

New Zealand, new welfare
Lunt, N. O'Brien, M. Stephens, R. (eds) (2008).
Cengage Learning Australia, Melbourne.

Reviewed by Phil Harington

It interesting to play on the 'new'. While old Zealand never really figures in our conception of who we are, old welfare is something we seem to have strong feelings about. As a nation we have kept alive the idea that we in New Zealand 'do' welfare. We have marked time with settler welfare, liberal welfare, the welfare state and the demise of welfare. We believe, like the woodsman with three new handles and two new heads, we still have the same old axe. Our 'welfare' has been new many times so there is a sense of provocation involved in saying we are new again. The editors want us to consider the period since 1999. This is a text about the welfare innovation from the current Labour-led administration. We have been guilty of allowing nostalgia for old welfare to be all we ever do. The search for some 'post' is not the drift of this volume. Rather, the editors and authors offer details, data and observations that could enable us to give the current era a version number.

From the foreword and the chapter overview we realise this book will catalogue welfare innovation; essentially social security, income and the welfare outcomes of a work-centred approach. This is a period that followed a storm. It is a period where political effort has been spent on re-establishing some basic confidence about welfare provision; the effort being both deliberative and pragmatic. Principles have been expounded alongside a pragmatism about structural change and alignment, while a fortunate economic buoyancy has increased the capacity of employment to be the main basis of individual and family wellbeing. Being willing to take a multi-sectored approach this text is keen to be both documentary and commentary, at various points teasing out the details of policy innovation while assaying the converging impact of economic growth,

demographic shifts, global realities, welfare traditions and also adding not a few reservations about such a 'work-focused' policy.

There is also a sense in the arguments of the editorial team that this text wants to anticipate an alternate reading of this era. They seem to be saying this era has not really been billed as a seminal time in welfare reform. Although the innovations have come from the social democratic tradition and have been keen to bring stability and partnership back to welfare practice, this era has not found a catch phrase to telegraph its welfare agenda as did flat tax proposals, cups of tea or the mother of all budgets for the previous era. Maybe the absence of a slogan does diminish the readiness to see this as an era of manifest welfare reform. Over the fifteen chapters of detail and comment the authors seem keen to present a systematic record of what has occurred, with a toting up of gains and losses so that we can begin to ask if a new welfare model has taken hold. When we see the extent that community- and civic-minded organisations have in these times become integral to welfare infrastructure, advocates for services to their own, hardened to lobbying and contracting, maybe we could ask the question not stated here: how resilient will this model be to a likely future tax-cut regime and the consequent diminution of infrastructure provision and partnership linkages with the centre?

The first chapter gives us some terms to associate with 'new welfare'. We recognise social development in contrast with traditional welfare. 'Investment' as social policy is contrasted with 'minimal policy'. Social development is summarised as 'a dual commitment to social protection; supporting and caring for vulnerable members of society and social investment building economic and social capital'. (p6)

The editors writing the introduction highlight 'activation' as a key feature of new welfare policy to achieve welfare goals. Activation is something designed into policy to motivate and encourage choice and initiative as distinct from the stick approach to 'pro-welfare' behaviour. In the context of social development activation becomes a quality designed as much to enable the officials and policy practitioners in their roles at the front line of their responsibilities for local and appropriate results to take initiatives to achieve goals. Officials are expected to be able to see the gaps in services, employment or resources and notice the

sectors of any community that are missing the opportunities. In a social development approach they would match the diverse and idiosyncratic aspirations of communities with effective responses from services through 'joined up' government.

Likewise, activation-framed policy is likely to position options so that the person - or indeed a community at risk, a neighbourhood with disadvantage, a sector with problems accessing services - is motivated to find a way forward. It could be a fund or contract or a partnership. With various policy innovations, funds for special groups, contracts to target settings of concern, more people may be able to access work, receive health care, participate in education, find childcare, eschew domestic violence etc. This thesis of this chapter (and the rest of the book) is that the focus of new welfare is work as the best device for gaining ground. New welfare is likely to match funding and provide joined up mechanisms to enable people and families to access work through elements of choice as well as coercion. Hence, child care policy, parental leave, family support, upskilling and training allowances and a frequently adjusted minimum wage, for example, create means for individuals to improve their lot where a passive system would likely leave it to happenstance. To these facilities the authors argue for the importance of high quality case management from officials in their respective domains of work placement, accident compensation, housing, truancy and victim support, who will act as pro-active agents to assist people, citizens, clients, and even consumers.

Active engagement between officials and clients of a welfare system enables assessment, planning, linking and monitoring to become the basis of welfare practice. While on the one hand, through case management, an official may closely support a client to devise a way to make gains, it is also possible for data and policies for local and regional initiatives to become the basis for local solutions. Where old welfare would have been fearful of intimacy and initiative in the domain of an official, new welfare is more emancipatory for all those at the front line. As someone who is as much concerned with practice as with policy, my comment would be there is interesting scope here for further research.

There follow chapters that put this era into context historically, globally and of course ideologically. Easton (chapter 3) makes the point that given the dynamics of a global economy, an international job market, sectional interests and governments clutching at control mechanisms no-one should not be surprised by redundancy and dislocation. In a world where a job will seldom be for life, welfare has to be astute and smart just to anticipate and enable transitions in work-forces. Having to support a whole workforce without prospects is far too large a burden. Stephens (chapter 4) covers a wide range of factors that has helped design new welfare debating the changing social security system. He raises the issue of the conflict over responding to children in poverty. His conclusion, offered with a candour that makes this text compelling, accepts that 'just increasing incomes for families in lower decile households is not sufficient to offset the detrimental impacts on child development from material hardship, as the effects of family background, assets and a lack of social capital have not been overcome' (p39).

The sober summation expressed here does not soften the argument that poverty or indeed income maintenance is actually as much a value we could choose to apply, a responsibility we could collectively accept, to share the profits with workers. Failure to see any collective value leaves the problems on government's door and we reserve the right to criticise them for it. Government policy will always be playing catch-up if it is simply left to fill the gaps left by those that would not accept the value of fair wages and investment in their own workforce. Apart from the ideological acuity required to be ever-responsive to the machinations of voters or taxpayers (and to have the funds on hand to move into the gaps with sufficient strength) there is an unenviable management problem to be so well informed and have the correct policy at exactly the correct time. It is interesting in these chapters to realise just how ready a government has been to seek data and research, to model and track consequences to their behaviour and to hold to positions based on staying a course.

The chapter by Humpage and Craig (Chapter 5) reminds us how the language of welfare may shift. So much is lost when words are co-opted into populist terms to catch-all and play safe. Building inclusion is spin for social change rendered as steady progress, never threatening those

who are there already. What seems like a shift could well be a continuity and the vocabulary used may seldom deliver what it implies. In these relative days an adequate income may not itself mean the absence of poverty. Inclusion becomes a euphemism for something crossing equity, with equality and diversity signifying very little.

At this point the book turns to its second section on ‘issues in social security reform’. We start looking at the case studies. Since this is a welfare framework based on work first, we know it deserves a challenging interrogation. We expect the arguments to become more biting. Can soft workfare do better than hard workfare? What work counts? Could care for dependents and domestic work be included as work? Is this, along with policy to actively support mobilise traditions of kinship and neighbourhood, even friendship and diversity the locus of building capacity or increasing social capital? Is a focus on children in poverty akin to arguments to save animals by protecting the whales? Is enterprise, wherever it is cultivated, a step to wellbeing or does it beget more welfare as community life is left to the fate of markets? We can pose these questions and more as the subsequent chapters cover active labour markets, youth unemployment, low-income mothers, the weakness of tax credits to relieve child poverty, sickness benefits, closing the gaps and new migrant and refugee settlement.

In these chapters the issues may well be about policy and critique of ideological preferences but what becomes interesting, in my reading, is where we realise just how much of the problems depend on smaller responses. Building community may sound grand but it is done through many small gestures and reciprocations. Trust emerges slowly but on mutual on terms. Welfare emerges from better relations. As Amitai Etzioni argues in a recent comment on America’s new politics ‘a revival of community requires us to spend much less of our energy and resources on fighting one another, and invest much more of it in the common good’¹.

To provide some snippets: O’Brien ponders how soft workfare will likely produce a better society than hard workfare and then presents argument on the lingering marginality of those with chronic illness and

¹ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/amitai-etzioni/conservatism-is-dead-long_b_113096.html

those responsible for dependents. Lunt notes the policy activism that has gone into capability enhancement responding to youth unemployment through developing work habits, social supports and income. From Youth Transition Services (YTS) to modern apprentices we get a feeling that an active program of enhancement has been marshalled even if the idea of a hip-hop program for youth entrepreneurship may still be a step too far in modern politics. Baker's chapter on low-income mothers reminds us that sociology can make the case but it will take a resolute political ideal to move off the work-first stance.

Given the thesis that drives this book Susan St John and her arguments for direct support to children and their families had to be included. She presents the case and at the time of writing we wait for the decision of the Human Rights Commission. There is a coalition arrangement which in the future that may move this critique from a lobby into policy. New welfare will be called new all over again if children on the basis of their existence are the recipient of state support not because their parents are in work but because their welfare needs a guaranteed minimum. So far new welfare delivers through intermediaries: tax credits if the parents have the employment, the adequate wage, the hours to work, the forms filled in. It puts funds into child care and support services of the appropriate kind, can champion healthy eating, reduce violence. Yet at the same time it has faced an unholy battle to prevent undue force and a merchandising environment that will to sell all manner of tat in a life enhancing brand. There is a bloody mindedness in any generation in their ascendancy that they have the right to have things their way. Somehow the grown-ups will raid the cookie jar and presume to speak for the rest and do what they prefer as best. As we contemplate arguments for direct support for children it seems clear we are going to be delayed by an experiment; how well does a tax cut do the job in contrast to a tax credit?

The chapters on the sickness and invalid rolls (Lunt), closing the gaps (Poata-Smith) and the new migrant and refugee settlement (Love) are each assertive and interesting papers showing how labour force and development goals have become features of the broad role of government. Development is not a solution in a can. It has obstacles and generates contestable ground. Nevertheless it has become embedded in new welfare so that funds and policies with names attached – Jobs Jolt, Pathways to

Opportunity, national Settlement Strategy – become the kaupapa for new practice by officials and the communities they seek to assist. These have become the small new cogs in the complex joined-up design for sustaining welfare of any meaningful kind through government activity. Such entities represent a significant feature of the current fabric and we may well get a lesson in how robust and potent they are should a tax cut regime be our inheritance and these back-room roles of advocacy, partnership, facilitation or case management are taken out by the cuts and the collaborators in these arrangements are all returned to the hard path of market forces again.

I'm not sure we can simply equate enterprise with a continued attachment to neo-liberalism. There has always been reciprocity as a means to generate and redistribute wealth in general or in kindred communities. Activity based on values to do with developing one's own collective tenure, growing social as well as financial capital and trying to be an integral part of one's own economy and not some cheap labour pool is quite a challenge. We would want a policy framework that will mobilise capital in its various forms. We might value a robust, even nimble, public sector that has an ability to listen and respond to diversity and does not always find the answer in a catch-all. I suspect Giddens is correct when he reminds us that much of the third way is driven by changing demographics and the emancipatory quests of those who were outside the one size fits all universalism of old welfare. When Lunt talks about redefining disability as ability, and work as a meaningful right not a concession he draws attention to the aspirational voice of an emergent civic community. Alternatively when Poata-Smith challenges the easy symmetry between tribal hierarchy and tribal enterprise he heralds a drive for a different Maori civic voice. We are reminded in our disciplinary tradition, and in my case an affiliation with a social democratic movement, that we will always challenge elites where they grow fat and relish an alternate welfare eschewing nostalgia that might romance the good old days and are suspicious of new-speak for stakeholder democracy.

In the end I appreciated this book. It is timely, even prescient. It has put up a case and loaded it with detail and discussion. It is not a battle-force attack and it is not a sterling defence. In the small world we inhabit

and the smaller market this book might appeal to best we all know each other. One of the players responsible for much of the policy directions that make up the content of this book has been a colleague and is soon to be back in our domain. There is a small sense of this book being a family of learned and passionate siblings letting us view their conversations. The book will be interesting to those who are themselves under a spotlight in their political or policy roles. There is more than enough here to chase the ideas and resolve to do better. Human welfare will continue to need our sociological attention.