

Raymond B. Blake. *From Rights to Needs: A History of Family Allowances in Canada 1929-92.* Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009. x + 354 pp. \$98.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7748-1572-7.



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Published on H-Canada (September, 2009)

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At first glance, the tale Raymond Blake tells about the shift of the federal government's family allowances (or "Baby Bonus") program from a universal entitlement to a needs-based program is a familiar one--familiar in particular from Linda McQuaig's seminal argument in *The Wealthy Banker's Wife* (1993), using the changes to the Baby Bonus in the 1990s as a case in point, that de-universalizing a program is the first step towards eliminating it. McQuaig was polemically defending the seemingly illogical practice of giving everyone support as the best way to ensure that the benefits of the most needy and marginalized are defended by a broad social consensus, against the more obvious practice of targeting spending on the poor alone. Blake, however, is arguing the other side: that paying families selectively based on needs rather than universally based on rights is ultimately more effective social policy, and was a long time coming.

Blake argues that the move towards selectivity emerged as an idea in the 1960s, when a "new-found consciousness of poverty" prompted civil

servants, politicians, and citizens to reevaluate the effectiveness of universal payments as an anti-poverty measure (p. 17). Selectivity was identified as good policy early on by Pierre Trudeau's government, for example, but was not operationalized because it was politically dangerous. This reperiodization of the shift very effectively reframes the ultimate repeal of family allowances by the Mulroney government in the early 1990s--generally invoked as the best example of that era's neoconservative assault on social programs--as not only the rational culmination of two decades of study and debate within government, but also as a brave concession to social justice, in that payments went to people who needed them, rather than those who felt entitled to them. The link between neoconservative social policy reforms and 1960s-era anti-poverty discourse suggests a radical rethinking of political ideologies in the late twentieth century, and points to a tantalizing blurring of the left-right binary in Canadian politics.

This reframing of the universality/selectivity debate is polemical history, and is interesting where it drives the narrative of *From Rights to Needs*, which unfortunately is only the last three or four chapters of the book. Blake's significantly less dramatic thesis, in fact, is two-fold: first, that a number of factors, not just one or a few, influenced the development of family allowances; second, that family allowances were introduced at the federal level as a form of nation-building. This two-part thesis is less interesting than the discussion of universality, and the parts that submit to its rule are consequently less interesting than those that stray into polemic. The claim that the Baby Bonus was a nation-building project is very convincingly argued in places, and makes efficient use of much of Blake's extensive research, but is not consistently adhered to. The argument that no single factor or even set of factors determined the shape of family allowances is more properly the avowed absence of a thesis, and is traceable only in the book's tendency to present quite a bit of the research material in an undigested form.

The narrative begins (chapter 1) with unfruitful discussions of financial support for families in the 1920s; Blake illustrates well the overall reluctance to introduce allowances at that time, in particular the open opposition to a state-funded wage from labor and from social workers, specifically Charlotte Whitton, the head of the Canadian Welfare Council. In a somewhat familiar story (chapter 2), Blake notes the influence of new policy intellectuals in and around the civil service and the major parties, and of the adoption of collectivist rhetoric in Britain and the United States during the Second World War, in making the idea of a massive social investment in family spending power more attractive. Family allowances were created in 1944 with the unanimous support of all three parties in Parliament, despite the bungling opposition of some prominent Progressive Conservatives outside the House, including George Drew, the premier of Ontario, and John Bracken,

the federal leader (who did not hold a federal seat). The argument that family allowances were meant to create a direct emotional and material bond between the federal government and individual citizens, particularly in marginal regions where the federal government was seen as distant, is most consistently adhered to in these opening chapters.

The administrative challenges posed by family allowances were formidable--the program "exceeded any previous peacetime administrative organization in both size and scope" (p. 125)--and Blake presents a good picture of how these were overcome, province by province, as the program developed (chapter 4). The analysis of the effectiveness of the program as an anti-poverty instrument up to 1960 is also interesting (chapter 5), or more accurately becomes interesting in later chapters when effectiveness becomes the basis for critiquing the program. After 1960, the growing recognition of poverty amid affluence prompts a rethinking of the feasibility of the program: should family allowances be provided to everyone universally regardless of need, or should they be targeted to those who really need the money (chapter 6)? From then on, policymakers begin to insist that allowances should be an instrument for the elimination of poverty, rather than a universal right. Blake's interest in the Baby Bonus as a nation-building project becomes less pronounced as the universality debate takes center stage.

In Blake's narrative, the shift of family allowances from a direct payment into something resembling a welfare provision coincides with the beginnings of open conflict with the Province of Quebec over social policy in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Social policy at this time becomes a central site of constitutional strategy between Trudeau and Quebec premier Robert Bourassa (chapter 7). Both governments insisted on having a rationalized federal/provincial anti-poverty program, rather than just a set of unrelated administrative bodies mailing out checks. Prime Minister

Trudeau's government began the process of reforming the Baby Bonus many times, usually with a nod towards selectivity, but always balked at the prospect of a revolt by middle-class supporters--particularly women (chapter 8). The Mulroney government, emboldened by eroding support for taxpayer-funded universal programs (and perhaps, though Blake doesn't note it, less directly dependent on middle-class women for votes), finally did away with family allowances in 1992 (chapter 9).

Evaluating the book's success or failure is complicated by the peculiarities of its ambition. There's no doubt that the book is well researched and chronicles the high politics of family allowances assiduously and clearly. But Blake's stated intention to craft a more "nuanced and complete explanation for the origins and development" of family allowances is at odds with the polemical tone of the book's handling of the universality question (p. 23). While the book is framed as a direct response to excessively politicized and stylized books that offer a single central tension as "the answer" to welfare state history (with particular scorn heaped on Jane Ursel's book *Private Lives, Public Policy* [1992], which links the family allowances program to the federal state's desire for industrial harmony), it is most interesting and most successful where it fails to live up to its ambition. *From Rights to Needs* is, in this important way, an illustration of the limitations of the kind of historical realism to which it aspires, of presenting "what really happened" without imposing on it the false coherence of a political caper.

One major consequence of the tell-it-like-it-is approach is that statements of political elites are most often taken at face value. Throughout the book, Blake leaves unexamined the use of rhetoric and key words in the debates: terms like "expert," "rational," "effective," "efficient," and "coherent" are presented as if their meaning were entirely transparent and obvious. This is particu-

larly jarring when Blake so clearly takes sides, as in the universality debates, but it also weakens the book overall. Why was expertise an accepted category of knowledge? Why did coherence and rationality become such an agreed-upon goal--not just for the province of Quebec, which had a lot to gain from equating shared responsibility with incoherence and "bad policy," but for the editors of the *Globe and Mail* and *Toronto Telegram*--in the late 1960s? Did political elites use these key words because they thought they had public resonance, or simply because they believed they had inherent positive value? Putting some thought into these questions would have not only made a "better" history of family allowances, it would have made a history more relevant to historians whose interests lie precisely in those theoretical questions, regardless of when and where they arise.

The tendency to implicitly identify with political elites is reflected in the scope of *From Rights to Needs*, which is quite narrow. The book's opening line, "The debate on family allowances began in a parliamentary committee," reads like an explicit provocation to historians like Shirley Tillotson who would seek to place political history in a wider social world. Blake's account is stubbornly internalist (to use Tillotson's phraseology), establishing a cozy familiarity with the prime minister and his cabinet, and extending from various members of the opposition to the provincial premiers and a few senior civil servants as the need arises. There's nothing inherently wrong with internalism; scholars from Donald Creighton to Denis Smith have written highly engaging and dynamic history by limiting their focus to the private struggles and the personal dramas of public figures that have been central to Canadian political life. But Blake, limited by the peculiarities of his theses, gains little in the way of dramatic intensity from his decision to focus only on the key players in the story. Having whittled his cast roughly down to the size of an Edward Albee play in any given chapter, that is, he nonetheless can't seem to make them do anything really interesting.

As a book of political history written in the shadow of social and cultural history, *From Rights to Needs* combines the theoretical depth and interpretive scope of the former with the dramatic flair of the latter: it neither presents a dramatic tale nor offers much in the way of serious consideration of the wider meaning of the terms under debate. Even the case for selectivity over universality, which undeniably profits from its polemical thrust and rhetorical license, is presented in a closed world. The link Blake suggests between neoliberalism and the New Left's anti-poverty critique of the welfare state debate could have been examined in terms suggested by L. B. Kuffert's *A Great Duty* (2003), which sees a postwar conservative animus to bureaucratic rationality picked up by the New Left: what role did an innate suspicion of bureaucracy and modernism play in eroding

public support for universal programs, and embolden the Mulroney government, a generation later, to replace family allowances with a program explicitly targeting individuals in need, rather than abstract Canadians?

From Rights to Needs, where it is not a polemical history of the universalist threat to the welfare state, is a nuanced account of the political history of family allowances, full of detail on the intricacies of administrative and political struggles over social policy in the twentieth century. It will be a volume that scholars of the welfare state and Canadian politics turn to in order to be reminded of who did what when and why. Reports, documents, and parliamentary debates are presented in a largely undigested form that is ideal for reference use, and for guiding anyone interested in doing further archival research on any topic touching on this broad period in Canadian political history. Its limitations as a book, as opposed to as a record of research, may affect how it is used in undergraduate classrooms, though the chapters directly addressing the universality debates would be of some interest to students of social policy--perhaps read alongside *The Wealthy Bankers' Wife*.

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Citation: David Tough. Review of Blake, Raymond B. *From Rights to Needs: A History of Family Allowances in Canada 1929-92*. H-Canada, H-Net Reviews. September, 2009.

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