This paper is concerned with the trajectory of social policy thinking and action in Canada in recent years. My claim is that there has been a profound shift in the understanding of social problems and solutions that has entailed a minimization and de-politicization of both the concept of social policy and the policy agenda. A secondary claim is that insight into the discursive struggles surrounding social policy provides a richer understanding of the nature and degree of the shifts that have taken place. This methodology also sheds light on how the efforts of marginalized, oppositional, actors play into the developments and the opportunities and constraints they face as participants in social policy debate.

These are interesting times for those engaged in the struggle for social policy in Canada. Like many other western nations, Canada went through a period of harsh neo-liberal cuts in the 1980s that was detrimental to its welfare state and the social fabric. As many have documented, however, new possibilities for a positive change subsequently emerged with the advent of "social investment" as the raison d'Λtre of social policy and the elimination of the federal deficit in 1998. This paper seeks to help identify the sort of social investment welfare state that is emerging by exploring how the concept of social policy is being shaped in the course of key debates. Analysts have distinguished two opposing possibilities for social policy in this new era of investment. One is a high road agenda for social policy that would likely feature strong public provision of social programs or at least provision of a genuine and compassionate approach to human capital investment, and the creation of quality jobs that lead to greater equality and social justice. The other is a low road thrust that would entail privatization of social programs, a "work for welfare" or "workfirst" approach that is concerned with getting people off of welfare

and into a job, and the creation of poor quality jobs that lead to greater poverty and inequality. The question is which road is being preferred at present?

The approach of this paper is to examine the actual content of the debate as it has occurred in the context of the key committee hearings on social policy. The advantage of looking closely at the nature of the debate itself is that it allows us to see more specifically the process whereby ideas were transformed. It is also, therefore, more revealing than some other more conventional approaches to studying politics of the conceptual gains and losses with respect to key concepts and the overall field of knowledge. More specifically, it can show us where *marginalized oppositional* actors were thwarted in the debates, where their challenges lay, and the ways they might have been forced to adapt their thinking or claims-making strategies in order to stay relevant within a context not of their choosing. This method, thus, allows for a better understanding of how certain ideas and discourses came to the fore and became the new "happy medium" accepted by a wide cross-section of actors, and others failed to thrive and were shuffled out of the realm of the possible.

The hearings identified for study include the mid- to late-1990s federal Standing Committee on Human Resources Development's Sub-committee on Children and Youth at Risk, and to a lesser extent, the Standing Committee on Finance debates on priorities for the federal budget. The former hearings were initiated with the intent of filling the empty vessel of the national children's agenda, which was a government agreement that featured lofty values but was short specifics. The discussions involved a range of actors who are generally considered to make up the social policy community - at least, at the federal level. They included politicians, bureaucrats, government ministers, social policy

research and advocacy groups, professional groups, politically partisan lobby groups, individual researchers and advocates, and other interested parties. It was in these committee hearings that key social policy players faced off in an actual contest over what ideas would count as social policy under the new social investment regime.

The study shows that while the focus on the child initially offered promising new opportunities for progressives to influence the social policy agenda, the sector faced harsh competition in the war of ideas. In the end, this sector could not prevent a fundamental negative shift in our understanding of social problems and social policy. Current discourse rests on a limited understanding of social problems and a limited, casework, approach to policy. While the last few years have witnessed some positive advancement in social programs, several signs point to the emergence of a low road social strategy. The latter includes the growing attraction of policy makers to tax cuts, the continued avoidance of any significant new programs or social spending, a general climate of disinterest in state social policy, and the continuation of a neo-liberal orientation towards offloading responsibility for human welfare onto individual families and parents, and the community and market sectors.

The paper begins with a brief discussion of the historical context for contemporary debate on social policy debate. It then turns to a detailed discussion of the committee debate on the national children's agenda, highlighting the discursive constraints that derailed the progressive sector and the nature of the shifts that occurred in the concept of social policy. The paper concludes with a recap of the argument and a discussion of some of the implications of the findings for both political analysis and progressive activism on social policy.

Historical backdrop to the current debate: The Shifting Citizenship Regime in Canada

To set the current period of debate on the child in context, it must be seen in the light of the broad political and social changes that took place in Canada from the late 1980s onwards, including changes in the universe of political discourse and the social policy agenda. The period of the mid-1980s onward ushered in a neo-liberal economic orthodoxy based on promotion of the private sector and market forces, and relegation of social policy to a secondary concern relative to fiscal health, economic growth, and competitiveness. Social policy decisions were placed under the control of the Ministry of Finance and the social policy agenda was reoriented towards the goals of international economic competitiveness, which was also seen as the key to domestic well-being (McKeen and Porter, 2003: 125; Banting, 1996). The transformation entailed an assault on universality and shift to targeting, major reductions in social programs and devolution from the federal government to the provinces, and an elimination of what national standards there had been. Programs that were cut and restructured (or eliminated) were Old Age Security, the Family Allowance (eliminated), Unemployment Insurance, and provincial services such as schools and hospitals. The replacement of the Canada Assistance Plan (CAP) in 1996 with block funding (the Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST) left the door open (indeed, encouraged (Graeffe, 2004) provincial governments to cut and restructure social programs consistent with the individualization and employability agenda. With this move social spending was also cut by about $7 billion (D. White, April 2003: 15).

The shift to a neo-liberal governing paradigm also entailed the political marginalization of left and progressive actors. Groups such as labour, women, first nations, and poverty and social justice groups underwent a serious decline in credibility as a result both of funding cuts and direct attacks on their representative status (Jenson and Phillips, 1996; Brodie, 1995). The social democratic political left (including federal and provincial NDP parties and the labour movement) fell off the political stage during the 1990s and was increasingly unable or unwilling to present any clear alternative to the neo-liberal model.1 While social policy and poverty advocacy groups continued to be consulted by government, the climate was such that, as Keith Banting has put it, "social policy and finance officials were talking past each other"(1996:44).

The elimination of federal deficit in 1998 ushered in a new era of so-called social investment, with the issues of child poverty, and later, child health and development emerging as key concerns (Dobrowolsky and Saint-Martin, 2002). Investing in measures for healthy child development became a popular mantra in Canada, Britain and elsewhere, and this became a central focus for new spending proposals. Such spending was seen as the best way to ensure a healthy, adaptable workforce necessary for the changing labour market and society of the future. A new child benefits program was introduced in 1998. At the same time, a new climate of collaborative federalism emerged that gave the provinces and territories more leverage in social policy making. A new intergovernmental Ministerial Council on Social Policy was formed in 1996, and two new intergovernmental agreements relating to children and social policy were announced

1 This insight was offered by Peter Graefe. For example, the NDP lost parliamentary power over the 1990s, both federally and provincially, and NDP parties themselves also shifted towards accepting market-oriented solutions (Baker and Tippin, 1999; Yates, 2002; Sheldrick, 2002; D. White, 2003). The labour

in 1999: the National Children's Agenda (NCA) and the Social Union Framework Agreement (SUFA). These agreements also marked a new interest in government-community sector partnerships (Jenson and Phillips, 1996; Phillips, 2001; Jenson, Mahon, and Phillips, 2003; Rothman, 2001; Friendly, 2001).

Children, then, and particularly, the National Children's Agenda, became a prime topic for social policy discussion from the late 1990s onwards. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that there was some automatic common understanding of the problems and solutions. Indeed, the debate surrounding the NCA was highly contentious, and its outcome was in many ways pivotal in forming a new definition of, and trajectory for, social policy in the current period.

Discursive Politics: The debate on the national children's agenda and the thwarting of progressive ideas

The NCA was introduced as a new organizing principle for the discussion of future social policy and, needless to say, it generated a wide range of new activities and programs both within and outside government. They included the NCB program (which has been termed the flagship program of the NCA), an array of health and human resources projects (e.g. the National Longitudinal Survey on Children and Youth), and programs designed to fund partnerships programs between government and outside researchers and organizations (examples include the National Centres of Excellence on Children, The Early Years Project, Aboriginal Head Start, and the Community Action Program for Children.) As some have suggested, a so-called social-learning network also

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movement, which had suffered a serious decline in power since the mid-1970s, also seemed to adopt a market mentality in the 1990s.

developed that involved both government and non-governmental participants, including research organizations such as Canadian Policy Research Network and the C.D. Howe Institute (Jenson, 2004; Dobrowolsky and Saint-Martin, 2001; 2002: 23).

Social policy advocates also had a keen interest in the question of children, of course. One contingent of social policy groups had been important in politicizing the issue of child poverty in Canada through the late 1980s and 1990s. Thus, nationally-based social policy research, policy development, and advocacy organizations and individual allied researchers saw the continuing focus on children as a positive sign. Among them were the Canadian Council on Social Development (CCSD), National Council of Welfare, Caledon Institute of Social Policy, National Anti-Poverty Organization, Vanier Institute on the Family, Campaign 2000, Canadian Policy Research Network, and the Canadian Day Care Advocacy Association. Indeed, the commitment to the NCA was the first commitment to new social spending by the federal government in over a decade (D. White, 2003). This sector was concerned, as was the broader left and social justice community (i.e. labour, women and equality-seeking, and social justice organizations),2 with the issues of rising poverty and growing inequality caused by the cuts to social programs and services and the creation of low paid jobs. These actors perceived the discursive focus on children and the NCA as creating opportunities to

2 Generally, we can distinguish between social policy/anti-poverty organizations and those concerned with broader issues relating to social justice and equality, although some organizations tend to bridge the two camps (eg. the National Anti-poverty Organization and Campaign 2000). Social justice and equality organizations tended not to participate in the hearings on child and family policy (with the exception of those of the Sub-Committee on Tax Equity for Canadian Families with Dependent Children) (see Harder, 2004, for more details). Partly, these groups were protesting against the narrow family-centred biases of the new discourses and the privileging of children as the only deserving group – for example, women's groups saw the focus on children as preventing a focus on issues of women's equality, autonomy, and freedom from violence. Yet, it was also the case that equality-seeking and other social justice groups suffered a loss of credibility in social policy debate virtue of the narrow terms of the discourse itself (McKeen, 2004; Dobrowolsky and Jenson, 2004).

demand key policies to support families, including day care, policies that support a home/work balance such as parental leave, affordable housing, good training opportunities, increases and improvements to the NCB (e.g. re-indexation, elimination of the claw-back), and provision of more adequate social assistance benefits to ensure that families could have basic needs met. A key question, then, is what impact was the progressive community able to have in shaping the terms of the children's agenda debate?

Taking the late 1990s hearings of the HRDC's Sub-committee on Children and Youth at Risk as a centrepiece in this debate, it is clear that several factors stood in the way of progressive social policy advocates leaving a strong mark on the thinking of this committee. An initial factor was the discourse that conditioned the Committee's work from the beginning. This discourse was strongly infused with a "population health" perspective that was concerned with ensuring healthy parenting and healthy children. An early initiative in this area had been the federal Community Action Program for Children, established in 1992, with the objectives of assisting "parents in raising happy, healthy children," promoting "healthy pregnancies," "improving parenting and family supports," and "strengthening early childhood development, learning and care" (Murray, 2004). The NCA vision document issued by the Ministerial Council on Social Policy Renewal in 1999 continued to occupy this conceptual ground. It acknowledged that families and children need support; it noted issues of poverty and inequality and their impact on child development; and it recognized that government has an important role to play in ensuring income support to families or, at least, addressing child poverty. It declared a humanist philosophy in wanting all children to thrive in an atmosphere of "love, care and

understanding" and a desire that all "partners" (i.e. communities, families, parents, and businesses) work together to ensure that children could "reach their full potential as adults" and have the opportunity to "develop their physical, intellectual, emotional, social and spiritual capacities to their fullest". Four priority areas for addressing "children's health and development" were named, including children's physical and emotional health; their "safety and security" in terms of having basic needs met for love, shelter, food, clothing, recreation, play, protection from abuse and danger, and support by caring adults; their "success at learning," which included physical, emotional, and social development and being in a ready state of learning throughout their lives; and, lastly, "social engagement and responsibility." The latter referred to the goal of children forming stable attachments to nurturing adults when they are young and developing supportive relationships within and outside their families, valuing Canada's cultural heritage and diversity and understanding their rights and responsibilities of belonging to a wider society, respecting themselves and others, and understanding the personal and social consequences of their choices (Canada, Ministerial Council on Social Policy Renewal, 1999). These interests, and the so-called social-learning network that grew up around them, were also reinforced in the early and mid-1990s by scientific discourse on child development (Jenson, 2004). The work of health research scientist, Dr. Fraser Mustard, was particularly influential, although others were involved as well. Mustard's research focused on the various factors (for example, income, parenting, degree of supportive programs during and after birth, etc.) that influenced the development of skills in children. He argued that caregiver interactions with young children could affect children's IQ performance, and his research emphasized that good social conditions were

important to the long term solutions. While he saw primary responsibility for children lying in communities and families, he acknowledged that families and communities need help if they are to do their jobs effectively and reach all "their" children.

Yet these discourses were clearly also inflected with an individualizing approach and targeting and employability concerns. The vision document was on a continuum with the ideas introduced in the Liberal social security review of 1994. The latter had articulated a new human resources model for social policy that put social programs in the service of the market and called into question the notion of social rights guaranteed by government (Maioni, 1994). This change was reflected in the switch in metaphors, from the safety net that compensates people for the failure of the market, to a trampoline that bounces people back into the job market. The sub-text of the NCA vision document likewise echoed this individualized, supply-side perspective. It put the onus on the individual to adapt to the market and make something of him or her self, with little sense of how issues such as equality and citizenship rights would affect the outcome for either individuals or the collective whole. The weight was placed on *individuals* (families, parents, and children) who were expected to transform themselves (or their children) into healthy and successful entities. Parents were seen as mostly responsible for ensuring their children grow into independent autonomous people who are fully integrated into the labour market and are adaptable to changing conditions.3 Social supports tended to be conceptualized as community programs that serve individuals seen as being "at risk" – i.e. individuals who have come into contact with human service agencies (i.e. are poor). The notion that risk factors lie mainly within the individual families or the child was

3 For example, one of the emphases of the National Longitudinal Survey was that parenting is a key determinant of child outcomes (Can., SCYR, #8, May 11, 1999: 29).

legitimized further through research agendas and concepts that were adopted primarily to understand what makes children tick; what makes "the" child successful. Thus, concepts such as "readiness to learn" were seized upon as a vital issues to be addressed (the lack, thereof, was seen as leading to a failure in child development).

These biases formed the ideational context of the sub-committee hearings on the NCA where the population health perspective reverberated with and through health and human service professionals and continued to subtly disadvantage progressive actors as participants in the debates. Indeed, the child was the traditional purview of a range of helping and human service professions in the fields of health, education, community and family social services, and child welfare, and that generally operated through such institutions as schools, community centres, child welfare agencies (e.g. children's aid), health and social service agencies (e.g. family service departments), and community-based programs serving disadvantaged communities. Through these hearings, and other steps to strengthen their representation (i.e. the formation and funding of the National Children's Alliance), these actors entered the fray of social policy debate in full force. In many ways they became the new acceptable face of progressive thought on social policy.4 Line departments (i.e. both the departments of Health and Human Resources Development) viewed this sector has having a rich store of knowledge of "what works" to allow families and individuals to overcome their difficulties and their programs were seen as innovative and creative. A number of them were funded through such programs as the Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program, the Community Action Program for Children,

4 The National Children's Alliance was chosen by the federal government as a body that could potentially monitor progress under the NCA. Jenson, Mahon, and Phillips make the point that Campaign 2000, which was an umbrella group for social policy and anti-poverty advocacy organizations, was much less well favoured with government funding (2003).

and Aboriginal Head Start. In so doing, government claimed to be advancing a new, positive, collaborative, and flexible approach to ensuring such services, and rejecting the cookie cutter model in favour of locally defined solutions.

The experience and knowledge of the sector, however, strongly adhered to the individualized model inherent to the largely therapeutic and crisis intervention work typical of such fields as child welfare and family services. Their programs and policy proposals tended to reinforce a limited casework view that reflected the model of social *integration* rather than social *responsibility*, and that put the accent on helping those at risk as opposed to supporting *all* families. As one witness (from Initiative 1,2,3, Go!) expressed it,

> what matters to me the most is the way the local communities are going to be used as an essential and major level to provide parents in underprivileged environments with the support they need to give their children the best possible conditions for their development (Can. Standing Committee on Human Resources Development (cited as SCHRD), 36/1, #40, June 11, 1998: 18).

Their services were often of a "self-help" variety, that were more concerned with exposing clients to the "right" ideas than attending to their more substantive or material needs. Examples included counselling in meal planning, nutrition, vitamin supplementation, smoking cessation, prevention of alcohol and drug use during pregnancy, or support groups for women in distress.[5] This sector also shared the government's outlook that communities, and not governments, were in the best position to understand and decide on how best to meet the needs of "their" families and children. As one witness (from Early Years Action Group, North York) put it,

> The main part of our whole thrust is to mobilize local neighbourhoods to plan for their own children, because the neighbourhoods know their children best. They know what their children need (Ibid.,25).

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5 See, for example, Can. SCYR, 36/1, #8, May 11, 1999.

A second significant source of tension in the ideas at play came from the fact that for the first time mainstream social policy debate was substantially populated with social conservative spokespeople. While neo-conservative actors had had a significant presence within broader political discourse in Canada since the mid-1980s (first becoming a visible presence in the Mulroney government's "Family Caucus" (Luxton, 1997)), they became a force within *social policy* debate only from the late 1990s onwards.6 They included primarily traditional right wing think tanks, like the Fraser Institute, anti-feminist groups such as REAL women, newly emerged groups and individuals representing the interests of single-earner families (e.g. Canada Family Action Coalition, Kids First, Parent Association of Canada, Focus on the Family Canada), and Reform/Alliance MPs. These groups aligned with a far right ideology and agenda based on an anti-collectivist/ return-to-the-traditional-family/ patriarchal view of social problems. Their ideas could be framed quite nicely in the terms of the NCA and in terms of the growing mainstream interest in giving responsibility to communities, families, and parenting. They believed in individual responsibility and for families taking care of "their" own children. The Reform Party, for example, believed that loving parents are the key to ensuring good child development, that children are best cared for within their families, and that the needs of families under stress are best met by a community or local level.7 As one Conservative MP put it in this discussion:

6 One general exception was the neo-conservative, anti-feminist group, REAL Women - a group that had emerged in the mid-1980s and actively participated in social policy debate in the early 1990s (eg. the federal debates on child benefits in 1992 and 1994).
7 See, for example, the dissenting report of the Reform party of the Sub-Committee on Children and Youth's 1999 report (Can. SCYR, *Report*, 1999).

> Parents must play a large role in the development of their child . . . children need good parents. Behaviour in school and in society depends on behaviour in the home. We have to really concentrate on this and . . . we seem to be on the right track.(Ibid., 49).

Their thinking also aligned nicely with the orientation to "helping those at risk." The main stress on families, they argued, was rooted in high levels of family taxation and lack of economic growth. At the same time, the new interest in families and children provided an opportunity for neo-conservatives to politicize and advance the needs of families with one stay-at-home parent (the traditional single earner nuclear family). Their view that these families were being treated unfairly led to the establishment of a parliamentary committee on the tax equity for families, wherein right wing groups continued to voice neo-familial sentiment (Harder, 2004).

As a result of these shifts in the social policy community, then, dynamics were at play that left social policy groups with little room in terms of advancing a high road meaning for social policy. On the one hand, their task was seen to be one of finding common ground with health and human service professionals and community based organizations. Thus, for example, they sought a focus on families that recognized the changing context for families – namely, the incredible stress on families in the new period of economic restructuring and changing demographics and life styles. The latter included the changing nature of the family in having both parents in the labour market, and the double burden of single mothers, as both workers and carers. In the light of such changes, they argued for a policy direction that would "lift all boats," not merely provide help for families "at risk."8 Many progressive groups attempted to broaden the narrow human resources framework of the NCA by arguing that children should be recognized as

8 See, for example, Can. SCYR, 36/1, #2, March 16, 1999: 20 (Katherine Scott, CCSD).

rights-bearing citizens "in the here and now," not just valued for what they will be in the future.

In practice, however, progressives were regularly undermined in their attempt to push towards broader issues and analysis. For example, while progressives presented concerns about poverty and the inadequacy of welfare benefits, these quickly melded into the dominant issue of how individual families could be better helped in making the transition from welfare to work. They were derailed by such premises that poverty was "complex" and complicated, and that therefore, no single solution could be found (Can. Standing Committee on Finance (cited as SCF), 36/2, #36, December 1, 1999:23 (Caledon Institute)). They were drawn into discussing questions that were narrowly framed. For example, they included questions about the kinds of services and opportunities social assistance recipients need in order to "self-actualize" and achieve "self-sufficiency" (i.e. make the "transition" from welfare to paid work), or what some "new and creative" solutions are to the problem of welfare fraud and the culture of dependency (Can. SCHRD, #39, May 28, 1998:12,14 (NCW)). While social policy groups welcomed the greater attention paid to the realities of living on welfare and the struggles of the working poor, the preoccupation with how to ensure people did not remain *trapped* in these situations left very little room for considerations of *social* issues. Discussions of root causes of problems, such as discriminatory social conditions and the failure of welfare systems to meet even basic needs or to respect the established rights of recipients, tended to be shoved to one side.

Faced with the growing alliance between government and professional and community interests, progressives were indeed more generally under pressure to reframe

their issues and arguments in ways that were more compatible with dominant discourses and more likely to influence committee members (e.g. "enhancing employability," "encouraging provincial flexibility," or "eliminating welfare dependency"). Thus day care advocates generally reframed the issue as one that addressed both the issues of child development and child poverty. They argued that day care gave parents the supports they needed to enter employment (Jenson, Mahon and Phillips, 2003; Dobrowolsky and Jenson, 2004). There were also real disagreements within the progressive community itself concerning how far to go in accommodating the "employability" agenda. For example, while many groups saw the NCB as an important step in addressing child poverty and wanted to press for enhancements and improvements to it, divisions existed on what priority it should have.9 Similarly, tensions existed over the discussion of the Market Basket Measure of poverty, with some groups willing to grant legitimacy to the new tool for measuring poverty and others who not.

On the other hand, the other major dynamic in evidence at the hearings concerned the interplay between progressive and neo-conservative ideas. Indeed, progressive conceptions of social problems and solutions, especially the core interests in poverty, the NCB, the children's agenda, and child care, were routinely attacked by right wing advocates and committee members. The latter were also relatively successful in diverting discussion to narrower individualized concerns. While progressives argued that conditions such as child poverty, the lack of affordable housing, the absence of affordable and good quality day care, an inadequate child benefit, and a lack of quality employment opportunities, were critical in preventing people from achieving independence, and

9 For example, the NCW was relatively more concerned with the hidden "employability" agenda of the NCB and its implied diminishment of social rights, than was the Caledon Institute.

affected child development and child poverty, right wing advocates countered that these issues were largely a matter of (poor) personal choices made by individuals, albeit, often made in situations of crisis and family breakdown. Homelessness, for example, was supposedly caused by family breakdown and by youngsters running away from home (Can. SCF, 36/2, #8, November 8, 1999: 34). Indeed, it was argued that the welfare system encouraged teens to leave home to avoid the rules of the house (Can. SCHRD, 37/2, #32, May 27, 2003: 40). Liberal MP, Paul Szabo, was particularly vocal in arguing that child poverty was related more to "social" factors (i.e. emotional problems caused by bad family upbringing, single parenthood caused by family breakdown) than economic ones (i.e. poverty) (Can. SCF, 36/2, #36, December 1, 1999: 22; Ibid., #8, Nov. 8, 1999:33, 34; Ibid., #6, Nov. 3, 1999). Neo-conservatives also promoted discussion on topics related to parenting and psychology, such as on child-parent bonding, or the impact of non-parental care on child development.10

Progressive conceptions of solutions likewise came under fire. Social policy groups were generally on the defensive in arguing that welfare recipients had a right to welfare and to dignity. Neo-conservative participants argued that welfare recipients were a problem group and undeserving, both because of their "dependency" on the public purse and because of the way the welfare system itself supposedly encouraged dependency. The right wing challenged the definition of poverty by arguing that it is simply not possible to define or measure; that it was an ambiguous concept, a subjective state (different for everyone), and that the use of relative measures imply that low income

10 See, for example, the discussion of parenting in Can. SCYR, 36/ 2, #12, May 31, 2000.

can never be eliminated.[11] Eliminating poverty was impossible in any case, they argued, because "there will always be people making bad choices." The right wing equally countered progressive calls for a national child development and care program. They argued that such programs would not meet the needs of *all* families and would disadvantage parents who choose to stay home to care with their children. They diverted attention away from these issues by forcing attention onto the question of whether the Child Care Expense Deduction discriminates against single-earner families with a stay-at-home parent. They put forward the alternative idea that *parents* are in the best position to make decisions about their children, and so more money should be put in their hands (Can. SCF, 37/2, #86, October 27, 2003:13 (Herbert Grubel, Fraser Institute)). According to the (then named) Reform Party and other right wing groups, the last thing that families need is more government bureaucracy, a higher tax burden, and the loss of personal choices, all implied by new large-scale government programs. The solution to family poverty and stress was not the NCB,[12] or a child care program, but lower taxes and possibly a child care tax credit (Ibid., #89, October 28, 2003: 40-42 (Derek Rogusky, Focus on the Family Canada)). They also dismissed the idea of a "children's agenda" and the issues of child poverty and child care as the ideas of a fringe minority, and not representative of those of average Canadians.

In the end, the new "happy medium" that was achieved was strongly grounded in dominant perspectives of health and social work. According to this view, individuals existed as either adults, who are seen as fully developed individuals who accept

11 They promoted the market-basket method of measuring poverty based more on an absolute notion of poverty.

responsibility for participating in paid employment and parenting, or children, who are innocent and developing and, therefore, require conditions to allow for them to develop successfully. Adults were deemed responsible for the success of their children, and the problems that counted related to individual personal vulnerabilities. To the extent that there was some continuing interest in such issues as social cohesion, these were also seen as solvable through a strategy of "investing in human resources or human capital" on a family-by-family or case-by-case basis. While there was talk of the "complexity" of the problem of poverty, the privileged standpoint was how to help resolve problems of families on a case by case basis. Broader social and economic conditions were seen largely as contextual or as part of the "stresses of modern life" with which families must contend. They did not invoke a discourse on higher goals such as equality, social justice, or the achievement of social rights. The solutions were constructed in term of helping parents overcome barriers to employment and "be the best that they can be for their children." The types of interventions seen to be effective were therapeutic-style community services, tailor-made to the particular limitations presented by poor, vulnerable, and "at risk" groups. They included, for example, interventions to address psychological and emotional disturbance, lack of parenting skills, lack of training, poor academic achievement, and particular risk-taking behaviours such as alcoholism or drug abuse (Murray, 2004).

These discussions and developments ushered in a subtle but important turn in Canadian social policy, whereby the mainstream social policy community adopted an even more limited knowledge and understanding of the possibilities of social policy and

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12 According to Richard Shillington, the Reform Party's critic for social policy, Stockwell Day, had stated that the NCB was too generous as it goes to families with incomes over $100,000 (Can. SCYR, 36/2, #2,

moved a step even further away from a structural analysis of social problems. First, while it was a continuation of the human resources model that had been introduced years earlier, it also represented a considerable narrowing of that paradigm in terms of policy agenda and the new ethic of support given. The HRD Committee submitted a brief "interim" report in 199913 (in anticipation of the 2000 federal budget) which was noticeably devoid of discussion of conceptual issues. It was confined to a narrow band of issues and program ideas considered directly to relate to the task of helping families/parents make the transition to employment and good parenting. It proposed only two kinds of programs: "income support" and "social services" (Can. House of Commons, December 1999). Under income support were "modifications to the tax system that will spell some relief for families with children," improvements to parental benefits (increasing benefits, extending the duration of leave and easing qualifying requirements), and more investment in the NCB. Under social services, the Committee envisioned federal-provincial negotiations towards the goal of strengthening community supports. The latter would ideally include services such as child care, housing, early learning programs and parenting courses (Ibid.). Day care and housing were positioned here as part of a range of community based interventions that could be offered to disadvantaged populations depending on whether the need was identified within and by the community.

First, the narrowness of this package stands in contrast to the scope, even, of the 1994-95 social security review proposals. The social security review had been a turning point in the official embrace and articulation of a new "human resources" model for

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December 1, 1999: 11).

13 Interestingly, the Committee seems not to have ever prepared a final report.

social policy that put social programs in the service of the market and called into question the notion of social rights guaranteed by government (Maioni, 1994). Yet, that discussion had retained considerable scope for social goals and issues (for instance, those of diversity, equity, and equality). The HRD Committee's report, for example, had recommended that the reform process be subjected to a gender analysis, that the links between violence, inequality and poverty be addressed in the reform process, and that the federal government lead in eliminating barriers to employment and achieving a workforce that reflects the diverse composition of Canadian society (Can. SCHRD, 1995, 100-102). The 1995 policy agenda addressed a wide range of program areas, including the working income supplement, child benefits, child support child care, child development, training, literacy, post-secondary education, supports for the disabled, unemployment insurance, working time and flex time, reform of social assistance, tax fairness and tax spending, women's equality, equality in diversity, access for persons with disabilities, partnerships with Aboriginal Peoples, and supports for the disabled. It had framed the issue of day care as a program in its own right that served a variety of goals, including that of enhancing women's ability to be full and equal citizens (Ibid., 73).

Second, even within the terms of this narrow two-pronged policy agenda, the approach to social spending has been quite specific.[14] In the post-NCA period, social policy-making has become the art of funnelling resources into two kinds of functions: spurring families into entering and maintaining paid employment and maintaining good parenting, and addressing specific problems relating to the so-called difficulties and failures of families in fulfilling these objectives. Most new spending has been dedicated

to income support and social services to families. On the income support side, the Canada Child Tax Benefit (CCTB) and NCB have been at the centre of the new reform, and have been increased regularly. As Deena White has stated, "[a]nnual increases to the CCTB will raise the federal "investment" in reducing child poverty to over $10 billion by 2004-2005, making it an extremely ambitious program" (April 2003:18).15 The 2005 federal budget also introduced tax cuts for low and modest income groups. New funding for so-called social services has come from a variety of sources at both federal and provincial levels. "Childhood services" have been funded by the provinces using the part of their budget that had freed up by virtue of the provision of the NCB.16 Deena White has reported that these funds have been used to "reinvest" in employability programs or employment incentives for parents, health or social programs for children "at risk," childcare credits for poor "working" parents, or other programs targeted to children living in poverty (April 2003: 17). Such services have also been funded through the Early Childhood Development Agreement (ECDA), announced in 2000,17 and an Early Learning and Childhood Framework, announced in 2003.18 Other measures include the

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14 I am indebted to Deena White for much of the data on spending in this section (White, April 2003).
15 The 2000 budget expanded the Canadian Child Tax Benefit by $2.5 billion over 5 years, with $850 million of those funds directed at the NCB supplement for low-income families. The government also raised the family income cut-off for the CCTB to $90,000 by 2004, up from $70,000 for the year 2000, and raised the cut-off for the low-income supplement $35,000 (Linda White, 2002: 108). By 2007, the maximum NCB is expected to be $3,495, although "few consider it will be sufficient to pull kids out of poverty" (White, April 2003: 18).
16 The NCB allowed the provinces to "claw back" social assistance benefits allocated to families for children and called for this money to be "reinvested" by the provinces in other programs of benefit to poor children. (White, April 2003: 17).
17 The ECDA involved the transfer from the federal government to the provinces of between $300 and $500 million dollars from 2001-2006 allows for investment in four areas: healthy pregnancy, birth and infancy; parenting and family supports; early childhood development, learning, and care; and community supports (White, April 2003: 21).
18 Under the child care framework agreement $935 million was pledged for matching federal funds to the provinces over five years ($25 million in the first year (2003). As Deena White reports, the combination of the ECDA and child care framework agreement will add about $1.5 billion dollars to the CHST by 2007, replacing a little over a quarter of what had been withdrawn from the provinces with the introduction of the CHST almost 10 years ago (White, April 2003:23).

Aboriginal Head Start Program, and investments to communities for provision of affordable housing and housing improvement, and new resources for people with disabilities (e.g. in the 2000 budget).

A key point, however, is that the bulk of this spending has been dedicated to programs that operate within a narrow casework paradigm. As Deena White has pertinently remarked, " . . while a few of the provinces used a portion of the ECDA funds for reinforcing or expanding child care services or credits, it was *risk-reduction* programs, such as para-natal screening, that were the principal beneficiaries in many provinces (April 2003: 22) [my italics]. Similarly, she reports that Ontario has spent its new funding (i.e. freed-up by virtue of the NCB), by giving a portion back to municipalities (but only a small proportion of the amount that had been cut since the 1995 provincial election) where it has been used for "preventive and early intervention services for families with young children, child care for parents participating in workfare measures, and LEAP (Learning, Earning, and Parenting), which provides help (obligatory) for teenage parents on welfare with high school completion, parenting skills, child care, school expenses, and job search, and programs for children's mental health." (Ibid., 32). Half of the $114 million that Ontario received under the ECDA were spent on Ontario Early Years Centres, which as White describes, was "a mix of "therapeutic" resources for parents, such as literacy or nutrition programs, help for families with special-needs children, self-help programs, and referrals to other local and provincial resources," and services for children with autism (32). The remaining 50% was sprinkled over about 25 other, mostly existing provincial health, family and ECD programs (33). White sums up Ontario's approach with respect to childcare:

It's policies imply that it is unwilling to support any financial credit for parents outside of the labour market, any collective solutions to families' child care needs (even if they work), any significant wage top-ups for families with children, or any direct interventions in early childhood development except with respect to children at risk (34).

Clearly, absent from this reinvestment strategy were reimbursements to the social programs that provide a more general sense of social security and that are *not* based on a family casework approach (e.g. Employment Insurance, which was dramatically cut in 1996 (with the exception of the extension of parental leave under EI)). Nor was there any talk of making up for the huge cuts to social programs that were made in 1996 with the introduction of the CHST. Also missing has been action to bring about a national day care program, which, when it had been promised in the late 1980s and early 1990s, had been perceived as a broad-based public program of a type that creates feelings of entitlement and security for all families.

Conclusions: Implications for Political Analysis and Progressive Activism

This paper has explored the politics and policy of social policy restructuring in Canada through a lens that takes seriously the notion that struggle over ideas is a crucial component of politics, and that it involves the interplay of a range of actors with differing degrees of power and legitimacy. Events such as formal committee hearings provide a unique opportunity for gaining an understanding into some of the central idea-creating processes at work in ways that do not rule out of consideration the parts played by even politically weaker participants. In the case of the debate on the national children's agenda, while the progressive social sector saw the focus on the child and the hearings as opportunities for pushing for a high road approach to social policy (even if it only stayed within a human resources approach), they were unsuccessful in preventing a significant

narrowing of the discourse and meaning of social policy. Their ideas were largely contained by the dominant health and social services understandings advanced by human service professionals and their government allies, and were put on the defensive as a result of new and on-going challenges by neo-conservatives. The view that took hold as a result was that social policy has a single rationale, which is to help families make the transition to employment and happy parenting. This was the case despite ongoing claims of concern about social cohesion. In this view adults were defined as parents who are responsible for their children, and all problems tended to be attributed to the personal deficiencies of individuals.

The nature of the discussion and these results reflect and reinforce previous analyses concerning the changing nature of the welfare state in Canada, to be sure. For instance, it is consistent with the theme that the welfare state has undergone a neo-liberal regime shift that has involved a reorientation from welfare to workfare and a shift towards targeting and employability. It also fits the argument that a new period of "social investment" has come into being. I would argue, however, that the discussion of the NCA represented a moment of further refinement of the general human resources orientation to social policy that reduced it almost entirely to a narrow casework rationale for state intervention. In other words, these debates produced a shift in public imagination concerning the very essence of social policy. This shift was ideological, to be sure, but it also reflected the input of the relevant "social-learning network" and social policy community who were able to offer only a substantially diminished knowledge of what social policy is, can be, and can do. At this point the social policy agenda was reduced to two components: minimal income support to top up low wages

(predominantly, through the NCB), and the provision of local, tailor-made programs of intervention to address particular human failings. While this may have the ring of a well-rounded and balanced approach, under this regime social policy is fast becoming social services, writ large. While the discourse of social policy celebrates the *child*, the real star of this regime is the casework approach, which has become the primary organizing principle behind the bulk of new initiatives funded in the so-called social investment era. This helping ethic has more in common with the model of intervention existing in the child welfare field, for instance, in keeping with the philosophy and practice in foster care wherein the state steps in to "protect" or rescue the child when parents are deemed to be neglectful. It also shares much with the "harm reduction" approach wherein public assistance is carefully meted out to certain populations who are perceived as vulnerable, or in crisis, or as morally deserving and worthwhile (families are seen as deserving because they include children). These types of "services" are almost by necessity delivered in a manner that is condescending and paternalistic, as has long been the case in the field of social services for families.

While this model and world view are very problematic from the standpoint of their impact on both individuals and society at large, my purpose here is not to enter into a full critique of its content but to simply underline that these changes are taking place and are important. I would argue that this aspect needs to figure more centrally in our analyses of current welfare state questions. For example, one question that has been recently addressed is why Canada has failed to achieve a national day care program, despite long time promises and entry into a period of fiscal surplus. Explanations have identified various reasons for this, owing to institutional structures (e.g. federalism),

broad ideological factors (the conservative ideologies of some provincial governments and the strength of the right-wing, pro-family, Alliance Party as the official opposition at the federal level) (L. White, 2002), and shifts in the discourse (the focus on the child) and the delegitimation of players (feminists, in particular) (Dobrowolsky and Jenson, 2004). While these are important arguments, they tend to overlook the types of ideational influences discussed here. In other words, a further limiting factor in the day care struggle may be that a national day care program in the form of a *social* program (i.e. one that meets a public need and/or reflects a sense of social responsibility) is simply not tenable under current entrenched definitions of social policy for families, which can only imagine day care, or any other service, as a local intervention for individuals at risk.

By the same token, while the point is often made that Canadian social policy is rife with internal diversity that reflects the differing ideological stances of provincial governments (in relation to the issue of day care, for example), this may not be the whole truth. Based on this study, I would argue that there is, indeed, a good deal of ideological coherence and integration to the social policy current system. It lies in the fact that both federal and provincial governments (with the possible exception of Quebec) are more or less faithful to the same narrow rule for allocating new social spending – i.e. that only those programs that fit within a casework paradigm and, thus, position recipients as in need of rehabilitation or treatment are suitable candidates. This is partly "ideologically" driven, but it is also partly the result of how the struggle over the national children's agenda played out and the particular choices made by the social policy community and the social-learning network in the context of the debates.

There are further analytical questions that should be addressed concerning how knowledge of developments at the level of the social policy community can help explain broader political developments. I have argued elsewhere that there are subtle and complex inter-linkages between meso and macro level politics which make them both cause and consequence of one another (McKeen, 2004). Unpacking these linkages, especially between developments within the social policy community and those within key debates on the federal budget, could lead to a more adequate understanding of the current demeanour of the federal state to social policy reform. It might aid in explaining, for instance, why social investment in Canada has continued to figure as a poor third cousin relative to tax cuts and paying off the deficit despite the current the interest in "social investment," the consensus on child development, and conditions of a federal surplus. Social spending has indeed been decreasing as a percentage of the GDP and is currently at an all time low (CCSD, 2004). At the same time, the mainstream fiscal /economic community has continued to gravitate towards the view that economic growth, taking care of the debt, and having tax rates that are competitive with the U.S. are the fundamentals upon which everything else rests, including redistribution efforts ("It's a question of growing the economic pie, because you cannot redistribute welfare unless you create it in the first place (Can. SCF, 37/2, #85, October 23, 2003: 65)". We might ask, for example, whether the language of the NCA, complete with its familialist bias, has in fact served neo-liberal and neo-conservative forces in specific contexts in allowing them to advance demands for tax cuts and a smaller state, and resisting new social programs. We could also ask whether the focus on the child in social policy has exacerbated the level of invisibility of the issue of gender equality.19

19 On the lack of attention to women and women's equality interests within public debate see comments by

With respect to political strategy, the findings of this paper suggest that many progressive actors would do well to adopt a more critical approach in understanding the new social policy framework. The new concept of social policy makes an impositional claim concerning the nature and source of individual and collective social problems that is based on a grossly oversimplified understanding of human reality. It is devoid of structural analysis, is not concerned with issues such as equality or social justice, and studiously avoids *social* questions.20 Moreover, as others have suggested, it has paved the way for a policy agenda that produces a low road social strategy - one which creates and perpetuates more poverty, inequality, social divisiveness, and personal stress than it resolves. As social groups have continually pointed out, the real social issues and the serious level of social crisis that currently exists, and that particularly affects children and vulnerable groups, has not been acknowledged or addressed. Beyond critique, it is also important for activists to develop and advance a fundamentally different model for social policy, one that understands the importance of social policy and social programs in creating a sense of social solidarity, a sense of belonging to the collective whole, and in creating a culture that values caring about the welfare of others.

A final point is that the choice of discourse as political strategy is obviously important. Discursive strategies can make or break alliance possibilities. A key question

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women's groups and their allies in, Can. SCF, 37/2, #87, October 27, 2003: 80, 82, 72 (comments by Shelagh Day, Poverty and Human Rights Project; Judy Wasylycia-Leis, NDP MP). Also, Dobrowolsky and Jenson, 2004; and McKeen, 2004, chpt 6. For analyses of the way the focus on the child wrote women out of the poverty problem and undermined much of the credibility of women's groups in social policy debate, see McKeen, 2004; and Dobrowolsky and Jenson, 2004).

20 Progressive lobbyists often present critiques of the agenda but there is a sense in which sustained challenges by this sector have been lacking. Richard Shillington made the following comment on the NCB: "Certainly 15 years later, we were told over and over again that we were going to take from the wealthy and give to the poor. We didn't give it to the poor. We took from the wealthy. Now we're taking from the middle. Now we've divided the poor into some poor and not poor, and we're taking from some of them to

for progressives is how to challenge the new social policy paradigm and policy agenda in ways that will give greater political voice to the full spectrum of progressive actors, including, especially, social justice and equality-seeking groups and the poor themselves – groups that have largely been excluded from the debates. Only by presenting a cohesive front can progressives hope to present an effective counterweight to the growing voice of the political right.

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give to the other ones. This is targeting beyond decency, actually. . . I do know that what we have done so far hasn't been what we were told was going to happen (Can. SCYR, 36/1, 1997/98: 24).

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The Shifting Concept of Social Policy in Canada: How Progressive Advocates Fared in the Debate on the National Children's Agenda

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