

**Broadening the Options:  
Inflecting Quebec's Post-Industrial Trajectory**

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Mainstream studies of welfare regimes have recently drawn insights from feminist studies, particularly as regards the care-giving roles of families, in order to enrich their understanding of the interaction of states, markets and families in welfare provision. From this starting point, dominant interpretations of post-industrial economies and welfare states chart two paths to a full-employment future: a high road based on publicly-supplied personal services, and a low road based on flexible, low-paid service employment (Iversen and Wren 1998). □ The route taken has important ramifications for the quality of work in the service sector, and the quality and professionalism of services provided. □ As women make up the majority of workers in the personal services as well as the majority of clients (Aronson and Neysmith 2001), the road taken has significant consequences for issues of gender-based inequality. The dominant interpretations nevertheless argue that path dependency largely predetermines the path selected (Esping-Andersen 1999; Scharpf 1997), leaving those living in liberal welfare states on a low-road trajectory. □

This paper will briefly trace how an engagement with feminist approaches has enriched the mainstream understanding of welfare regimes, and ultimately led to the path-dependent conclusions that seem to prescribe a fate of increased inequality in liberal states. This conclusion, however, is problematic in a number of ways. It does not tackle the anomalous reality that path-shifting reforms are occurring (Palier and Sykes 2001; Dobrowolsky and Saint-Martin 2002) and thus does not analyze from whence comes the political agency of these changes. More fundamentally, the lack of a deeper engagement with feminist critiques has meant overlooking how women are strategically located within this post-industrial economy, and how women's mobilization might inflect chosen paths for restructuring.

The final sections of this paper seek to illustrate this critique by considering how the women's movement in Quebec, Canada, has sought to participate in constructing the parameters of the province's post-industrial welfare regime. It argues that although the dominant tendency in Quebec has been to favour the low-road solution, the women's movement has succeeded in creating a number of institutions and practices that may with time serve as levers to shift Quebec's trajectory towards policies reflective of a high-road strategy.

## THE HIGH AND LOW ROADS FOR THE POST-INDUSTRIAL WELFARE STATES

The mainstream study of welfare regimes has recently grappled with the growing incompatibility between post-war welfare regimes and the new social risk profile emerging from labour market restructuring, demographic change, and changing gender ideologies. In attempting to make sense of welfare restructuring, and to sketch the profiles of emergent responses, this work has drawn insights from feminist critiques of earlier regime typologies. The most salient point is the admission that earlier typologies conceived of regimes as largely bi-polar (states and markets), ignoring the contribution of the family which constituted a third important pole of welfare creation. As such, a recasting of this work would require greater attention to the welfare function of the family, as well as recognizing how different degrees of *defamilialization* (or, more appropriately, capacity *to form an autonomous household* – see O'Connor *et al.* 1999, 32) interacted with labour markets and the state's welfare effort.

Indeed, it is in the domestic economy that Esping-Andersen (1999, 6) finds the “*alpha and omega* to any resolution of the main post-industrial dilemmas.” The

central idea driving this analysis is the role of the dual-earner family. The presence of two incomes is felt to better suit the emerging social risk structure by compensating for increased family instability and for temporary job loss by one of the earners. By internalizing some of the risks of job loss within the family, the dual-income family makes increased labour market flexibility less threatening, and is thus likely to loosen restrictive labour market regulations. Moreover, the increased labour force participation resulting from dual-earner families is potentially consistent with the renewal of full employment, since dual-earner families are time-strapped, and can thus be expected to purchase personal services rather than producing them themselves (Esping-Andersen 1999, 55-57, 162). Post-industrial economies can thus reach a full employment labour market that matches security and flexibility provided they nurture the link between dual-earner families and the development of personal service markets.

The contribution of personal services to full employment, however, is not a magic wand, but comes with its own constraints. The most pressing issue here is the *cost disease* that comes from weak service productivity growth. If personal service productivity lags that of the economy as a whole, the relative price of these services will rise over time. These services will eventually price themselves out of the market, thus evacuating their employment-creating potential. In order to confront this problem, two remedies are possible: wages and working conditions in the sector can be kept low in order to depress costs; or the state can subsidize their provision by providing them publicly or by offering subsidies. The first solution involves accepting increased earnings inequality; the second involves placing strains on public finances or increasing taxes to a point where resistance is likely. This story can be summarized as the *trilemma* of the service economy: countries can successfully

pursue only two out of the following three goals: significant employment growth in the personal services; income equality; and sound public finances (Iversen and Wren 1998, 510-513).

If we disqualify the scenario of limited service employment growth, we are left with two post-industrial paths (Scharpf 1997). The first path, characteristic of the United States, and of liberal welfare states more generally, relies on the private-sector provision of these services. Given low tax rates, high-income earners have sufficient income to demand both high quality educational and medical services, along with a wide variety of household and personal services. The low wages paid to employees in these latter services ensures that they remain affordable, including for the upper middle-class (Scharpf 1997, 6-7). This gives rise to what this paper will refer to as the “low-road,” since it accepts, and may require, poor quality jobs in a key sector of job creation. It is thus tied to increased income inequality, and the growth of the ranks of the working class living below the poverty line. Remedies to this inequality are unlikely to lie in traditional labour market institutions like collective bargaining or improved minimum labour standards, since these might simply reduce employment levels. Instead, the tax and transfer system can provide targeted wage supplements to the lowest paid to lift them out of poverty (Scharpf 1997, 9).

There are nevertheless numerous reasons to doubt the efficacy of this solution to the problem of inequality.<sup>1</sup> For instance, it ignores the question of the welfare impact of job quality (beyond wages paid) (Esping-Andersen *et al.* 2001). Income transfers are also not the most effective way of ensuring that these low-paid workers have access to the care services they need (cf. Lewis 2001). In addition, these income supplements may serve to further degrade the lower reaches of the labour market by reducing the pressure on employers to raise wages (and productivity) (Myles 1991).

Finally, this road is sketched out with little reflection on its differential impact for men and women. Yet, for all intents and purposes, it is women who are disproportionately represented within this low-end service class, performing tasks that have traditionally been gendered as female. The end result is likely to be increased gender income inequality coupled with the continued under-valuation of work performed primarily by women.

In contrast, the Scandinavian countries have taken a high road, and provide many of these personal services publicly, funded through higher levels of taxation. Wages in the personal services are higher than on the low-road, reducing levels of income inequality and poverty. This high-road can thus boast a number of advantages over the low-road, including universal provision, reduced income inequality (including between women and men) and better quality services (Mahon 2000). The difficulty with this approach lies in a level of taxation which promises to become ever more punitive given stagnant productivity growth. Indeed, there is a sense that the high road has reached its limits, and that a greater degree of income inequality should be accepted in order to maintain both full employment and stable public finances. This step back from equality in the here and now could nevertheless be compensated with labour market policies that provided ladders to better paying jobs for those within the personal services, thereby allowing for equality over the life-cycle (Esping-Andersen 1999, 182). Another solution would involve implementing means-tested user charges for these public services (Scharpf 1997, 10).

In the case that will interest us below, namely the liberal welfare states, this analysis leads to sombre conclusions about the inevitability of increased inequality. On the one hand, the Scandinavian/social democratic response of increased public provision of personal services is ruled out on the grounds that the balance of political

power is unfavourable and that citizens in liberal welfare states are unlikely to accept the tax burden this requires (Esping-Andersen 1999, 113)). There is also an element of timing involved, since the creation of employment in publicly-provided personal services occurred in the Keynesian era, and would be difficult to replicate in a period of stronger tax competition, and strict fiscal and monetary policy guidelines (Esping-Andersen *et al.* 2001, 241). Indeed, Esping-Andersen is sceptical that Scandinavians will be willing to shoulder the full tax burden of the public sector strategy. On the other hand, attempts to improve wages and working conditions within the private service sector are likewise problematic, since this will lead to higher prices, and thus to lower demand (and hence lower employment in the sector). These constraints keep liberal welfare states on a liberal path of limited public sector spending and thin labour market regulation. Esping-Andersen sugar-coats this pill by stressing how low-wage supplementation measures could alleviate labour-market poverty, and how more coherent human resources and training strategies might mitigate inequality over the life-cycle, but he is insistent that path-dependency dramatically forecloses available options.

*Problems with this account of post-industrial options*

This engagement by mainstream welfare regime scholars with feminist scholars is problematic on at least two counts. First, they engage but with the surface of the feminist critique, recognizing the importance of welfare provision within the family. They do not adopt the feminist concern with overcoming gender inequality, and indeed readily accept the impossibility of increasing men's unpaid domestic labour (O'Connor, Shaver and Orloff 1999, 20; Mahon 2001). Esping-Andersen's conclusions in *Social Foundations* are intensely sombre for women living in liberal welfare regimes, although he does not greatly explore this conclusion. For instance,

the argument that there is little room for reducing substantial income inequality is particularly problematic for women, since they are concentrated among the lowest paid, and hold the majority of jobs in the personal services whose wages and working conditions must be kept depressed in order to maintain high employment. Even women in social democratic systems are likely to bear the brunt of the post-industrial trade-offs, since they again are concentrated in the personal services where wages again are called to fall (or at least remain steady) so as to remove pressure on the treasury. The sombre conclusions in the liberal case do not even begin to address issues about the recognition of women's unpaid labour within the household and the community (no doubt required where service markets are incomplete, or priced beyond universal affordability) or the loss of service quality (as well as of the ability to exercise citizenship rights) when personal services are provided according to the profit-motive as compared to the standards of the caring professions (which affects women as the majority users of these services) (Aronson and Neysmith 2001, 152-53, 160; Lewis 2001, 161; Brush 2002)

This first problem highlights two issues. First, the analysis assumes that personal service work necessarily has low productivity and therefore insists that wages must fall and that equality requires cycling people *through* the sector rather than improving work conditions *in* the sector. This is an eminently contestable position, which may veil the importance of productivity-enhancing skill building behind the view that caring is a natural talent (particularly for women) (Mahon 2002, 347-48; Cameron *et al.* 2002). Second, in addition to portraying these results as the only ones possible given the tight productivity constraint, Esping-Andersen (1999, 4) argues that path dependency limits the ability of societies to even choose among these three models. If one is trapped in a liberal welfare state, one cannot hope to shift



towards the social democratic path. As the next sections of this paper argues, this contention is also contestable given both the range of possibilities available within a given welfare state model, and its evacuation of the sphere of agency.

The second problematic aspect of Esping-Andersen's engagement is the fact that he limits it to one strand of feminist arguments. He is engaging first and foremost with feminist analyses of work-family reconciliation, which means he is focussed largely on the figure of the working mother, and on a narrow range of attendant public policies around child-rearing and personal service provision. As Lisa Brush points out, these feminist analyses push aside at least two important issues. First, they locate care within a states/markets/families typology, and ignore that care is often provided outside of these three spheres, such as in community organizations, informal networks and social movements (2002, 169-170). This critique is reminiscent of the one made by third sector scholars, who underline that as social provision turns from income transfers to services, the non-profit sector has become the "main official channel for the distribution of social care services in Europe" (Ranci 2002, 30). Second, the analyses with which he engages are couched in a language to encourage exchanges with non-feminist scholars, but in the process obscure patriarchal relations of power and violence. As such, questions about the role of violence in limiting women's labour force participation, and issues about non labour market related policies central to women's welfare (such as body rights) are pushed out of the picture (Brush 2002, 177-79). The explorations of the intersections with relations of race/ethnicity in the construction of welfare regimes (Ross 1995) are also entirely ignored.

KICKING PATH-DEPENDENCY?

This paper does not pretend to offer an analysis that addresses, let alone responds, to all of these feminist critiques of mainstream welfare regime studies. It nevertheless argues that certain aspects of these critiques point to the need to loosen the trade-offs posited in the post-industrial model, and to recognize the possibility for agents to thereby modify or shift the paths laid out. One part of this critical project must involve the *productivity* project that critiques the shortcoming of Baumol's cost-disease hypothesis (Mahon 2000, 34-35), builds better models of how services contribute to productivity growth (Block 1990, 174-76, 196-97), and develops institutions to foster productivity improvements (and improved job quality) in the human services (Herzenberg et al. 1998; Leys 2001, 221). Treating this issue is beyond the scope of this paper, but I am tempted, in light of these critiques of the post-industrial trilemma,<sup>2</sup> to recognizing these economic forces as constraining rather than firmly binding.

However, the part that is of particular interest to this paper is the critique of *path dependency*. As noted above, the post-industrial trajectories sketched out by Esping-Andersen, Iversen and Wren, and Scharpf all pre-suppose that societies cannot meaningfully choose between them, as the existing configuration of states, markets and families prevent the shift from one path to another. This approach does not deny that change is taking place, but argues that each typological subset of countries (liberal, corporatist, social democratic) faces an idiosyncratic set of reform possibilities and imperatives (Esping-Andersen *et al.* 2001, 215). As Esping-Andersen *et al.* (2001, 203) underline in their report to the Belgian Presidency, "reform, even radical policy change, does take place, but it is 'institutionally bounded' change."

In many ways this makes perfect sense. As Paul Pierson has argued, political life includes a variety of features, such as multiple equilibriums, contingency, inertia, and the critical role of timing and sequencing, that make it particularly likely to exhibit a high degree of path dependency (Pierson 2000, 263). In the case of welfare regimes, the dense institutions regulating the complex interconnections between economy, social policy, and cultural assumptions about the distribution of domestic labour would appear to make it very difficult to overcome the logic of increasing returns and shift from one model to another (Pierson 2000, 258-61). Much as in the “varieties of capitalism” literature, it would seem that each path has its own self-reinforcing logic that penalizes those that stray too far (Hall and Soskice 2001). However, as Pontusson (1995, 128) argued nearly a decade ago, the neo-institutionalist project from which these path-dependency arguments generally flow is better at highlighting enduring patterns of difference than at explaining convergence and change. And yet, even as Esping-Andersen and Pierson emphasize the salience of path dependency, there are increasingly signs that welfare state reforms in some European countries are jumping out of established grooves and are starting to change paths (Palier and Sykes 2001, 10). This is perhaps not surprising, since, as researchers working within liberal welfare states have already noted, there is room for significant variations in programs (and hence outcomes) even within regime types. For instance, as the liberal regimes undergo broadly similar transitions into “social investment states,” the design of different income transfers has noticeable impacts on outcomes in terms, for instance, of poverty rates (Jenson and Saint Martin 2003; Myles and Pierson 1997). Similarly, significant universal programs, for instance in health insurance, have been enacted in liberal welfare states.

If we hope to understand these changes, and consider the possibilities they may offer for equality-enhancing strategies, we must return to the question of agency and strike a “better balance between institutional incrementalism and change-oriented actors” (Mahon 2001, 26). Path dependency arguments likely pay too much attention to traditional labour market actors, rather than looking more widely at other groups intervening in the policy process (Dobrowolsky and Saint Martin 2002). This indeed closely follows the prescription of the feminist critique of power resources theory, which demands an assessment of the power resources of other actors, including the women’s movement (Olsen and O’Connor 1998, 15; O’Connor *et al.* 1999, 202-203). It also finds some resonance in some work in feminist geography, where the disempowering structural logic of globalization discourse is destabilized by incorporating subjects and actors that the economic globalization literature has neglected and recognizing their capacity for agency. This work also invites research on neglected scales of intervention and the interpenetration of the formal and informal economies (Nagor *et al.* 2002, 260-61, 269). We are thus invited not only to recognize previously neglected actors, but also to look at the importance of what has been defined as marginal. Here one is reminded of Dobrowolsky and Saint-Martin’s call (2002) to look beyond the state and institutionalized policy networks if one wishes to understand the sources of change (see also Richardson 2000). More importantly, it raises Brush’s (2002) argument concerning the failure of much of the welfare regimes literature to consider welfare created outside of states, markets and families, for instance in communities.

Such an approach is particularly strategic for the study of post-industrial welfare regimes. If the current restructuring of welfare regimes emphasizes personal services, women find themselves directly affected by the reforms. This becomes

particularly evident once we turn from welfare triangles to welfare diamonds, and recognize women's significant contributions, often unpaid or underpaid, to personal services in *communities*, as well as in families, the market and the state. The service mix among these poles will have a direct impact on women in their capacities as employees (making up the majority of the personal services workforce), as welfare state clients (making up the majority of the recipients of personal services), and as unpaid carers in the household and the community.

Feminist critiques of state restructuring, and more specifically of the shift of personal services towards the community, have emphasized the dangers this poses for women along the lines set out above (lower quality services, more demands for unpaid care within the family, replacement of stable public sector jobs for women by precarious and less well-paid community sector jobs) (e.g. Aronson and Neysmith 2001; Lamoureux 1998). These are important reminders of the dangers faced, but they do tend to obscure the possibility that this tenuous and dangerous position is also a strategic one providing spaces of agency. While being at the centre of these transformations places past gains at risk, it also provides opportunities to shape the emerging path, and possibilities of shifting the path in a more propitious direction for achieving gender and economic equality.

Given the strategic location of women within this change, it is well worth going beyond considering how women's organizations (among others) have resisted some of the dangers involved with post-industrial restructuring, to assess the alternatives they have proposed, along with their success in embedding these in public policy. In other words, we have to pay more attention to how women's organizations have approached the treacherous terrain of the post-industrial economy, and more particularly to the political economy they have envisaged as a means of increasing

gender equality. This involves adopting Torfing's view (1999, 389) that to capture both agency and constraint, one must focus on "path-shaping strategies in a path-dependent context."

Such studies have an academic interest in terms of speaking to the debates cited above concerning the possibility of path-shifting, the sources of such policy changes, and the analytic advantages of feminist approaches. I nevertheless propose such studies for serving the more mundane purpose of enriching a strategic understanding of how particular women's movements have succeeded (or failed) in inflecting the course of welfare regime restructuring. If cost-disease is a challenge but not a fatality (as suggested above), and if path-dependency is not an absolute, then we can learn much about how different actors, including the women's movements, have attempted to broaden the options beyond those offered in conventional accounts.

The following sections of this paper proceed in this spirit in assessing how the Quebec women's movement has attempted to broaden its options over the past two decades, and in particular in how it has positioned itself with respect to policies concerning personal social services. It makes use of briefs and publications produced by the women's movement and by its relays within the state, materials produced by the movement's organic intellectuals, and some secondary sources. The narrative will trace the strategic reflections of the women's movement, paying particular attention to how the movement succeeded, even in defeat, in building leverage at a variety of strategic points. It is too soon to argue that the women's movement has shifted Quebec onto a different path, but it has inflected the path taken in ways with ramifications for gender equality.

BROADENING THE OPTIONS IN QUEBEC

### *Situating the Quebec Women's Movement*

Quebec, with a population of seven million, is Canada's second largest province. It is distinct in comparison with the rest of the country in terms of being the only French-speaking province, and the vast majority of the population sees Quebec as a nation free to pursue its destiny either within the Canadian federation or independently. As a result, there is a tendency to consider (erroneously) the provincial government as legislating with more or less the powers of a sovereign state, particularly in the field of social policy. While this has given rise to a certain number of innovations placing Quebec on a different trajectory of welfare state reform than the rest of Canada, particularly in the past half-decade (Vaillancourt 2002), it remains broadly within the liberal path that the Canadian welfare regime has followed since the 1960s.

While the women's movement in the rest of Canada organizes primarily at the federal level (albeit with difficulty), Quebec's women's movement is resolutely focussed on its provincial government. The modern feminist movement originated and expanded concurrently with the modern nationalist movement. The projects of national affirmation and gender equality, while often in tension, are nevertheless bound together (Lamoureux 2001; Maillé 2003). This has aided the Quebec women's movement in obtaining political space for voicing its demands, including within the state through the arms-length advocacy and research *Conseil du statut de la femme* (CSF), as well as a *Secrétariat à la condition féminine* that reports to the Minister responsible for *la Condition de la femme*. These institutions have successfully weathered the storm of state disengagement over the past decade, unlike their counterparts in the other Canadian provinces (Rankin and Vickers 2001). Outside the state, the variety of organizations claiming to speak for women makes the use of the

term “women’s movement” problematic. Coordination between provincial-level associations is nevertheless occurs through regular meetings, and the peak-level *Fédération des femmes du Québec* (FFQ) has emerged in the 1990s as the lead organization for the political mobilization and representation of the women’s movement on broad issues of public policy, particularly following the 1995 March against Poverty (Maillé 2000, 94-95).

*The Women’s Movement and State Restructuring: the mid-1980s to early-1990s*

The issue of restructuring Quebec’s welfare regime dates from the early 1980s. Recessionary conditions at the time pushed unemployment into the mid-teens, thereby undermining the financial sustainability of the income security system, and opening spaces for a general questioning of the welfare state. The Department of Finance was quite clear about what direction to follow, laying out a blueprint for reform that involved consolidating pilot welfare-to-work programmes in order to compel social assistance recipients back into the workforce. The Liberal government elected in 1985 had similar predispositions, appointing three working groups to elaborate a program of deregulation, privatization, and state downsizing.

The women’s movement, by contrast, was entertaining different measures for re-attaining a full-employment economy. In 1983, the CSF released a paper on women and full employment that sought to define a model of full employment that would meet women’s needs. Thus, a return to full employment would be insufficient if it left feminized job ghettos untouched, and if it did not consider women’s unpaid labour. While the paper came to no definite conclusions, it questioned the dominant notion of work, considered the idea of making job creation in non-profit communities a priority, and came down in favour of a Guaranteed Annual Income (GAI) (Rheault 1983). A later paper by the CSF nuanced this conclusion, noting that a GAI would



need to be supplemented with childcare services, and would need to be structured so as to not subsidize the proliferation of low-paying jobs (Lepage 1986).

These ideas were given further form in debates around two significant policy initiatives, namely social assistance reform and reform to the health and social services system. In the case of the former, the government's intent was to reform social assistance in such a manner that those people deemed "capable" of working would be more-or-less compelled to participate in active measures after spending nine months on benefits. The measures themselves were short-term oriented, often taking the form of a six-month subsidized work placement with a public agency, a private business, or a community organization. Women's organizations joined community groups to oppose these initiatives, arguing that the net effect was to impoverish and punish those on social assistance. In place of the employability focus evident in the policy, these groups demanded a labour market policy that instead emphasized higher minimum wages, stricter labour regulations, and access to qualifying training programs. Nevertheless, the alternative that was generally proposed, namely job creation, demanded some illustration. The result was the development of a vision, albeit still marginal, of community-based development responding to local needs as an important course of action.<sup>3</sup>

The second debate occurred around the Rochon Commission, which was mandated to propose changes to the health and social services systems. Fearing that the Commission would advance a project of privatization, the women's movement, like the community movement, emphasized protecting the public and universal character of the existing health care system. At the same time, the relationship of the alternative health and social services created by women's groups to the state needed to be reconfigured. The expertise developed within women's health centres and the

services offered were being increasingly used by the state. Yet this was a one-sided use that failed to support the survival of these centres, nor to adopt their holistic outlook on health and welfare. Thus, in their joint reflections anticipating the Commission's hearings, women's groups developed a demand for recognition – recognition in the form of increased funding and of the respect for the groups' autonomy (Lacelle 1986, 5-6; Michaud 2000).

The Commission's report had a real and nuanced sensibility for the contribution and autonomy of the community sector, no doubt reflecting the fact that 300 of the 800 briefs it received came from the community sector. However, its recommendations continued to place the sector in the role of a dependent contractor, filling a well-defined niche in the technocratic management of social problems (Lamoureux 1988, 163, 165-68; Vallée 1988, 20-23). Despite this limitation, the women's movement seized the report's openness to the community and alternative services to push for their recognition by the state (cf. Godard 1988). The subsequent reforms to the health system reflected the tension in the Rochon report by formally recognizing the contribution and autonomy of community-based resources, even while setting up instrumental relationships with them. This has led to an ongoing debate over strategies of relations with the state, weighing the danger of co-optation against gains of recognition, resources, and discursive space for alternative projects (Fournier and Guberman 1988; Michaud 2000; Shragge 1999).

In brief, the mid and late 1980s, while not marked by great policy breakthroughs for the women's movement, nevertheless saw this movement start to entrench itself on the terrain of social services reform, and to develop strategies for the personal services sector such as labour regulation and the development and recognition of community resources.

*The Early and Mid-1990s: Regrouping to Make Gains*

The early to mid-1990s served as a period for consolidating spaces created by the demands of the 1980s. On the one hand, the reform to social assistance indeed proved problematic in a variety of ways. With the run-up of unemployment in the recession of the early 1990s, the employability programs simply re-shuffled the line of the job-less, and created an “employability carousel” where the unemployed were shunted through a series of training placements or subsidized jobs before returning to social assistance for lack of available work. Women’s groups and community organizations found themselves in a tight spot in this circumstance. They found themselves both critical of a reform that was not only punitive, but also counter-productive and demoralizing for participants (Bohémier 1992). At the same time, these groups and organizations made use of these placements and subsidies as a means of increasing (or at least maintaining) staff levels in a period where public spending was restrained and social needs were increasing (White 1997). The way out of this catch-22, according to these organizations, was to transform the money for employability measures into salaries for stable and lasting jobs in these organizations.

The attempt to transform employability measures into the consolidation of community-sector services was buttressed by the development of an argument concerning the economic (as opposed to simply social) function of community services. For instance, a provincial-level women’s organization released a booklet in 1993 that highlighted how women’s centres were economic workshops, given the impact of interventions such as community kitchens, training programs, and micro business development (D’Amours 1993). Women’s centres could be seen, among other things (such as sites for developing women’s citizenship), as centres of economic activity and developers of community resources (Belleau 1996a, 22). As

such, given the proper funding, women's organizations, and the community sector more broadly, could offer a solution to both high unemployment and the growth of unmet needs through their activities. At the same time, cognizant of the role of personal services as the source of new streams of employment, this approach might allow a middle-way between the low-wage, for-profit services growing in the United States and the publicly-provided services found in Sweden, supported by a heavy tax burden (CSF 1996, 7-8, 11-12).

These developments were gathered together and given fuller form in the context of the 1995 Bread and Roses March against poverty, coordinated by the FFQ. The March, which attracted significant public attention and support, articulated nine demands for fighting poverty. The first demand was for the creation of a "social infrastructures" program to recognize and consolidate women's unpaid or poorly paid and precarious work in caring services. This would entail investment in what could be called a "social economy" of quality human relations, to complement existing infrastructure programs that created construction jobs for a predominantly male workforce (David and Marcoux 1995, 5). This strategy was forthright in insisting that this investment had to lead to quality and lasting jobs, and not short-term work placements that kept the unemployed occupied until "real" jobs were created. In fact, the general thrust went in the opposite direction of turning spending on employability programmes into support for lasting, secure jobs.

This demand was supplemented with demands to improve labour standards (such as increased minimum wages) and thus improve the lot of low-wage workers, as well as access to training, to housing, to non-traditional employment, and employment equity. Upgrading labour market measures was a necessary part of the social economy package, so that women's groups and the community sector would

participate in a broad based movement of social and economic development, and not simply end up managing misery for a cash-strapped government (Belleau 1996b, 12-13).

While sold as an anti-poverty strategy, these demands form a fairly coherent challenge to a low-road personal services strategy. First, they refuse to accept that personal services work must be low-wage if it is to be employment creating. Second, they seek a public recognition (and ultimately financial support) for a broader range of personal services, particularly those services provided by unpaid or poorly-paid women in the community. These demands, if met, would clearly deflect Quebec's post-industrial trajectory. They would also require a significant transfer of resources from the state. The recognition of the difficulty posed by the resource issue may explain the decision to focus on provision by the *social economy* rather than the state, since the women's movement could argue that organizations in the social economy were more flexible and lighter in terms of administration and bureaucracy, and thus cheaper than pure public provision (CSF 1996, 5). This was nevertheless a risky move, since it is equally true that the lower cost of community services relates to lower wages and benefits, and many women's organizations were leery of job substitution with parts of the public service dominated by female employees (AFEAS 1998).

The women's march opened a number of spaces within the state for institutionalizing this agenda. While women's organizations had already been struggling for some time to have a say in setting regional development strategies (Masson and Tremblay 1993), the March precipitated a number of advances. These included the addition of a fifth orientation to the women's policy framework, recognizing the role of women in regional development (Quebec 1997). The idea of

the social economy was likewise explored by a number of consultative bodies within the state concerned with social development (see Graefe 2001 for more discussion). The project of a social economy gave the women's movement and the community movement a status (albeit secondary) as economic actors, and thus a place at the table at two important summits in 1996 that sought to create a broad social consensus on deficit reduction and employment creation.

These summits were roundly criticized by many progressives for placing an overwhelming emphasis on deficit reduction, and thus legitimizing the government's strategy of balancing the budget through significant cuts to program-spending. The women's movement's representatives in fact walked out when the government refused to commit to the goal of "zero impoverishment" in deciding how to reform the welfare state. In retrospect, however, the summits can also be seen as the site at which the government's family policy was launched. This policy was spearheaded by a reform coalition that included progressive family organizations and early childhood development experts, but it received a critical boost from a mobilized women's movement, strategically placed femocrats and some strong feminist ministers (Jenson 2002, 319). It included a unified family allowance for low-income earners that aimed to break down the wall between welfare and work, but its centrepiece was the plan to develop universal low-cost childcare, delivered through non-profit daycare centres. The policy was not an undiluted good, however. Jane Jenson underlines how it was bound up with the punitive social assistance reform of 1998. Still, in her view it involved an instance of a determined reform coalition rowing against a neoliberal tide to embed a program promoting greater gender and class equality. While wages in the sector remain low, the educational emphasis of the policy, coupled with the unionization of the workforce, opens spaces for improving the credentials and wages

of child care workers. Indeed, a 1999 agreement signed with the government raised wages an average of 35% over four years, and led to discussions on establishing an occupational pension plan (Jenson 2002; Vaillancourt *et al.* 2002, 41-42).

Finally, the anti-poverty message as a whole continued to be carried forward by women's groups and community organizations. As part of its reinvention in the early 1990s, the FFQ decided to create a wide coalition against women's poverty. The success of the 1995 march against poverty, and the alternatives it presented to the employability bias of Quebec's social assistance system, placed the women's movement in a position of leadership in opposing the 1996-98 social assistance reform. While this reform reinforced the existing policy of *managing* poverty through a residual and work-focussed social assistance system, the women's movement's identification of alternatives (creating and consolidating jobs in the social economy, higher minimum wages etc.) that might serve to *eliminate* poverty opened spaces for a wider debate. This subsequently gave rise to a campaign, led by a coalition of women's organizations, faith-based groups, union federations, anti-poverty organizations, and the organization of social assistance recipients, for a framework law for the elimination of poverty (Noël 2002, 2).

#### *The Turn of the Century: The Low Road, but not the Same Low Road*

The first years of the new century provide an opportunity for considering the relative successes of the women's movement in inflecting Quebec's post-industrial trajectory, and for assessing ongoing challenges. The general conclusion that emerges is that Quebec is still on the low-road, but certainly not on the same low road. Indeed, a number of institutions and practices now exist that may eventually provide the markers for a new, high-road path.

One example arises from the government's new anti-poverty strategy, enacted in response to the demands for a law against poverty. While it may be too early to adopt Noël's conclusion (2002, 9) that the anti-poverty agenda in Quebec has changed, the explicit recognition of the demands of social actors has provided important resources for displacing a residual, social assistance approach. It may allow for the development of new approaches for confronting the questions of inequality, job quality and poverty raised by the post-industrial labour market.

Perhaps the biggest success for the women's movement has been the government's family policy, and particular its universal and affordable child care program. This program has led to the creation of some 6,000 jobs in non-profit centres, even as wages have improved. Here we observe a major program that seems more in keeping with the high road than the low one. The story is less positive when one turns to a second large sphere of personal services employment, namely homecare. Home care services grew greatly in importance with the government's ambulatory care reform. The government has supported the creation of a network of social enterprises to perform these services, and 103 non-profit providers have sprung up province-wide, providing 3,800 jobs (Chantier 2001, 14). This outcome has been lauded by some progressive analysts for its employment outcomes and for crowding out private provision (Vaillancourt *et al.* 2002). On the other hand, the structure of government funding has kept wages low in the sector and provides incentives that stress quantity over service quality. It thus has a good ways to go before it adequately respects the needs of the predominantly female homecare workforce and its predominantly female clientele (Toupin 2001, 6; CSF 2000, 39-43).

The development of the social economy has also proved to be a mixed bag. From the very earliest regional committees, dominated by women's representatives,



there has been great difficulty in getting the government to accept the women's movement's broad conception of the *economic*. As a result, the encompassing economic vision of social infrastructures, recognizing the role of traditionally unpaid or underpaid labour as well as social benefits not counted in standard macroeconomic aggregates, gave way to more traditional views. Social economy projects were therefore subject to standard cost--benefit analysis, and with time the imperatives of generating autonomous revenues and becoming self-financing have made themselves felt. The idea of funding social infrastructures for the ends they served (both social and economic) was thereby pushed aside (Toupin 200, 34-35).

Indeed, as public interventions to support the sector increased, it became evident that the vision of social infrastructures was being displaced by an entrepreneurial vision emphasizing the development of social enterprises, as in homecare (Tremblay and Gilbert 2001, 52-53). Martine D'Amours (2001) argues that this has reached the point where the government sees the social economy as made up of three policy fields: one dealing with cooperatives, seeking to prop up their competitiveness in global markets, particularly through access to capital; another one dealing with the social economy and focussed on developing entrepreneurial social enterprises; and a third one involving the funding of community organizations. The women's vision is largely relegated to this third compartment, which becomes defined solely in terms of its social contribution. The most recent provincial budget appears to vindicate this interpretation (Québec 2003). As a result, the drift of social economy policy has elicited ongoing feminist critique. The bitter taste left by this experience meant that it did not figure in the Quebec demands around the 2000 World March of Women (Druelle 2001, 72-73). Paradoxically, despite the severe conclusions of the women's movement's leadership and their academic allies, the potential gains of

developing this sector according to a feminist blueprint has meant women and women's organizations have continued to be active participants in institutions related to the social economy. This holds even as the multiplication of relevant institutions makes such participation onerous in terms of time and resources (Descarries and Corbeil 2002; Sabourin and Duval 2001, 21).

This bittersweet diagnosis can be extended more generally. The emphasis on labour standards and minimum wages has given rise to some modest but encouraging gains, such as through the steady increase in the minimum wage and the December 2002 changes to the labour standards legislation. Similarly, while large parts of the community sector have been left aside by the entrepreneurial approach to the social economy, the government has moved to recognize the contribution of autonomous community action to the development of citizenship, and made promises to contribute to the base funding of community organizations. The meaning of this recognition will hinge greatly on the sums of money made available, and the criteria for dividing it between groups. It nevertheless represents another point of leverage for inflecting the development of personal services in Quebec, and thus post-industrial restructuring more generally. Quebec may still be following the low-road, but it is not the same low-road. More importantly, resources are accumulating that may provide further means of shifting towards something more closely approaching the high-road.

## CONCLUSION

This paper cannot be said to have advanced a feminist critique of the mainstream work on post-industrial welfare regimes, but it has attempted to challenge the strong path-dependent vision advanced by this work by placing the agency of women's organizations at the centre of analysis. Recognizing how women's

organizations are placed at strategic intersections of welfare restructuring, it has attempted to assess how they have tried to inflect the course of this restructuring from the liberal low-road to something more like the social democratic high road.

The example of the Quebec women's movement provides much material for further reflection. The portrait of its efforts over the past two decades is not always a cheery one, filled as it is with losses and setbacks. Nevertheless, these setbacks came assorted with more than the consolation of "moral victories" – they provided discursive and institutional resources for challenging the low-road strategy. These resources include the (partial) recognition of the value women's work in the community sector and politicizing the issue of work conditions in this social economy, the creation of a family policy with a universalist flavour, a broadening of the debate concerning poverty (and policy solutions to poverty), and small improvements in labour market regulation.

It is nevertheless too early to claim that the Quebec women's movement and its allies have pushed the welfare regime firmly towards the social democratic path, and the election of the right-wing Quebec Liberal party in April 2003 may well hem in these gains. The mainstream accounts may therefore retort that the emphasis on path dependency remains accurate. Nevertheless, the resources underlined above at the very least suggest that there is significantly more room to manoeuvre in terms of policy (and likely in terms of outcomes) within the constraints of the liberal path than is usually thought. It appears that the options can be broadened beyond active labour market policies and wage supplementation to encompass universal care services, the wider recognition of care work and some labour market re-regulation. While perhaps not the high road, it would appear that the women's movement in Quebec has succeeded in deflecting the post-industrial path away from the low-road in a manner

that commands us to pay more attention to the transformative potential of strategically-placed organizations and movements. Welfare regime studies should thus heed Mahon's call to rebalance the attention given to institutional incrementalism as compared to agency (2002, 26). Meanwhile, equality-seeking movements in liberal welfare regimes may be able to draw some lessons, strategies and inferences from the experience of the Quebec women's movement as it resonates with their own contexts and dilemmas.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich's (2001) investigative (voyeuristic?) exploration of work in low-paid service labour markets suggests that while greater pay would bring important welfare gains, access to child care, health, and housing must also be greatly facilitated.

<sup>2</sup> See also Howell (2002) for a discussion of empirical evidence that raises questions about the extent to which wages and labour market regulation have priced service jobs out of the market. Howell places more weight on the impact of a slow-growth macroeconomic environment, a view which is partially shared by Ferrera *et al.* (2001, 173).

<sup>33</sup> These conclusions are drawn from testimony presented to the Québec National Assembly's Social Affairs Committee in 1988, including by the Conseil d'intervention pour l'accès des femmes au travail (February 29), the Association de défense des droits sociaux du Montréal métropolitain (February 22) and Action-chômage (March 10). See also CSF (1988).

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