoples on welfare but by basing the report in the north, the implication was that it was an issue for the reserve communities. The reports pointed to a ‘welfare culture’ and a ‘culture of dependency’ already being a dominant problem for the northern communities; it was killing the spirit of the people but there was absolutely no alternative for often as much as 90 percent of the population: ‘While the debate simmers throughout Saskatchewan about the merits of the government’s welfare reform policies, anger and frustration are felt by northerners perpetually on the social assistance rolls.’ The second report indicated that surveys showed that more than two-thirds of the residents of northern Saskatchewan were Aboriginal and at least three-quarters of that population lived below the poverty line. ‘A common joke in Northern Saskatchewan,’ the report noted, ‘is that welfare and the child tax credit are the only growing industries.’ Social assistance benefits offered to the residents were 50 percent below the poverty line. The third report argued that social assistance rates in the north were inadequate when compared to the south, while the fourth report pointed to flaws in the system for the distribution of welfare and the number of unqualified people receiving assistance. The fifth report argued that jobs were so scarce in the north and the rate of pay was so poor, that there was not enough of an incentive to work and go off welfare; the sixth report pointed to the potential economic opportunities in the north.¹¹⁸ A story in 1987 reported that approximately 85 percent of adult Status Indians living in Saskatchewan were unemployed. It called for a government-financed, Indian-controlled and operated approach to health and social services to address the needs of Treaty Indians who migrated to the cities.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, 14-19 April 1986

¹¹⁹ *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, 24 June 1987

The shift in perceptions of welfare recipients in Saskatchewan by the mid to late 1980s demonstrated a hardening of attitudes toward the less fortunate. The Devine government was successful in pandering to these attitudes and reinforcing them. As one *Leader-Post* editorial commented, the Progressive Conservative government was well aware that ‘there is an anti-welfare mood abroad in the land. Votes can be mined in making welfare unattractive for single, employable people.’¹²⁰ Middle-class sensibilities bought into the right-wing rhetoric and such myths surrounding social welfare recipients as pitting “hard-working tax-payers” against “welfare spongers”, that most social assistance recipients were lazy and worthless, and that they contributed absolutely nothing to society.

That said, there was also an increasing view that the Tory government had now gone too far. The all too common reactionary comments by Grant Schmidt regarding welfare recipients were described in the newspapers as ‘unbelievable’ and ‘intolerable’.¹²¹ The *Star-Phoenix* repeatedly pointed to the rural-urban divide on the issue, noting that ‘much of the growing chorus of criticism seems to be originating in rural Saskatchewan.’ This suggests, one editorial went on, ‘that the present government, currying favor in its rural strongholds, has tapped some deep reactionary wells and is enjoying a high approval rate for making life increasingly difficult for welfare recipients in the larger urban centres.’ The ‘righteous tone’ of much of this rural condemnation of those on welfare was difficult to comprehend when one considered the cry for government assistance to the agricultural industry: ‘And what if Schmidt and other government members of his mindset went around spouting statistics (real, not unsubstantiated!) about the numbers of farmers who accepted

¹²⁰ *Regina Leader Post*, 12 May 1984

¹²¹ *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, 15 April 1987; 21 April 1987

government money who strictly speaking, could get by without it?'¹²² It was only too obvious, one letter to the *Star-Phoenix* observed, that 'in times of economic hardship, welfare recipients are convenient targets for crusading Conservative politicians frustrated by the mounting provincial deficit. Little concern exists for those living on social assistance, and the government has made it clear its priorities lie elsewhere.'¹²³ The question then becomes, another editorial noted, 'are the cuts of today deep enough to produce scar tissue that will last into the next election. If they are, the Conservatives are done for, despite what the ministers are hearing on coffee row in rural Saskatchewan, and despite the support of the right-wing contingent now carrying the day.'¹²⁴

Myths become accepted truths if they are repeated often enough, regardless if they bear little relation to reality. Newspaper articles by the end of the 1980s pleaded with the Saskatchewan electorate to recognize that the government was engaged in myth-making: 'Unfortunately, the procedures of provincial welfare systems are based on such a myth and consequently tend to treat welfare recipients as potential, or actual, criminals. The welfare system seems characterized by an unspoken but absolute faith in the worthlessness of the human being.' Increasingly, articles in the newspapers turned the accusations of 'villainy' back upon the government.¹²⁵ The government's policy of forcing welfare recipients to line up to get their assistance cheques was viewed negatively in the newspapers reports and as a clear method of humiliating the poor, particularly in the face of massive federal restructuring to unemployment insurance.¹²⁶

¹²² *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, 5 May 1988

¹²³ *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, 18 March 1987

¹²⁴ *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, 22 April 1987

¹²⁵ *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, 13 May 1988

¹²⁶ *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, 2 July 1988; 20 April 1989

Conclusion

Popular attitudes toward welfare recipients in Saskatchewan did undergo significant change in the period from 1970 to 1990. Much of the reason behind this shift toward hardened and less sensitive attitudes rests with the deteriorating economic situation of the late 1970s and most of the 1980s. Political groups on the right from across the nation found an easy target in the waste and mismanagement of the welfare programs both at the federal and provincial levels. They found an attentive audience by calling for a streamlining of the welfare state to produce more effective, efficient, and productive social programs. But aside from recognizing when and why the shifts occurred, it is also important to understand how the attitudes were transformed. In 1970 the Saskatchewan populace, for the most part, viewed those on welfare as unable to work for a variety of reasons beyond their control and therefore in need of government aid. The experience of the Great Depression had made the need for the social security net clear. Able-bodied individuals on social assistance were seen as unfortunate victims, temporarily down on their luck. But as the recession of the latter 1970s deepened, and inflation and unemployment took their toll, the return of reactionary positions regarding “the welfare trough” rapidly gained popularity. Focus, and indeed anger, shifted toward the “unemployed employables”, able-bodied individuals who were “capable” of working, yet seemed unwilling to do so. Criticism was aimed at this group and the ‘common myth of the welfare bum’¹²⁷ dominated public attitudes and was carried and reinforced by the two successive Progressive Conservative governments. The work ethic had deteriorated to the point that individuals were content with a life at the

¹²⁷ *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, 13 May 1988

expense of the hard-working taxpayer. Welfare recipients were lazy, irresponsible, dishonest, and ultimately unproductive.

By the mid-1970s economists had introduced “productivity” to the mix of economic variables characterizing the nation’s economic downturn. How could Saskatchewan and Canada compete in an increasingly competitive global market with its inefficient and wasteful social security system pulling down its productivity numbers? Critics turned the productivity gauge on welfare recipients and found it to be a zero-sum game. According to traditional definitions of productivity, those on welfare were simply a waste of resources and a drain on the economy. They contributed absolutely nothing, not only to the economy, but by extension also to the society at large. ‘If I was in the position of collecting monies from the government,’ one letter writer to the *Star-Phoenix* observed, ‘I would be more than pleased to be given a chance to work for it. I would be proud to be active and productive again....The energy spent in directions that go nowhere would best be rerouted into something more productive. By productive I mean work....The sense of self-confidence cannot be attained by any other means.’¹²⁸

Increasingly society has come to measure value by the work we do and by what we produce, not to society as a whole, but rather to the formal economy. It is measured in economic, not social, terms. Work in the home, voluntary work in the community, caregiving to elders, and the raising of children, as Marilyn Waring points out, ‘counts for nothing.’ Indeed, these activities came to count for even less in 1990 than they did in 1970.

¹²⁸ *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, 1 May 1987

The drive to be productive further stigmatized welfare recipients, including single mothers, and made them feel even more worthless than previously. According to Karen Seccombe, ‘the real problem with welfare is that our society no longer feels comfortable paying mothers to stay home and take care of their children.’ Most middle-class married women with dependent children are now employed outside the home, and we expect therefore that poor mothers should be doing the same, ignoring the very real and differing circumstances between the two groups.¹²⁹ In the age of the ‘post-welfare state’ even the distinction between “deserving” and “undeserving” poor has been lost. According to Luc Theriault and David Rosenbluth, ‘Now, virtually everyone is considered to be productive and potentially employable, at least to some degree.’¹³⁰ The resulting danger is that all welfare recipients can potentially be viewed as unproductive unless they are contributing in a measured way, to the extent of their abilities, to the economy and society as a whole.

¹²⁹ Seccombe, 12

¹³⁰ Theriault and Rosenbluth, 60

About the Author

Dr. Robert Wardhaugh was appointed Post-Doctoral Research Associate at the Saskatchewan Institute of Public Policy September 1st, 2001. He is a historical researcher on a collaborative Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) project, "Rethinking Productivity." Dr. Wardhaugh comes to Saskatchewan from Winnipeg where he was assistant professor in the department of history, University of Winnipeg, since September 1998.

Dr. Wardhaugh also has experience teaching at the Universities of Manitoba and Brandon. He completed his PhD in Canadian History at the University of Manitoba and his MA and BA at the University of Saskatchewan. His primary research and publishing interests are in Canadian political cultural, and regional history, rural issues, national/regional identity, Prairie history and literature. He has published two books, *Mackenzie King and the Prairie West* and *Toward Defining the Prairies*. Dr. Wardhaugh has also published numerous articles, book chapters, biographies, and book reviews.

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