



# **Can Workfare Work? Reflections From History**

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## *introduction*

The connection between work and welfare is perhaps the oldest and most troubling debate in the history of social policy, one that stretches from the English Poor Laws of the 16th century to the recent victory of Mike Harris and the Common Sense Revolution in Ontario. Debates about welfare, as Michael Katz, America's leading historian of poverty has recently observed, reflect a set of historic preoccupations and stale ideas about poor people that discourage fresh thought [1995:21].

The return of 'workfare' - or the demand for compulsory labour or service from the poor as a condition of their relief - into Canadian social policy discourse through the victory of Mike Harris and the Common Sense Revolution underscores this point. The 1995 election was the first provincial contest in Ontario since the Great Depression in which welfare was a core issue, indeed perhaps the core issue. And as I will argue, parallels between the welfare politics of the 1990s and the 1930s do not end there.

Why, in the 1990s, do we want to make the poor work for their relief? When did we last do this and why did we stop? What might a return to 'workfare' or work testing reveal about changing perceptions and realities of work and poverty as we approach the end of this century? And does the history of workfare within Ontario provide us with any guidance concerning the likely success of such policies in the 1990s?

## *inventing the 'work test'*

Work tests for the poor have old roots. The fear which inspires them, namely that the mere existence of relief will corrupt the moral character of the poor and their incentive to labour, is one of the oldest themes in social policy history. In 16th century England, when the first Poor Laws took shape, a popular saying was that "All whom God, not their

idleness, makes poor, must be relieved" [Michison 1991:21]. Within this statement we see embedded a fundamental distinction between the deserving and the undeserving poor which runs like a thread linking Elizabethan England to Mike Harris' Ontario.

But in times of need, how can society peer within the hearts and minds of the poor in order to comprehend their inner character and moral worth? When sufficient work cannot be found for all who want it, how can distinctions be made between the lazy as opposed to the merely unlucky? In the early 19th century, the most influential answer ever devised to this dilemma emerged within the English Poor Law Report of 1834.

The Poor Law Report originated the idea of the 'workhouse test' - a kind of self-administered psychological screening process - to separate the deserving from the undeserving poor. By compelling all those who sought relief to prove their need by voluntarily committing themselves and their families into central workhouses as a condition of receiving assistance, the authors of the Poor Law Report believed they had discovered the simplest and cheapest way to reduce societal spending on the poor to the absolute minimum necessary.

Only the truly desperate, the Poor Law Report argued, would agree voluntarily to consign themselves and their children to central workhouses in which families were separated, forced to wear pauper uniforms and compelled to perform mindless, repetitive labour such as running on treadmills, picking oakum or breaking up stones in order to gain their subsistence. By making relief 'less eligible' or less attractive, through the workhouse test, than the worst form of labour at the lowest available wages, the work ethic of the labouring poor could be preserved. Put differently, by subjecting all the poor to stigma and degradation as a condition for receiving assistance, work incentives for those capable of labour could be enforced [Michison 1991:64-66].

Two core assumptions underpinned the Poor Law Report's arguments, both of which have reemerged in recent debates on workfare. The first was that wage labour at a subsistence level was available to all who wanted it. The second was that it was relief itself, paid to the poor in their homes in response to proof of need, that was the primary cause of poverty. The Elizabethan Poor Law - not structural changes within the economy - the 1834 Poor Law Report argued, was the primary engine of poverty because it encouraged too many people to avoid looking for work. For the remainder of the 19th century and well into the 20th, this fear of pauperizing the poor through making relief overly generous became the core theme of British social policy. The workhouse, the 'less eligibility principle' and vigorous enforcement of work tests were its key manifestations.

Nineteenth century Ontario never passed a poor law. But the English Poor Law principles of 'less eligibility' and the 'workhouse test' did cross the ocean in the minds of the hundreds of thousands of British immigrants who came to settle within the province after 1834. By the end of the 19th century, to cope with an upsurge in vagrants and paupers filling local jails particularly during winter months, the province finally enacted legislation requiring Ontario counties to erect Houses of Refuge for the care of their poor. Within these County Homes, usually situated on 100-acre farms on the outskirts of the province's towns and cities, inmates were put to work, usually without great success, in return for their subsistence.

Work tests also informed the moral panic surrounding the rise of 'tramps' in late 19th century Ontario. In hindsight, we know that the steam revolution in transportation and industrialization fractured local labour markets, accelerated the dependency of the population on wage labour and provoked a vast upsurge in labour mobility and cyclical fluctuations in labour demand, a phenomenon we now call 'unemployment.'

During the 1880s and 1890s, however, these structural disruptions within the economy, which severed an ever-widening circle of people from their jobs and their communities, were interpreted through the moral lens of a perceived decline in the work ethic. A North American-wide popular backlash soon arose against the most visible and threatening symbols of this economic dislocation: tramps or jobless men who flooded into cities like Toronto, particularly during the onset of winter, in search of work or relief. Led by the Associated Charities movement, the middle-class campaign against the tramp menace succeeded, during the 1880s and 1890s, in having requirements for breaking stone or sawing cords of wood imposed upon all single men seeking aid from the city's charities or its House of Industry. In exchange for three or four hours work in the woodyard or on the stonepile, tramps were entitled in the 1880s and 1890s to a bowl of soup, six ounces of bread and shelter for the night.

### *The Great Depression: relief camps*

Until the 1930s, work tests imposed upon the indigent within county poorhouses, or upon tramps and vagrants seeking aid at Toronto's House of Industry, reached only a small proportion of Ontario's poor. Most of those in need relied upon informal networks of help from family, friends and a variety of charities - not institutional relief - to get them through periods of hardship. By severing one in three workers from their jobs, however, the Great Depression created a crisis of dependency so vast as to compel the rapid creation of a mass system of public relief within Ontario and across Canada. In establishing this new welfare structure, few questions proved more explosive than whether the unemployed should be compelled to work in exchange for their subsistence.

Within Ontario, relief policy during the 1930s went through three distinct stages in address-ing this issue. The first phase, which bridged the early De-

pression winters of 1931 and 1932, was characterized by well-meaning but ultimately futile attempts by the federal, provincial and municipal governments to put the jobless to work at prevailing wage rates. During these years, 80 percent of relief spending took the form of local public works designed to employ as many of the jobless as possible until economic recovery returned.

Through this system, even the luckiest of the jobless got no more than \$28 worth of work every two months, clearly not enough to meet the needs of either themselves or their families. By the spring of 1932, aghast at the size of their mounting deficits and the magnitude of the jobless crisis, Ottawa and the provinces abandoned all pretense of providing jobs for the unemployed and switched over to providing only direct relief, usually in the form of vouchers for food, clothing and rent rather than cash.

During this second stage of relief policy, which bridged the terrible Depression winters of 1932 and 1933, when more than 400,000 Ontarians ended up on the dole, the main preoccupation of local and provincial governments was simply to develop accounting and administrative systems for dispensing relief on a mass scale to maintain public order and to keep the population alive. In the spring of 1932, for example, the Ontario government developed its first standardized schedule for relief food allowances. That same year, the City of Toronto finally created a Department of Public Welfare so that families on relief no longer had to line up for bags of groceries at the House of Industry. The primary emphasis of relief policy during this second stage was simply getting relief to families in need, not attempting to test the work ethic of the unemployed.

Beginning in the summer of 1933, a third stage of relief policy began to emerge, one which would endure until the end of the Depression. During this phase, the emphasis shifted away from simply relieving need towards more vigorous enforcement of work incentives and work testing on the jobless. It is within this third stage that we can locate the

closest parallels to our own welfare debates of the 1990s.

The first candidates for work tests were single men, the same group which galvanized the earlier moral panic around ‘tramping’ in the 1880s and 1890s. In the summer of 1933, the federal government of R.B. Bennett established a network of work camps across Canada, run by the Department of National Defence (DND), for the relief of all single men over 16 years of age.

The DND relief camps, quite simply, represented an attempt to recreate Victorian workhouse principles within the bush of northern and western Canada. No one was compelled to enter them. On the other hand, no able-bodied, unmarried men over the age of 16 could collect relief anywhere within the country outside of the camps. Like the Victorian workhouse, and most distinctively unlike the American Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) also created at the same time and for the same target population of the single unemployed, the principal objective of the Bennett relief camps was to impose work tests on the jobless, not to provide them with work. This distinction is crucial and cuts to the heart of today’s moral debate surrounding the legitimacy of workfare.

The camps provided the men with food and shelter but did not pay them a wage. Instead, the men received a 20 cent daily ‘allowance’ (compared to the American CCC rate of \$1.00 a day) for the purchase of personal necessities. In return, they were compelled to work on construction projects such as cutting bush, draining swamps, building roads and airfields, or restoring historic fortifications. Those who refused to cooperate were denied their daily allowance. If their stubbornness persisted, they were expelled from the camps and often forced to walk miles through the bush to reach the nearest road or railway line, and face the uncertain future of being deemed ineligible for relief in any Canadian town or city.

The 'workfare' function of these camps - to use modern terminology - was quite explicitly spelled out at the time by Bennett's officials. "A dole mentality was creeping into the minds of the single unemployed," government spokesmen argued when the camps were first established. Too many of their number had "acquired the mental attitude that ... assistance from the State was their inherent right." The 'moral purpose' of relief camps, according to the army's chief of staff, was to cure this "state of mind diseased by ... compulsory idleness" through the influence of "steady work, wholesome food and congenial surroundings." Or as Bennett's Minister of Labour, W.A. Gordon, put it: To preserve their "usefulness [it was] essential [that] work be performed by those in receipt of relief from the State" [Struthers 1983:99].

The men themselves saw things differently. Here is how one former relief camp inmate described his perception of the key difference between work and workfare 30 years later to oral historian Barry Broadfoot:

Down the line the [Civilian Conservation Core] did good work because they paid their guys and had decent leaders and discipline that made sense. Down there a guy ... didn't mind working in a camp. They had pride, they gave their guys pride. Parks built, dams built, roads a fellow could drive over years later and say to his wife, "I helped build this road" just like a guy could take his wife to Europe and drive through a little French town and say "I helped liberate this town." But in Canada not on your blinking life. It was "get those dogs off the street before they offend the people." Everything about those camps was wrong, but the thing most wrong was they treated us like dirt. And we weren't. We were up against it, broke, tired, hungry, but we were farm boys who knew how to work. We were slaves. What else would you call a man who is given twenty cents a day and is expected to believe their bull....

that he is an important part of the country. They just wanted us out of sight, as far out of sight as they could manage [1973:96].

Given such feelings, it was hardly surprising that while the American Civilian Conservation Corps went on to become the New Deal's most successful Depression program, Bennett's experiment with workfare culminated in the 'On-to-Ottawa Trek' and 'Regina Riot,' the single most violent protest of the 1930s in Canada.

### *relief for workers, nothing for shirkers*

Within Ontario, work tests for the remainder of the unemployed - that is, married heads of families - began in earnest following the summer 1934 election victory of a new populist Liberal Premier, Mitch Hepburn. Unlike Mike Harris, Mitch Hepburn did not make welfare recipients a principal target of his campaign. Indeed, during the election he told voters; "I swing well to the Left where some Grits do not tread." His new Minister of Welfare, David Croll, also promised to "humanize" his department and "to serve the little men and little women of this province" [Struthers 1994:90].

These sentiments did not last very long. Within days of their victory, Hepburn and Croll were informed by the Bennett government that the federal share of Ontario's relief costs was being cut back by 37 percent as Ottawa desperately attempted to bring its own budget into balance. This sharp right turn in federal relief spending quickly evaporated whatever sympathy the Hepburn government might have had towards the unemployed. A month after taking office, David Croll informed the Ontario legislature that: "Cheating is rampant in respect to direct relief." He also confessed to his growing "disquiet and fear that able-bodied men were being given rations, shelter, and clothing and other commodities without being required to make any return. Who will seriously attempt to deny that

this was detrimental to anyone's morale. Something for nothing is a dangerous creed." From this point onwards the motto of his welfare department, Croll vowed, would be "Relief for Workers, Nothing for Shirkers" [Struthers 1993:91].

Croll's campaign against the spectre of welfare fraud between 1934 and 1935 may sound familiar. All the unemployed on relief were forced to reapply for assistance and to fill out sworn affidavits that they were truly destitute. Fraud squads were created both within the provincial department of welfare and within Ontario's towns and cities in order to uncover family income being hidden by so-called 'relief chisellers.' Surprise visits to the homes of the jobless, Croll told the legislature:

Allow [us] a chance to discover what the family has perhaps been concealing, possibly an undisclosed income from an old age pension paid an aged parent. Perhaps it is income from a child. It also makes it possible to learn what the husband is doing and what his earning capacity may be... . In the past there was no way of learning this except through a tip-off from some neighbour [Struthers 1994:3,4].

Welfare benefits in 40 towns and cities across Ontario, where agitation by the unemployed had pushed the local scale of relief above the province's maximum ceilings for cost-sharing food, shelter and clothing, were unilaterally rolled back 15 percent by Queen's Park. When the unemployed in these communities responded by occupying local relief offices or staging Hunger Marches to the Legislature, Croll dismissed them as "political crybabies." Ontario's relief scales were already the "highest in Canada," he told the press, particularly in relation to declining living standards across the province. "We are already at a point where our relief allowances are so close to the amount that can be earned by labourers on full-time work that the wage earners' point of view becomes important," his depart-

ment argued in defence of the cuts. "What incentive is there for them to work?" [Struthers 1994:93].

Croll also imposed work tests on the jobless. Throughout the winter of 1934-35, municipalities across Ontario were informed that the unemployed should be compelled to work out a portion of their relief. These jobless men could earn back some of their lost welfare benefits through one or two days' labour each week sawing wood in the municipal woodyard, sweeping streets, raking leaves, picking dandelions, shovelling snow or clearing brush. If they refused to work, on the other hand, they and their families would be cut off relief.

By arresting leaders of the unemployed movement, cutting striking families and single men off relief, and penalizing municipalities that refused to conform to provincial cutbacks by reducing their block grants and imposing special mill rate increases on property owners, Hepburn and Croll broke the back of resistance to workfare by the end of 1935. Compulsory work tests became a regular and ongoing feature of Ontario welfare policy for the remainder of the Depression.

However, it is questionable whether workfare or the campaign against welfare fraud had any major impact on shrinking the size of the population on the dole. Unemployment along with relief caseloads within Ontario peaked in 1933. Thereafter, the numbers on the dole did not drop significantly until 1937, the highwater mark of recovery during the 1930s. In other words, the major influence on welfare caseloads and spending within the province were clearly changes in the overall state of the economy, not the work ethic of the unemployed or the zeal with which relief was administered. Whether the campaign for work tests preserved the legitimacy of the relief system in the eyes of taxpayers, or simply intensified the suspicion and stigma surrounding those on relief, is another matter.

### *the end of the work test*

By 1941, the Depression was over and so too was relief to the able-bodied unemployed. In that year Ottawa, the provinces and municipalities across Canada simply cut off welfare eligibility for all those capable of work, a policy which remained in place until the late 1950s. Workfare or the work ethic of those on welfare disappeared as a public issue, because anyone capable of working (a definition which, in this era, did not include single mothers with children) was not eligible for relief.

This state of affairs was possible for two reasons. First, the coming of national Unemployment Insurance in 1940 soaked up a large portion of the burden of aiding the jobless. Second, the extraordinary economic prosperity which Ontario and, indeed, most of Canada enjoyed during the 1940s and 1950s ensured that welfare disappeared from the political agenda. With unemployment averaging below three percent, the number of jobless who could not qualify for UI was too marginal to command much public attention. In 1956, Ottawa passed the Unemployment Assistance Act, which restored federal cost-sharing for welfare to employable individuals who had exhausted or could not qualify for UI. However, government officials anticipated the costs of the program would be small, amounting to about \$13 million annually across the country.

Instead, the so-called Diefenbaker recession struck Canada in 1958, a cyclical and structural downturn whose effects would persist until the early spring of 1962. Annual unemployment rates shot up to seven percent, a level modest by today's standards, but one which had not been seen since the late 1930s. With the return of unemployment came a 150 percent jump in welfare caseloads and spending along with renewed calls for bringing back workfare within Ontario.

The Unemployment Assistance Act was silent over the issue of workfare. Indeed, it con-

tained almost no regulations whatsoever. Consequently, it was up to Ontario's municipalities to decide what conditions they wished to attach to aiding the able-bodied. By 1959, many had begun to reinstitute work tests. In Chippewa, just south of Niagara Falls, women on welfare were put to work washing the windows and cleaning the floors of the town hall for 16 hours each month. Scarborough divided the monthly welfare payments of its employable recipients by an hourly rate of \$1.55, and demanded they work it out through eight-hour days "clearing ... brush from undeveloped township land." London's Mayor told Premier John Robarts that men in his city liked to work out their assistance because "it took the stigma out of welfare and helped them to retain their self-respect." The Ontario Welfare Officers Association argued that "the threat of work stimulates people to find other support than welfare" [Struthers 1994:184].

But workfare's most powerful advocate within Ontario was veteran Deputy Welfare Minister James Band, who had risen through the ranks of the provincial civil service during the 1930s by rooting out welfare fraud at the local level. "There are many services that can be performed by recipients in return for the assistance granted which do not greatly affect the stream of economic life in the community," Band told federal officials in justifying the return of workfare within his province. "Most of these projects are basically work tests of a temporary nature such as cutting wood, ... road work, brushing, and other projects of this type." Such tasks kept the jobless "usefully occupied ... without prejudice to anyone" [Struthers 1994:184-85].

To his surprise, Band discovered that throughout much of Ontario and within the federal government itself, the idea of workfare was no longer acceptable. Unlike the 1930s, Ontario by 1960 had a strong trade union movement which, after two decades of high employment and Keynesian economic thinking, viewed unemployment as a national economic problem, not a test of moral character for the jobless. Ontario's unions

demanded extended Unemployment Insurance benefits and job creation projects with real wages in order to combat the recession, not the return of punitive practices which, as the National Union of Public Employees argued, would “create unemployment for regular municipal employees.”

Equally significant was the changed climate of public opinion reflected in newspaper editorials across the province about workfare. “Older citizens,” the *Belleville Intelligencer* reminded its readers, “will remember the ‘make-work’ schemes of the Depression, the devices by which relief recipients were required to ‘earn’ the meagre aid received but which so often robbed this work of all dignity because it served no useful social purpose... . Lacking such a purpose, enforced labour comes very near to being a punishment for poverty” [Struthers 1994:186].

When a local alderman in Peterborough recommended bringing back work tests, the *Peterborough Examiner* argued that giving in to such demands would only allow “penny-pinching municipalities to exploit those on welfare as a cheap source of labour for municipal projects.” It was a “sure way to bring back the workhouse.” The *Toronto Star* perhaps best summed up the way two decades of postwar affluence had changed public thinking about workfare by the early 1960s.

Our wealthy society has the obligation to provide [the unemployed] with work at a living wage. Failing this, it has the obligation to support them and their families decently - *not in exchange for forced labour, not as a matter of charity, but simply as a matter of right* [Struthers 1994:186].

Any chance that workfare might make a comeback during the Diefenbaker recession, however, was put to rest by federal officials in Ottawa. Ironically, Canada’s Auditor General, not usually a friend of social reform, singled out workfare

schemes as an example of gross fiscal mis-management within federal cost-sharing for the Unemployment Assistance Act, which had ballooned to more than \$200 million by the early 1960s. Federal funding provided through this scheme was intended solely for relieving the jobless, not to subsidize cheap labour for municipal improvement schemes, the Auditor General argued.

Seizing on the Auditor General’s critique, officials within the federal Department of National Health and Welfare, who detested the idea of workfare as a “return to Old Poor Law concepts” which reflected a “punitive approach to relief recipients,” informed the Ontario government that local communities implementing workfare would be ineligible for 50 percent federal cost-sharing. “Being requested to join a work gang may be physically and emotionally more damaging than being without employment,” Health and Welfare administrators argued. Nor would such routine labour “help the individual to obtain new skills” [Struthers 1994:188].

Deprived of 50 cent federal dollars, Ontario’s brief flirtation with a return to workfare was dead by 1961. When the Canada Assistance Plan was enacted in 1966, workfare’s fate was sealed by the clause stipulating that the right to public assistance was contingent only upon the fact, not the cause, of need. In other words, in order to receive cost-sharing of their welfare budgets under CAP, local and provincial authorities could not legally demand that individuals perform work in exchange for their welfare benefits. It is the scrapping of this condition, under the new Canada Health and Social Transfer to be implemented in April 1996, which allows work-fare to make a comeback.

### *conclusion*

Why are we on the brink of returning to the world of workfare in the 1990s? What does this



key policy reversal reveal about the changing structure of work within our economy and changing public opinion towards the jobless? Given our experience with workfare in the past, can we expect it will work any better in the present?

Four recurring themes in this overview of workfare's history help provide answers to these questions. First, whether we are talking about the English Poor Law reforms of 1834, the panic over tramps in the 1890s, the Great Depression in the 1930s or Mike Harris' Common Sense Revolution in the 1990s, one pattern is clear: Demands for imposing compulsory labour on the jobless typically follow wrenching structural changes within the wider economy - changes which produce persisting high levels of unemployment that cannot easily be explained by prevailing economic theories of the day.

Second, workfare campaigns typically develop as a delayed reaction to an explosion in relief or welfare caseloads, and their failure to decline proportionately as recovery proceeds within the general economy. This parallel applies particularly to similarities between workfare campaigns of the 1930s and the 1990s.

Third, at least within North America, workfare does not proceed in isolation but exists as part of a wider campaign of suspicion and punitive administrative practices directed against those on welfare including cutbacks in benefits, the creation of fraud squads and frequent home visiting in order to detect concealed income. In other words, despite much uplifting rhetoric about the 'dignity of labour' which usually accompanies schemes of workfare or work testing, in practice their implementation is

part of the cultivation of a wider climate of suspicion and stigmatization of welfare clients.

Finally, workfare, whenever it has emerged, represents an attempt to shift the causal location of persistently high levels of unemployment away from structural changes within the economy and towards the inner moral character or values of the victims of these changes. Simply put, workfare seeks to return to the oldest distinction in social policy history - between the deserving and undeserving poor. Through workfare, society insists upon the importance of testing the willingness of the jobless to work. But it is a cruel one-way exchange since such schemes, as the historical evidence suggests, have never been accompanied by guarantees that those who pass the test will, in turn, be rewarded with legitimate employment.

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