

# The Employment Service in Early Twentieth Century Ontario

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## Introduction

The establishment of public employment offices in which workers seeking employment and employers seeking workers could be brought together seems to be a fairly modest innovation. Yet it marks a critical chapter in the story of social and labour market policy formation in Canada. The Employment Service of Canada was implemented in 1918 in an effort to redress many of the most pressing political-economic problems of the period. The Service was established to ensure a more efficient organization of the labour force for the war effort and, subsequently, to facilitate the reintegration of soldiers into the nation's labour market. It represented for others a progressive approach to the problem of unemployment, one that moved beyond the moralizing practices of poor relief that were rendered increasingly archaic with the onset of the industrial depression in 1913. The Employment Service further signified a strengthened public presence in the field of employment placement work that had long been dominated by private employment agencies. While central to a number of key political-economic developments, the emergence of public labour exchanges in the early twentieth century remains under explored in Canadian welfare state historiography.

This paper, drawn from my dissertation research examining discourses and practices of employability in Canadian labour market policy over the twentieth century, seeks to address this gap by exploring how the public employment office functioned (and failed to function) as a critical site of social governance. It proceeds in two sections. The first section draws from the Report of the Ontario Commission on Unemployment established by the provincial government in 1914 to examine the problem of unemployment. It demonstrates how the Commission served as a forum in which discourses of employability and unemployability were assembled into administrative plans for the employment office. This section examines how Commissioners envisaged the employment office as a critical technology of labour market regularization that would direct 'employable' workers to work while excising the 'vagrant', the 'habitual casual' and all other 'unemployables' from the labour market.

Miller and Rose argue that "[w]hilst 'governmentality' is eternally optimistic, 'government' is a congenitally failing operation...The 'will to govern' needs to be understood less in terms of its success than in terms of the difficulties of operationalizing it" (cited in Higgins 2004, p. 461). Accordingly, the second section of the paper seeks to demonstrate how the Employment Service implemented in 1918 failed to give effect to many of the governmental ambitions articulated in the context of the Ontario Commission on Unemployment. Drawing upon archival records of the Ontario Branch of the Employment Service of Canada, this section illustrates the difficulties and uncertainties that administrators encountered in their attempt to govern through categories of employability, and to consolidate the project of the Employment Service around the 'employable' worker. This section then demonstrates how, in the face of this difficulty, the work of Employment Service administrators became increasingly shaped by a fraught attempt to bring order to the spaces

and subjects internal to the employment office. The examination of the early employment offices developed here seeks to illustrate both the fragility and determination of governmental projects as they encounter what Li (2007, p. 287) describes as “the refractory processes that make government so difficult.”

### **Section One: Envisioning the Employment Bureau: The Ontario Commission on Unemployment**

The rejection of the Poor Law system by officials in Upper Canada profoundly shaped the governance of poverty and pauperism in Ontario. Without a centrally administered Poor Law regime, assistance to the destitute evolved into a patchwork of private, religious, and municipal organizations (Valverde 1995, p.41). However, the absence of a Poor Law framework in Ontario did not imply the absence of its punitive principle of lesser eligibility. The laissez faire logics dominant in nineteenth century Ontario ensured that poor relief practices were ‘deterrent’; relief was typically dispensed on a discretionary, temporary, and in kind basis to enforce the liberal ethic of individual self-reliance (Struthers 1983; Valverde 1995; Stephen 2002).

The Report of the Royal Commission on Penal Reform (1891) demonstrates how a somewhat more nuanced account of unemployment gradually took shape along side the punitive principle of deterrence. The Report emphasized the need to scrutinize the ‘vagrant’ more carefully in order to assist those thrust into destitution ‘involuntarily’: “He should be assisted in his efforts to find employment, and nothing should be done that would tend to degrade him or to destroy such self-respect as he may be able to retain when compelled to seek relief” (Penal Reform Commission Report cited in Splane 1965, p. 108). The masculinist orientation of this recommendation is indicative of the gendered construction of unemployment. For much of the next century, notions of female domesticity would operate to deny women status as full labour force participants, and, thereby, access to many state measures directed to the ‘unemployed’ (Pierson 1990, Porter 2003).

While the Penal Reform Commission did not specify the kind of institutional framework that would best assist the industrious unemployed (male) find work, by the time its report was published, the public employment bureau had already been promoted as the successor to ‘deterrent’ poor relief. As early as 1889 it was resolved at the annual meeting of the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada that “the government establish offices where the workingman out of employment could go and enquire to obtain employment”, and in 1906 the TLC further affirmed “the necessity for the creation of free government labour employment bureaus throughout the Dominion, under the administration of the various provincial governments” (TLC cited in Industrial Relations Counsellors 1935, p. 20). Such calls were rendered increasingly urgent during the depression of 1913 and 1914 which signaled the conclusion of the western settlement and railroad building projects of the National Policy that had engaged many male labourers (Struthers 1983, p. 13). As one social reformer, Etta Wileman, exclaimed in a fiery tract titled *Government Labour Bureau: Their Scope and Aims*:

What is wrong with the brains of the Nation that the Labour market is unorganized resulting in idleness and distress? What is the matter with the State administration that no trustworthy centres are provided where the Labourer may apply for employment? What is at fault with the thousands yearly given in Charity? ... We find

honest, intelligent men and women giving way to apathy and despair in the constantly recurring struggle hunting jobs, and we see children new to the game of finding work thrown on their own resources to make connection with frequently disastrous results to their after lives” (Wileman 1913, p. 1).

Amidst growing consensus on the need for concerted governmental action to redress unemployment, and to better regulate the practices of private agents, the Ontario government appointed a Commission on Unemployment in 1914 to “to recommend measures to mitigate or abolish the evil” (Ontario Commission on Unemployment (OCU henceforth) 1916, p. 9). The Report of the Commission, released in 1916, noted that “Personal causes of unemployment have received, heretofore, a disproportionate amount of attention” (OCU 1916, p. 11) and called for policy measures reflecting an industrial approach to the problem of unemployment. A central recommendation of the Commission’s Report was the establishment of free, government-run employment offices that were to be linked together as a national mechanism of labour distribution. These offices would serve to mitigate the problem of unemployment and underemployment typical of the nation’s casual and seasonal labour market by accumulating statistical knowledges of labour supply and demand and distributing workers accordingly to ensure the “dove-tailing of occupations” (OCU 1916, p. 14). For Commissioners, the employment office represented the public side of regularization efforts. They also stressed the role that industry ought to play in combating casual and intermittent work. Their report recommended, for instance, that Ontario firms engaged in manufacturing plan their production schedules in ways that would minimize the destabilizing effect of seasonal turnover.

In a number of ways, the Commission advanced an approach to unemployment as ‘a problem of industry’. It put the question of public employment bureaus and employment ‘regularization’ at the forefront of labour market policy. Yet, in the Report, industrial approaches to unemployment were articulated alongside an ongoing preoccupation with ‘voluntary’ unemployment embodied in the form of the vagrant. For Commissioners, the central inadequacy of poor relief was that it failed to effectively adjudicate the unemployed on the basis of their will to work. Commissioners suggested that relief agencies were unable to detect, and thus were not sufficiently resolute toward, the vagrant and other irregular workers – “the indolent who prefer casual labour...” (OCU 1916, p. 13). In this sense, poor relief was seen to enable casual work:

Our present methods of handling vagrants have broken down. The vagrant thrives on soup kitchens, Houses of Industry, Salvation Army Shelters, and similar institutions, maintained for the purpose of rendering temporary assistance to a worthier class. The experience of Toronto in this respect is conclusive for the city has become a popular rendezvous for the habitual loafer, the nomad of the highway, and the man, who, under no circumstances, will work for more than a few hours at a time” (OCU 1916, p.77-78).

Poor relief settings were singled out as sites within which the transmission of voluntary unemployment took place: “Once in the breadline, the workman is in contact with drunkards, semi-criminals, and all those parasites who batten on the charitable public. The standard of life of the workman is continually lowered, and he cannot fail to notice the success with which others live in idleness” (OCU 1916, p. 104). Because of this, Commissioners concluded that “[t]horough

separation of the two classes is a long overdue measure of justice to the industrious poor and it must be regarded as essential to real progress in the solution of unemployment” (OCU 1916, p.78).

Commissioners subsequently articulated a dual role for the labour exchange; it would serve as a mechanism of labour distribution and regularization while simultaneously providing a solution to the problem of ‘unemployability’. They anticipated that the employment office would separate the ‘legitimately’ unemployed from the vagrant and ‘unemployable’ in ways that relief had failed to do, and that it would ensure both categories of the unemployed received the interventions they were due. In light of this dual role, the labour exchange cannot be read through a narrative of welfare triumphalism as the institutional expression of an industrial, more humane response to unemployment.

In devising the dual role of the employment office, Commissioners drew from (and repeatedly cited) the work of British social policy architect, William Beveridge. As Director of the British network of labour exchanges, Beveridge advanced more than any other the cause of the labour exchange in governing ‘legitimate’ unemployment and the unemployable (those who had grown accustomed to unemployment or casual work). He approached the problem of unemployment as, in large part, a matter of labour market organization. Such organization was to be achieved, Beveridge believed, not by increasing overall levels of employment in the labour market, but by redistributing hours of work to ‘regular’ workers through the labour exchange (O’Donnell 2003, p. 352).

The labour exchange’s redistributive function hinged upon its capacity to distinguish ‘employable’ candidates for regularization from ‘surplus’ ‘unemployables’ and ‘habitual casuals’. To this end, the labour exchange would serve as the site of a new kind of work test whereby officials would scrutinize an applicant’s will to work by counterposing his or her claim to be unemployed involuntarily with statistical knowledges of labour market demand (see Mansfield 1992, p. 452). The way in which the labour exchange would surpass ‘deterrent’ poor relief “in affording a direct test of unemployment” (Beveridge 1909, p. 215) was elaborated by Beveridge:

If all the jobs offering in a trade or a district are registered at a single office then it is clear that any man who cannot get work through that office is unemployed against his will... It [the state] can with perfect safety help the unemployed more freely because it knows that so soon as work is to be had it will have notice thereof and be able to hand on the notice to those who are being relieved. The labour exchange thus opens a way of “dispauperisation” more humane, less costly and more effective than that of the “work house test” – the way of making the finding of work easy instead of merely making relief hard” (Beveridge 1909, p. 216; see also O’Donnell 2003, p. 353).

Measures that awaited those whose claim to involuntary unemployment could not be validated by the work test stood in marked contrast to ‘dispauperisation’. Once identified, the ‘voluntarily unemployed’ or the habitual casual were to be denied employment, and moreover, were seen as properly subject to various authoritarian interventions recalling the Benthamite work house for paupers (Mansfield 1992, p. 455). Beveridge, along with other social investigators such as Beatrice

and Sydney Webb, argued that the unemployable ought to be “sifted out of the industrial world altogether” (Beveridge 1909, p. 215). Beveridge and the Webbs were ardent advocates of the labour colony (something akin to a prison farm) as a solution to the problem of the unemployable. Additional measures envisioned by Beveridge for the unemployable include the denial of civic rights and the right to have children (Mansfield 1992, p. 455; see also O’Donnell 2003 and Welshman 2006).

Following Beveridge, reformers in Canada promoted the labour exchange as the administrative framework necessary to excise and reform the unemployable. Bryce Stewart, the founding Director of the Employment Service of Canada, promoted the ability of the proposed labour exchange system to deal with “abnormal workers”, assuring delegates attending a 1916 Canadian Municipal Authorities conference that it would “... squeeze them out of the labour market and turn them over to the State for such specialized curative and preventative treatment (Stewart 1916, p. 523). As part of her call for labour exchanges, Etta Wileman similarly argued that “the problem of unemployables (vagrants, dependents, defectives and inefficient) should be treated as a problem of regeneration without any hesitation or compromise, the problem of the Employables as an Industrial matter” (Wileman 1913, p. 3).

The Report of the Ontario Commission on Unemployment further reiterated these ambitions. It called for the labour exchange to be coordinated with a diversity of institutional sites in order to have “[p]rovince-wide co-operation in taking these parasites off the street, and subjecting them to such treatment as may restore them to useful citizenship” (OCU 1916, p. 77). The Report suggested that the industrial farm would provide the ideal setting for such purposes: “The existing system of Industrial Farms, still in the earlier stage of its development in Ontario, appears to furnish the necessary instrument or a model ...for the accommodation of proved vagrants and confirmed wasters” (OCU 1916, p. 78). Many expert witnesses to the Commission concurred with this course of treatment and prevention; the relegation of the ‘unemployable’ to industrial farms would, in the words of one witness, “materially strengthen the labour market” (OCU 1916, p. 250).

The program for governing the unemployable that the labour exchange was seen to make possible was not only a project of excision. It was thought that employment offices could facilitate, through careful management, the reintroduction of the reformed vagrant and/or habitual casual worker into the labour market:

Your Commissioners believe most strongly that if the possibilities of reclamation are at all to be realized, Industrial Farms must be linked so closely with Employment Bureaux, that these can assist vagrants on release. The provision of some form of good conduct certificate, for the discharged vagrant who has deserved it, would facilitate this. In this way Employment Bureaux can serve two special purposes in addition to their ordinary task of providing work for the unwillingly unemployed... They can also assist the former vagrant to make a successful use of his new opportunity in life (OCU 1916, p. 79).

The difficulty of devising a program to identify exactly who among the un/underemployed population were actually unemployable was acknowledged by Commissioners. Such difficulty was exacerbated by the high levels of unemployment and casual work that typified employment conditions of the period. Yet the project was imperative in the minds of Commissioners, for the failure to apprehend the “deliberately and chronically idle class demoralizes the employment agencies and labour bureaux...the bureau and its efforts to organize the labour market are seriously discredited” (OCU 1916, p. 77). The difficulty of this project was also acknowledged by Beveridge. As he commented, “...it is difficult to attach any scientific interpretation to the word “unemployable”. The fixed distinctions suggested by it between “can works” and “can’t works” or between “will works” and “won’t works” are in reality fluid and indefinite...it is, therefore, quite impossible to make hard and fast distinctions, or to segregate a definite class of the unemployable” (Beveridge 1909, p. 136).

Yet, as Jennifer Stephen (2002) demonstrates, it was precisely ‘scientific’ interpretations that were called upon in the face of this ambiguity to re-establish the reality of a distinct and identifiable category of the unemployable. Commissioners heard from a number of expert witnesses who cast unemployability as a form of mental pathology that only those fluent in mental hygiene – “the latest of the sciences” (MacMurchy cited in MacLennan 1987, p. 10) – were equipped to diagnose. One Employment Service executive from the U.S. confirmed this for Commissioners, warning that the mentally defective and feeble-minded unemployable “may present such an appearance and bearing as will deceive all but the expert” (OCU 1916, p. 104). This point was also underscored by Dr. Helen MacMurchy, Inspector of the Feeble-Minded for Ontario, in her presentation to the Commission titled *Mental Defect as a Cause of Unemployment*. She called for employment offices to be one site in a comprehensive system of assessment and prevention involving screening for ‘backward’ children in public schools, a registry of all ‘mental defectives’ in the province and a “colony on the cottage plan for the permanent care of Mental Defectives who require such care” (OCU 1916 Appendix E, p. 297). The adoption of such a plan to screen out the mentally defective unemployable would, in her words, “unquestionably tend to lessen the amount of unemployment now existing in the province of Ontario” (Ibid).

As Stephen’s (1995, 2002) work also demonstrates, young, working-class women figured centrally within mental hygienists’ accounts of ‘unemployability’. The ability of such women to move from one job to another and to choose not to demonstrate thrift in spending their wages was problematized by mental hygienists as a form of moral delinquency rooted in feeble-mindedness. Discourses of mental defectiveness thus functioned to further mediate the access of women to waged work and brought many women under various forms of authoritarian governance (Stephen 1995, 2002).

In summary, the Ontario Commission on Unemployment provided an important site for articulating the problem of unemployment. Drawing upon the work of labour exchange advocates in Britain, Commissioners invoked the potential of the labour exchange to furnish solutions to both unemployment and unemployability. They suggested that the employment office would serve as a point of interception that would work in tandem with other

institutional sites to identify and remove the unemployable from the labour market. The program of division and containment articulated by Commissioners was lent scientific credence through discourses of metal hygiene (Stephen 2002).

## **Section Two: The Employment Service of Canada and its Ontario Branch**

In this section I will illustrate the uncertainties, difficulties, and forms of resistance that daunted those charged with the task of translating the labour exchange program into practice. Immediately following the release of the report of the Ontario Commission on Unemployment, the Ontario government opened full time employment offices. Eleven offices were established across the province by 1918. The mounting pressure on the federal government to create a national network of public employment bureaux, while one of the Commission's key recommendations, had little to do with the plight of the unemployed. It was prompted primarily by a concern over the mobilization of labour for the war effort, and, later, demobilization (Sautter 1980; Struthers 1983).

The federal government subsequently passed the Employment Office Coordination Act of 1918. By providing conditional grants to provinces to establish offices under the supervision of the Employment Service Division of the Federal Department of Labour, the Act brought into existence what would become a network of labour exchanges across all provinces except P.E.I.. The Act gave the federal government the ability to inspect employment offices to ensure uniformity of operations, and to receive financial and statistical reports from the provinces. At its peak in 1920, the Employment Service had a total of ninety five offices, but the number fell to seventy-five the following year. In 1922, there were twenty-seven offices in Ontario alone (Sautter 1980). In addition to job placement activities, the Employment Service of Canada quickly moved into the field of labour market research. In 1919, the federal headquarters began to produce statistics on the registrations, job orders, and placements recorded through its offices. This 'statisticalization of unemployment' (Walters 2000, p. 49) was one of the ways officials sought to make the labour market visible as a field of governance; to "show", in Stewart's words, "when, where and in what numbers employers and workers come into the labour market and the volume of transactions" (Stewart 1923, p. 287).

A number of serious challenges hindered the nascent system of labour exchanges almost immediately following the election of the Mackenzie King government in 1921. Not only did the Prime Minister dislike conditional grants, the funding arrangement on which the ESC relied, he also viewed unemployment as a local issue (Struthers 1983). Severe funding cuts were imposed on the service between 1922 and 1924, which resulted in a fifty percent decrease in staff working in the federal branch. These cuts also resulted in the ceasing of the federal branch's labour market research and the closure of divisions of the service for women and professionals (Struthers 1983, p. 38; Hunter 1993, p. 54). In the absence of any legal impetus for employers to use the Employment Service to fill job vacancies, and in the continued presence of private labour market intermediaries in a number of provinces, the ESC devolved into a referral service for casual work by 1924 (Struthers 1983, pg. 40). The institutional viability of the Ontario branch of the Employment Service was left to repeated admonitions from high ranking officials for staff to "sell" the service. At the 1937 conference of Ontario Employment Service Superintendents, the Deputy Minister of Labour for the province criticized those offices in which staff had acquiesced to a passive role by

“sitting at a desk and waiting for orders to come in” rather than engaging in their rightful duties as “salesmen as well as order takers”(Ontario Employment Service 1937).

Employment Service administrators also assumed a role in the administration of relief that would hinder their attempt to delineate ‘employables’ from ‘unemployables’, and to consolidate the Employment Service around the former. The administrative technique of the ‘work test’ performed in the employment office was soon discovered to be an effective means to verify the ‘deservingness’ of relief applicants in civic relief agencies.<sup>1</sup> The work test was seen to furnish a more rational and consistent way to categorize relief applicants as either ‘deserving’ or ‘undeserving’ as it did not rely exclusively upon the subjective and therefore contestable assessments of relief officers. It was also far less labour intensive than the verificatory techniques traditionally employed by organizations providing relief such as the Toronto House of Industry.<sup>2</sup>

The use of the Employment Service’s work test for relief purposes was initially limited to soldiers; under the program of federal relief for soldiers during the period of demobilization in 1919-1920, unemployed soldiers were not eligible for unemployment relief unless they registered at local Employment Service offices (Stewart, 1923).<sup>3</sup> While this program was terminated in April 1920, the use of the work test for the purpose of relief dispensation proved to be a highly durable (although not uniformly applied) social policy innovation:

The relief officer has come to recognize, and to take advantage of the assistance of the public employment service in dealing with the frequently recurring problems in unemployment. The practice followed, for instance, in the Toronto office, is to require the applicant for relief to register at the office of the Employment Service where, if no work is available, he is given a card bearing his name and the statement that “we have no work for the bearer who stated he is in need of relief”...The certificate from the Employment Service provides evidence that the applicant is a bona fide seeker after work, and that no employment is available for him. Imposition on different relief funds is reduced to the absolute minimum by this procedure, as the applicant’s card may be taken from him by the Employment Office staff if he refuses employment for which they believe him to be qualified to accept” (Labour Gazette Sept 1925 p. 859).

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<sup>1</sup> The potential use of the labour exchange work test for the purpose of relief was envisioned by Beveridge. He suggested that it could become the basis of relief dispensation programs (Beveridge 1909: 216).

<sup>2</sup> The difficulty faced by Toronto House of Industry officials in procuring and removing the rocks and wood used in the course of the outdoor work test (i.e. making relief applicants break rocks or chop wood in return for food and shelter) is well documented (see Splane 1965: 106; also Speisman 1973).

<sup>3</sup> As Cowen (2008) demonstrates, the military citizen has long served as the basis for innovations in social welfare governance.

As part of the federal government's Unemployment Relief Act of 1930, which provided federal funds to the provinces and municipalities for expenditures on relief work and direct relief, the federal Minister of Labour urged municipal and provincial relief officials to make use of Employment Service offices to screen relief applicants (Stewart 1935, p. 60). This practice was further entrenched in 1936 when the registration of all able-bodied relief applicants at the province's Employment Service offices was made mandatory. As a result of these initiatives, the labour exchange work test was performed on a broader cross-section of the province's population.

The increasing cooperation between the Employment Service and civic relief agencies undoubtedly increased traffic through Employment Service doors; Ontario Employment Service offices recorded an increase of twelve thousand registrants in 1936 immediately following mandatory registration of the able-bodied unemployed (Gettys 1938, p. 50). Yet many Employment Service administrators viewed this development as the unwelcome intrusion of a 'social' welfare project. At annual conferences, Employment Service administrators often expressed frustration at the way in which the potential of the Employment Service was undermined its increasingly close proximity to the stigma of charitable relief (and its less worthy subject). Many viewed the projects of employment placement and relief verification as incompatible; the practice of registering and offering work to unemployment relief applicants (many of whom were suspected of unemployability) was thought to impede the project of labour market organization which dictated that only 'employables' be forwarded to employment.

One complaint, shared by many administrators, was that employment offices had become over-run by "relief artists" – those suspected of utilizing the services of the employment office to seek certification for civic relief rather than work. As one administrator claimed of so-called 'relief-artists': "We see them only when relief is announced, not when jobs are going" (Ontario Employment Service 1923, p. 4). Other complaints focused on what was seen as the general unruliness of applicants: "when they hung about and got into a discussion they were loath to accept jobs which were offered to them, preferring to remain and talk" (Ontario Employment Service 1924, p. 16).

In an address entitled *The Relationship of Employment Offices and Unemployment Relief Centres*, one Superintendent articulated the risk posed to the Employment Service by its role in relief administration: "...there is the danger that we shall be regarded as a relief office rather than an employment office, and that would tend to nullify the fact, which it has taken years of patient effort to instill in the Employing public, that we send the *right* men or women to fill vacancies notified to us" (Ontario Employment Service 1923, emphasis added). Administrators consistently expressed such misgivings. The General Superintendent for Ontario wrote in his 1931 Annual Report:

Experience has demonstrated the fact that if a public employment office becomes known as a relief agency, or as being associated too closely with direct relief in any form, it loses a measure of its usefulness to the community... Throughout the year superintendents were instructed from time to time to guard against engaging in the dispensation of direct relief but to co-operate to the fullest possible extent in the selection and placement of men on relief work" (Ontario General Superintendent cited in Industrial Relations Counselors 1935, p. 63).

Employment Service administrators' reluctance to cooperate with relief agencies stemmed not only from their concern to restrict employment opportunities to those deemed 'employable'. On more pragmatic grounds, they also recognized how the work test functioned as a highly contentious technology of surveillance and disempowerment that threatened to mire Employment Service staff in conflicts over determinations of deservingness. Early in his tenure as the Employment Service Director, R.A. Rigg urged administrators to minimize such conflicts through the invocation of jurisdictional and administrative boundaries. He enjoined officers to "fix and keep fixed upon the different municipal authorities the onus of all relief administration and for determining whether an applicant was a suitable person for relief. That is primarily a municipal obligation... We are, after all, only employment offices. This is our distinct function" (Ontario Employment Service 1923, p.5). Evincing bureaucratic irrationality, Rigg suggested that while Employment Service staff should administer the work test, they were to deny any responsibility for the way in which its results were interpreted by civic relief officials. Regarding the disputes over determinations of relief eligibility, Rigg warned officers to "keep as far away from it as you can...so that the Employment Office would not become the battleground where these disputes are fought" (Ibid). Rigg's directive illustrates the fraught work of Employment Service staff tasked with both work test administration *and* the displacement of contestation over its distributive effects.

Employment Service administrators were caught in a dilemma; the marginalized status of the Employment Service as a labour market intermediary was made all the more evident by its increasingly widespread image as the certificatory branch of municipal and provincial relief agencies. This situation prompted extended efforts on the part of Employment Service officials in Ontario to recuperate the status of the labour exchange as a business-like service for the 'employable' unemployed. H. C. Hudson, Superintendent of Ontario Employment Service Offices, sought to dispel the confusion that had settled over the function of the Employment Service (and the employability of its subject) in a 1925 article in the journal *Social Welfare*:

...[T]he public employment service idea is a comparatively new one in Canada and the exact functions of the service should be made known so that the fullest possible use may be made of the service, which is as much of a public utility as, for instance, the post-office department. Both employers and workers should be made fully to realize that they are dealing with an institution operating along business rather than social service lines, but that the Service will co-operate to the fullest extent at all times with charitable and philanthropic organizations in endeavoring within the limits of its functions to make easier the pathway of those who are struggling to earn an honest livelihood" (Hudson 1925, p. 227).

At a 1931 conference, Ontario administrators confirmed the need to engage in a public relations exercise to stress the difference between the Employment Office and 'social' service agencies that dispensed relief. They resolved that, "in our contacts with newspaper reporters, social service offices and the general public, we make it clear wherever possible – that our association with social service activities of any kind is merely due to the emergency situation and is an evidence of our

willingness to co-operate in every way possible to relieve unemployment” (Ontario Employment Service 1931, p. 21).

Administrators also sought to assert the modernity of the Employment Service (and therefore its distance from relief) at the level of its spatial organization.<sup>4</sup> They regularly stressed the need to stage the employment office in ways that befitted its rightful status as a space of business rather than charity. One resolution passed by administrators at the 1931 conference stated:

“Whereas the popular misconception still exists as to the limited nature and functions of the employment service, and whereas the general public has a tendency to appraise our work merely from the outward and inward appearance of our offices, be it resolved that we express our unqualified opinion that public employment offices should be located only in modern and well kept buildings and that the standard of appearance be at least equal to that of a provincial savings office or similar institution” (Ontario Employment Service 1931, p.11).

To this end, a policy of cleanliness was critical. In a presentation made at the 1926 Superintendents meeting, titled *The Attractive Employment Office*, Ontario Employment Service administrators were made aware that the Bellville branch was “second to none in the province” as an environment that was “business-like and yet pleasing in appearance.” The Belleville Superintendent shared with his colleagues that, “...by insisting upon clean floors, clean walls, and a general business-like “tone” in everything pertaining to the office,” he “succeeded in completely changing the popular conception of an employment office from the point of view of the employer and applicant.” He further noted that the policy of cleanliness “increases the number of orders and applications in the Women’s department” (Ontario Employment Service 1926, p. 42).

Yet the achievement of a ‘business-like’ employment office involved much more than soap and water. It was also seen to require careful management of the way in which people circulated through the space of the employment office. Techniques of crowd management were critical in order to ensure that employment offices did not invoke the chaos of the relief ward and its connotation of unemployability. The Kingston branch of the Employment Service was held as an example of the way in which employment offices should, when possible, ensure the segregation of employers from the unemployed. The provision of separate entrances to the Kingston premises meant that employers “would not have to force their way through a crowd of men in order to place their orders” (Ontario Employment Service 1924, p. 15). In addition to separating employers and the unemployed, further order was to be established through the separation of Employment Service staff and applicants – those with jobs and those without. Administrators recommended to the Minister of Labour that “the general policy of the Service should be to discourage applicants from loitering around the premises; but that where this plan is not feasible, a waiting room separated from the business office should be provided” (Ontario Employment Service 1931, p. 12). The waiting room would require additional oversight. Resolutions passed by administrators at the 1931 annual conference expressed consensus on the urgent need to ban the ‘unemployable’ and the ‘the social misfit’ from the employment office, as they were known to “frequent the waiting room where they

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<sup>4</sup> Here I am building upon Cole’s (2007) discussion of the spatial organization of past and present employment offices in the UK.

indulge in occasional irrational outbursts which tend to re-act unfavorably upon others assembled, thus disorganizing the discipline of the office and lowering the morale of the Employment Service” (Ontario Employment Service 1931, p.30). This resolution is interesting because it indicates both the vulnerability and determination of the labour exchange program. It betrays the existence of those who sought, perhaps even successfully, to disrupt the operation of the labour exchange, and to contest the violence of a governmental project that mobilized the designation of ‘unemployable’ against people. Yet, it also indicates the way in which administrators sought to enclose and contain these moments of political contestation as the product of unintelligible “irrational outbursts”, and, thereby, as further evidence of the defective pathology of the ‘unemployable’.

The space of the employment office was not the only terrain on which administrators worked to fend off disorderly influences. Another was the conduct and aspirations of employment applicants themselves. At Superintendent meetings, officials often discussed the question of how best to responsabilize the applicant in order to ensure his or her compliance with the Employment Service program. The matter had to be broached carefully, for it risked blowing open antagonisms, what Li (2007) calls ‘lines of fracture’, between applicants and officers. Not all administrators were equally attuned to this danger however. One Superintendent advocated coercive measures to ensure that applicants, in his words, “play the game” and accept available work: “The applicants should be educated to work more in co-operation with the Employment Office...there was absolutely nothing in the office to bring home to the men applying for jobs that they should co-operate with the employment office” (Ontario Employment Service 1923, p. 10). This Superintendent proposed that those who refused job offers be barred from access to future services. Through this strategy – one which implicitly recognized the employment office as a space of power and resistance – the threat of future and prolonged unemployment would be mobilized in the present to ensure the ‘co-operation’ of the applicant. This coercive mode of bureaucratic disempowerment was rejected as inappropriate by other Superintendents who posited the need for therapeutic interventions that would cultivate the ‘will to work’ in the non-compliant. The Superintendent of the Chatham office claimed that while non-compliant applicants were a “nuisance to themselves as well as to the office”, they ought to “receive even more attention than others in the hope that they may eventually come to understand what is best for them” (Ontario Employment Service 1923, p. 11). The Deputy Minister of Labour for the province suggested to Superintendents that instilling the will to work in the unruly was nothing less than their highest calling: “We know the fact is there but we do not know the cause. We have got to get hold of the man and find out what is wrong with him, why there is no incentive to work. Such work is the most interesting part of your duties. Your work could be likened to that of the revivalist. If you can convert only one man to a desire for work it is the highest tribute that could be paid to the excellence of your judgment” (Ibid). In posing the problem of non-compliance in this way, administrators were engaged in the practice of anti-politics (Li 2007)<sup>5</sup>. They sought to manage non-compliance in ways that displaced the possibility of deliberate resistance on the part of workers to the often poor conditions of

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<sup>5</sup> Li (2007) illustrates how the reformulation of complex political issues as problems amenable to a technical solution is a practice generic to any governmental assemblage. She describes it as the practice of ‘anti-politics’.

work on offer.

Importantly, Employment Service officers were not only tasked with rendering responsible and compliant those whose will to work was determined to be deficient. They also came to realize that the project of the Employment Service needed to be secured against the dangers posed by those whose will to work was too great. A report on the Toronto Office of the Employment Service stated:

The task of determining definitely the proper classification of each registrant entails considerable study on the part of the department to which the applicant is referred in order to properly designate his abilities to the proper channel. In some cases the applicant, due to financial conditions informs the registrar that he will take “anything”. It has been found from continued observation that this is a mistake, because it leaves very little impression as to the applicant’s real vocation” (Ontario Employment Service, Professional and Business Section 1930, p. 2).

Unlike the relief agency, desperation had no place in the employment office. Declarations of need were not to interfere with the governmental quest to discover the applicant’s “real vocation”. The subordination of questions of need to the expert practice of vocational assessment was one of the ways which Employment Service officials could assert their distance from relief.

## **Conclusion**

Bryce Stewart’s (1923: 293) prediction that the Employment Service of Canada would be “destined to play an important role in the Canadian industrial drama” did not, ultimately, come to pass. The service developed little capacity to intervene in the Canadian labour market in any substantive sense. Explanations of what went wrong with the Service tended to focus on administrative problems. Several observers pointed to the federal government’s abdication of its regulatory role over the provincial offices, as elaborate powers of inspection and control were reduced to periodic financial auditing of provincial expenditures. This was seen to result in a marked drift in the operation of provincial offices that “[did] not produce the desired results” (Grauer 1939, p. 116). Others pointed to the way in which positions within the provincial Employment Service offices were allocated on the basis of patronage rather than merit (Gettys 1938 pg. 62). The implication was that officers lacked the appropriate skills needed to discharge their duties effectively. These accounts served to construct the failures of the Employment Service as technical problems amenable to solution in the form of new and improved modes of administration.

In contrast, this study draws from archival records of the Ontario branch of the Employment Service in order to shed light on the intractable difficulties faced by those who laboured to translate discourses of employability and unemployability into the administrative practices of the labour exchange. It demonstrates how the ambitions invested in the Employment Service, which relied upon the ability to police the boundary between ‘employables’ and ‘unemployables’, quickly ran aground, and were displaced by the more immediate imperative to bring order to the spaces and subjects internal to the employment office. The inviability and injustice of these early attempts to govern people on the basis of their ‘(un)employability’ raises troubling questions about the resurgence of notions of employability in contemporary social and labour market policy.

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