

Social Policy In Aotearoa New Zealand: A Critical Introduction

Reviewed By Jenny Neale

Social Policy In Aotearoa New Zealand: A Critical Introduction (2nd ed)
Christine Cheyne, Mike O'Brien, and Michael Belgrave. Auckland: Oxford University Press, 2000.

The first edition of this book came out in 1997 to meet the needs of both students and a wider audience. As the back cover blurb indicates, this second edition has been updated to address the changes in the past three years as social policy has continued to be 'the focus of much debate and reform'. In eleven chapters the authors examine social policy in Aotearoa/New Zealand in terms of history, philosophical underpinnings, legislative and political frameworks, and Treaty issues.

This is not a critique of specific social policies in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Rather it uses case studies in the areas of income support, social services and health policy to illustrate the theory and discuss them in a specific context. The authors contend that these three areas have been the focus of significant change and therefore provide good examples of the issues they are addressing.

Each chapter begins with an executive statement and concludes with a summary of key points and guide to further reading. In this latter aspect in particular the more recent work is obvious.

After an introductory chapter, Chapter 2 looks at the history of making social policy in Aotearoa/New Zealand and its particularly distinctive features, European colonisation having the major impact since 1840. The authors suggest that there were four critical periods, 1840s, 1890s, 1930s and late 1980s/early 1990s when social policy reform had a major impact on subsequent decades. While early social policy was premised on a reaction against the British poor laws, an underlying theme has been endeavours to create an economic climate that achieved the social policy goals with only a partial reliance on welfare provision. This chapter is very much aimed at the New Zealand reader and provides them with a comprehensive background. For those reading this from outside New Zealand it could be more confusing as it assumes some knowledge of New Zealand's institutional and more general history.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 look at the theoretical constructs for social policy. In Chapter 3 goals for well being are discussed. After introducing the general

concept the ways in which different groups view their relative importance is outlined. A range of sources is used to contextualise what well being has meant in Aotearoa/NZ from the Treaty of Waitangi to the Royal Commission on Social Security 1972 to the (then) Prime Minister's statement of February 1998. The philosophical arguments that have underpinned the political approaches to making policy to meet the goal of well being is looked at in Chapter 4. Shifts in the general direction of social policy since the 1980s are charted. As the authors indicate "(I)n addition to providing an explanation about why particular phenomenon exists, theory also enables us to explain the form that the phenomena takes" (p67). Liberalism, neo-liberalism, social democracy, Marxism and neo-Marxism are discussed leading into a more detailed discussion of feminist and anti-racist critiques of social policy in Chapter 5. On another level this chapter addresses arguments around inequality and the ways in which it is manifested.

Chapter 6 addresses policy analysis in the public sector and points to the recent structural changes that resulted in the creation of the Department of Work and Income, the Ministry of Social Policy, Department of Child Youth and Family Services and the dismantling of the former Department of Social Welfare. As the authors note, this reflected "...the reduction of the public sector's role to that of safety-net services and policy advice (increasingly viewed as contestable)" (p135). Of course further changes are currently underway which accord with the current Government's agenda and will no doubt add further to the discussion of change and emphasis in subsequent writing.

In Chapter 7 the recognition of Maori and their need for a collective rather than an individualistic approach to social policy is outlined. This chapter builds on arguments raised in Chapter 5 and while demonstrating that collectivity has been recognised in Government's dealings with Maori in a broad policy perspective, specific issues of social policy are not canvassed.

Chapters 8-10 provide three examples of specific policy initiatives taken to address issues around well-being – income support, social services and health. Chapter 8 discusses the movement from defining poverty in absolute to relative terms and the more recent shift back towards absolute poverty. Alongside this sits changing approaches to income assistance and the ways in which income support is targeted. Chapter 9 concentrates on choice and diversity in the social services, and the public, private and not-for-profit sectors involvement. Chapter 10 uses health policy to show how changes in government and philosophies have gone the full circle moving away from and now back to a social democratic model for service delivery.

The final chapter looks at social policy for the 21st century based on the legacy of the 1990s. It concludes that the market forces imperative and

targeting of benefits have reinforced the welfare dependency of some sectors of society - widening the gap between those reliant on the safety-net and the rest of the community.

This book provides a useful overview of the context and debates around social policy in Aotearoa/NZ. It will appeal to students and those working in the area of the social services and adds enhances the possibility of further well-informed policy debate.