

WELFARE HISTORY

Margaret McClure

THE DEPARTMENT of Social Welfare commissioned *A Civilised Community* to trace a century's development of social security policy – the state's activity in providing a basic income or financial assistance to ordinary individuals. Today social security, or 'welfare', is a provocative issue, but it has always been significant in our history, for social security policy and the way in which it is reflected in legislation have been pointers to the nature of New Zealand society. Handing over cash is a tangible acknowledgment of a citizen's rights, and the social security system (and the degree of dignity it allows), have often marked the boundaries of our vision; it has symbolised our prejudices and fears, and who's in and who's out of favour in the wider community of the nation.

Most of you here will be familiar with past trends in social security history making. From the turn of the century, from W.P. Reeves on, our histories celebrated social security as a symbol of the national character of New Zealand.¹ Historians portrayed social security, like New Zealand, as pioneering, innovative, and humanitarian. But from the 1970s throughout the West historians reacted against this complacency, replacing triumphalist narratives with more negative appraisals which emphasised the punitive nature of the

state's activity, and its regulation of poor people.² Margaret Tennant and W.H. Oliver led the way in New Zealand. However we have allowed important characters in their accounts, such as the obsessively dour Duncan MacGregor, to haunt our view of the past. And we have been slow to recognise the determined manner in which Māori were regulated and supervised far more than Pakeha.

The last decade has seen a greater variety of historical approaches, and is an interesting time in which to write social security history. This variety derives partly from the dramatic flux in social security policy-making throughout Western societies. As governments have reassessed social security, historians have joined in this review of their own social security traditions. Some have followed the conservative political trend and called for a return to Victorian values.³ Others, both economists and historians, have debated the validity of the concept of community, and attempted to rediscover a philosophical rationale for social security and the state's recognition of the needs of strangers.⁴

But the issues of social security history are not simply a matter of taking a stance for or against welfare, of claiming social security as either a good or an evil. Historians in the last decade have also become much more analytical of the

diverse strands of social security development. Some have returned to its origins in each country, asking: where did we come from? Do its roots lie in charitable aid, or in the respectability of a social insurance scheme, in pensions for soldiers or mothers, or in the needs of the aged? Were the original planners men or women, middle class, radical, or conservative? What were their emphases? This approach is rather like the Hartz theory of colonisation, and its argument that the point of origin, the jumping-off moment stamps an indelible character on the future.

There are other issues which contribute to the complexity of social security history. Legislation itself is not the whole picture, and historians are giving attention to the ways in which officials' administration of the law can make a difference. Law enshrines policy, but does not always determine what happens at the grass-roots level for a bureaucracy can both undermine the impact of legislation, or extend it. In the early 20th century magistrates and officials in Ruatoria or Whangarei could subvert the law's harsh treatment of Māori pensioners, or exaggerate its intentions. Similarly, social workers in the 1970s varied in their assessment of *de facto* partners of sole parents.

Historians' view of the treatment of women in social security has become less black-and-white.

As welfare provisions have tightened feminist historians have shifted from their earlier hostility to a patriarchal state, and recognised the significant gains which social security has brought to women, acknowledging that the state has been a source of power for women. Feminist historians have also contributed to the growing specialisation of social security history, focusing on the development of one particular strand. However, they have tended to concentrate on the state's treatment of young women in provisions for sole parents or family assistance, and focused less often on old women – a huge group who are often ignored in gender analyses.⁵

This growing specialisation has made it clear that social security does not move as one body; its provisions rarely form a coherent system; while one group gains, another looks on enviously. My task was to co-ordinate these different strands – none of which (except the elderly) had been examined in detail in New Zealand.

Firstly this meant that although I saw social security as a symbol of community, the community of the nation, this has sometimes been a fragmented one. It has been difficult to meet needs fairly or rationally, and this history traces the rivalry between different groups in the community. The process of sorting out rights and needs has often been a rough lolly scramble with people shouting for more, rather than a civilised shared meal. Consensus has not endured for long, and in times of economic stress these rivalries became more visible as

some citizens claimed that their needs were more urgent or worthy than others. Sole mothers could be presented as courageous women in the early 1970s, and a few years later termed 'Rob Muldoon's legalised prostitutes'.⁶ These divisions between different groups in the community were not always continuous or clear-cut: at different times tensions rankled between Pakeha and Maori, young and old, men and women, workers and non-workers, or one-parent and two-parent families, and between those who were seen as deserving – widows and old people, in contest with the undeserving – single mothers and the unemployed.

Secondly, policy derives not only from the centre or from 'above'. Policy-making has been more dynamic than this, and ordinary citizens as well as politicians have had a role in social security policy. Departmental archives reveal letters from members of the public which restore the balance to a story which has often been viewed too lopsidedly in favour of political figures. Since 1938, particularly, these letters have linked the private domain with public policy, and are a form of protest often underestimated in accounts of political activity. New Zealand men and women were articulate in recounting their needs and pointed to experiences of life outside parliamentary buildings: an old man protesting that he 'must go cap in hand to tell his poverty', or a sole mother abusing Nash for her spartan Christmas.⁷ These letters provided an arena in which women had an important role, although

their voices were absent from the planning tables. On the other hand, the power of ordinary citizens can be romanticised. To have a voice is not always to wield power, and governments can be indifferent to argument and outrage.

In one hundred years of social security policy in New Zealand what do we find? The New Zealand system has had a strong sense of rights, in comparison with other countries, although the dignity of beneficiaries has always rested on a knife-edge. Social security was formulated in opposition to the stigma of charity as much as to counter poverty itself. This sense of rights was reinforced by the decision to fund social security from general taxation, so that earners and non-earners could often gain eligibility.

New Zealand has been pioneering on occasion, but very quickly become complacent and miserly, and governments have rarely researched the adequacy of social security benefits. Politicians and the public have always feared the cost and the incremental nature of social security – in the words of an early parliamentarian's reproach: 'There is no logical line which can be drawn when considering the question as to whom we shall help ...'.⁸ These fears were accompanied by a sharpened sense of rivalry, and policy reactions reveal who lose out in the community's esteem: Asians, Maori, mothers without a man to support their children, and the unemployed.

It is the aged who have been favoured overall. The 1940s were an exceptional decade, when govern-

ment paid attention to young families with the universal family benefit. But for most of a century the needs and the rights of the old have dominated the system. Old people have been confident of their rights, respectable and articulate, and their spending habits or sexual behaviour have rarely been queried. In a society which has taken for granted that it provides a great place for children, the financial needs of families have been obscured, and it is surprising that parents or mothers have not been a more powerful lobby group. It is the children and their mothers in one-parent families who face the greatest hardship today.

Finally – we should welcome the return of welfare history that is symbolised in the publication of these three books together. In the post-war period the most detailed

writing on social security and social welfare has often been by economists, public policy analysts or sociologists. These analyses have been valuable, but their language has often been abstract and unwieldy. They have focused on Wellington, and ‘few ordinary people ever appear’.⁹ It is good to see welfare analysis embedded in narratives again as historians return to the field.

Notes

- 1 W. Pember Reeves was a politician as well as historian, justifying his political activity in *State Experiments in Australia and New Zealand*, 2 vols, London, 1902. See also Keith Sinclair, *A History of New Zealand*, Harmondsworth, 1959; J.B. Condliffe, *The Welfare State in New Zealand*, London, 1959.
- 2 Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward led the way in the USA; see *Regulating the Poor*, London, 1972. For New Zealand, see W.H. Oliver, ‘An Historical Overview’, in Royal Commission on Social Policy, *The April Report*, vol 1, *New Zealand Today*, Wellington, 1988; and Margaret Tennant, *Paupers and Providers: Charitable Aid in New Zealand*, Wellington, 1989.
- 3 The most elegantly argued case is by Gertrude Himmelfarb, *Poverty and Compassion: The Moral Imagination of the Late Victorians*, New York, 1991.
- 4 J.K. Galbraith, *The Culture of Contentment*, London, 1992; Robert E. Goodin, *Reasons for Welfare: The Political Theory of the Welfare State*, Princeton, 1988; Michael Ignatieff, *The Needs of Strangers*, London, 1984; and Theda Skocpol, *Social Policy in the United States: Future Possibilities in Historical Perspective*, Princeton, 1995.
- 5 An exception is Alice Kessler-Harris, ‘Designing Women and Old Fools: The Construction of the Social Security Amendments of 1939’, in Linda Kerber, Alice Kessler-Harris and Kathryn Kish Sklar (eds), *US History as Women’s History*, Chapel Hill, 1995.
- 6 Mrs J.M.D to George Gair, 24 Feb. 1979, B&P, 12/7/11/1, pt.8, DSW.
- 7 Letter, Anonymous to Nash, [1951], Nash Papers, 1302/0373, National Archives, Wellington.
- 8 J.T. Paul, NZPD, vol 156, 1911, pp.815-9 David Thomson, ‘Society and Social Welfare’, in Colin Davis and Peter Lineham (eds), *The Future of the Past: Themes in New Zealand History*, Palmerston North, 1991, p.102.

FAMILY MATTERS

Bronwyn Dalley

FAMILY MATTERS is a history of government child welfare policy and practice. The work of the various government agencies responsible for child welfare (CWB, CWD, DSW) clustered around several main areas of child welfare, and I examine all of these in the history: juvenile delinquency and youth offending, residential care, the provisions made for ex-nuptial babies, adoption services, foster care, supervision and preventive policies, child neglect and abuse.

The history was commissioned by the Department of Social Welfare to provide a historical perspective to the development of welfare policy. In social welfare generally, and in child welfare in particular from the mid 1980s, there has been a tendency to castigate, rather than to understand past practices; the recent publicity surrounding the British child migrants is a case in point. In *Family Matters* I try to contextualise child welfare policies of the past (which includes the early

1990s) to understand where such policies came from, how they built on or reacted to those that had gone before – and in the end, to show that cycles of policy and practice reform and revision have been successive loops in the cycle of welfare provision, each predicated on the belief that the reform and change was a step in the right direction.

Family Matters traces the changes in child welfare from 1902 until 1992, from when George Hogben,