

5

Dismantling the Maternalist State: Labour, Social Work, and Social Catholicism Debate Family Policy, 1926–1930

We have never used the word 'Pension' in our legislation or administration as the term had appeared to us to encourage in our applicants an undue sense of their rights in claiming or demanding an allowance.

A.P. Paget, Mothers' Allowances Commission, Manitoba to Agnes McNab,
Mothers' Pension Board, B.C., 12 March 1927

It is quite clear that a community which does not contain families of four or more children would be doomed to extinction ... So that the service rendered to a country by the heads of large families is obvious. It is therefore in the interest of society that these fathers should be placed in a position of security so far as the needs of their families are concerned.

Leon Lebel, *Family Allowances*, 1929

In almost every province where a system of mothers' allowances had been introduced, government benefits had been restricted to a limited category of deserving mothers – namely, widows with more than two children and women with incapacitated husbands. Despite the strictures placed on this path-breaking form of social legislation by financially austere governments, the broader social movement, which demanded more liberal welfare programs, did not disappear from the Canadian cultural landscape. Between 1926 and 1928 there arose two related (albeit dissimilar) campaigns that aimed at further extending the maternalist welfare state, which had recognized the services that

Select Language and Voice : 

Labour, Social Work, and Social Catholicism Debate 161

family reproduction and the unpaid work of child rearing contributed to the common weal. The first, initiated by J.L. Cohen, the noted labour lawyer, and William Ivens, the Winnipeg labour activist, demanded that mothers' allowance benefits be extended to deserted, divorced, and unmarried women. The second, led by J.S. Woodsworth, the Independent Labour Party (ILP) member for Winnipeg, and Father Leon Lebel, the social Catholic commentator from Quebec, called for the introduction of a national system of family allowances.

What both of these campaigns shared was an acknowledgment that the State had a role in ensuring the 'economic stability of family life.' What disturbed Charlotte Whitton, and other adherents of the traditional boundaries between the private and public spheres, was that such legislation conceived of kinship relations almost entirely in economic rather than spiritual terms. Moreover, she objected to a national family allowance system, viewing it as a precursor to broader forms of social insurance. This new incarnation of mothers' allowances advocated by William Ivens, in combination with the family allowances championed by the ILP, would, according to conservatives, commit governments to extensive new powers. Whitton perceived these labour initiatives as radical challenges to the privileged position of the responsible male breadwinning husband and as a threat to personal initiative, the work ethic, and family economic self-sufficiency.

In the end, this two-pronged movement to bolster family-based welfare entitlements failed when it confronted Whitton, who as an ideological opponent was both politically astute and ruthlessly single-minded. During the ensuing discussions, the fate of mothers' and family allowances took unpredictable twists and turns that resulted in vastly different outcomes than any of the major protagonists intended. In order to raise a credible counterattack against what she perceived were well-orchestrated assaults by organized labour on the Canadian family, Whitton was forced to concede the viability of their argument – namely, that family security was mostly about economics rather than morality. In practical terms, Whitton succeeded in blocking further government incursions into family life, in that she was able to hold the line on mothers' allowances benefits and to defeat Woodsworth's proposals for a state-funded system of family allowances.

This ideological contest between Whitton and the ILP resulted in a decisive transformation in how the Canadian family was conceptualized.¹ The underlying principles animating family policies were transformed to such a degree that they no longer upheld the ideals of the

162 Engendering the State

mother-centred family: by 1930, mothers' allowances could no longer be differentiated from municipal relief and thus had lost their redemptive qualities; while family allowances (first mooted in Britain as a feminist and redistributive measure in recognition of the national importance of child rearing and of women's unpaid labour) had been reconstituted as a corollary to other state insurance proposals that aimed at reinforcing the right of male workers to a 'living wage.' In ways never intended by reformist exponents of new family welfare policies, the period between 1926 and 1928 witnessed a decisive restructuring of the ideological contours and national goals on which social welfare entitlements were based. By the end, the family and its unpaid work of reproduction and child rearing had lost precedence to the workplace and the wage-earning male breadwinner.

"Not a statutory right" but a "social aid"²

Legislative enactments only partly explain how mothers' allowances evolved, and governments of the time were vulnerable to popular social pressures. Nowhere are these points better illustrated than in the observations of Charlotte Whitton, the director of the Canadian Council on Child Welfare, and Ernest Blois, the director of child welfare for Nova Scotia. Blois believed that the Nova Scotia government had erected ironclad defences against popular protest by removing the administration of mothers' allowances from the immediate purview of government ministers and the legislative process. He was therefore outraged to discover that hundreds of 'unworthy' mothers, such as the unmarried and deserted, were receiving allowances because of 'the growing tendency in some quarters to consider all children of widowed mothers entitled to an allowance irrespective of the mother's qualifications to maintain her home and bring up her children in a proper manner.'³

However much provincial laws may have defined mothers' allowances as a limited form of needs-based social relief, during the 1920s public opinion gradually came to perceive allowances as a 'statutory right.' Whitton, who closely monitored shifting practices in the administration of mothers' allowances in all the provinces, concluded that she and other child welfare professionals had erred in disassociating 'the system from any aspect of charity.' They had thereby failed to suppress the 'constant agitation' from various 'other groups' who wished to detach mothers' allowances from traditional notions of pauperiza-

Labour, Social Work, and Social Catholicism Debate 163

tion and lesser eligibility and anchor them once again to the concept of rights-based pensions. Whitton looked on nervously as various labour and women's organizations launched massive campaigns which built on the perception, popular among working-class mothers, that the allowance was in fact a 'pension or compensation payment to which the applicant is entitled simply because she is a widow and not even particularly because she is in need.'⁴ It became clear to welfare traditionalists that government statutes were not immutable. Whitton was especially critical of the system in British Columbia, where from their inception mothers' allowances had been seen as a pension. Whitton had hoped to reinforce the power of the local CASs by keeping mothers' allowances firmly enmeshed with other forms of local relief; however, organized labour in alliance with other reform groups was successfully lobbying to have mothers' pensions administered through the distinctly rights-based Workman's Compensation Board. Furthermore, the British Columbian Deserted Wives Maintenance Act had defined a woman as a deserving 'deserted wife' if she was by reason of her husband's cruelty or adultery unable to cohabit with him; this made many separated wives eligible for a pension. Thus, divorced wives were informally granted state benefits; not only that, but there was nothing to prevent growing numbers of unmarried mothers from applying, even though the legislation made no provision for this class of women.⁵ According to Whitton, in Saskatchewan the municipalities – the level of government most vulnerable to pressures from local women's institutes – were completely indifferent to the number or classes of women recommended. In effect, public sentiment was given full reign in that province.⁶

Other provincial jurisdictions likewise succumbed to popular opinion. Nowhere was this more evident than in Manitoba, where labour agitation after the failed Winnipeg General Strike was targeting other areas for reform. By 1927 labour had succeeded in having mothers' allowances made into a 'reasonably adequate allowance.' In Whitton's view, this level of benefits dangerously eroded the principle of lesser eligibility – the foundation stone of all welfare assistance – because it surpassed the wage levels of the unskilled and seasonal labourer.⁷ But labour organizations in Manitoba were not entirely happy with how the government had bowed to their demands: in order to extend to widows a level of maintenance commensurate with what the 'breadwinner' had provided, A.P. Paget, the director of child welfare in Manitoba, had held fast on extending assistance to other 'classes' of

164 Engendering the State

women. This made Manitoba an anomaly among provinces, and led William Ivens to launch a vigorous campaign in February 1928 calling for a provincial Royal Commission to inquire into the administration of mothers' allowances. His hope was that this would compel provincial politicians to extend benefits to deserted, divorced, and unmarried mothers.⁸

In part, Ivens was prompted to take action on behalf of unmarried and deserted women because of cases like that of Fred and Ethel Schindler. Ethel Schindler ran off with the young 'Bohemian' immigrant, who later served with the Strathcona Light Horse during the war. Because 'unmarried wives' who cohabited with soldiers were fully entitled both to their pay and to military separation allowances, Ethel never felt it necessary to marry Fred. This meant that in official terms, their two children had been 'born out of wedlock.' In 1927 she finally married Fred. However, she soon left him after he physically abused her. Technically, Mrs Schindler was ineligible for a mothers' allowance because she was a separated wife and because, in a narrow legal sense, she was an unmarried mother, as her children had been conceived prior to her marriage. It was humanitarian concern for women like Mrs Schindler that inspired Ivens and fellow clergymen to fight for changes in Manitoba's mothers' allowance legislation.⁹ As Paget, the beleaguered director of the child welfare division, informed Whitton: 'Ivens is on the warpath pressing hard for an increase in our schedule and the extension of the scope of the Act to include Desertion, Penal Cases, One Child, those b.o.o.w. [born out of wedlock] in fact a regular broadside. Did you see Cohen's book on M.A. legislation? It appears under Labour auspices and Ivens uses the material to slam the Manitoba policy, minister, administration, director et al. ... The part that impresses the government most seems to be the % we take of Mothers' earnings.'¹⁰

From this perspective, the problem of mothers' earnings went to the heart of the issue. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, mothers' allowance legislation was ostensibly written to prevent women from having to enter into paid work outside the home, and it was on this basis that organized labour supported it. But in practice, women and children were increasingly being compelled to work for ever larger portions of their upkeep, and this threatened once again both wage levels and jobs for the 'more deserving' male breadwinner. This subtle but important shift in how mothers' allowances were distributed occurred in all provinces; but in Manitoba, where the allowances were

Labour, Social Work, and Social Catholicism Debate 165

intended to rise and fall with the cost of living, they were being used quite deliberately to bolster a widow's incentive to work. What disturbed labour leaders was not that public welfare administrators were encouraging the earning of pin money, but that by making deductions proportionally less after the recipient earned \$10, women were being manipulated into working longer hours, especially after their children were in school.¹¹

These work policies for widows were very effective: in 1917 only 56 per cent of Manitoba beneficiaries earned supplementary wages, but by 1926–27 fully 80 per cent of women on government assistance sought work outside the home.¹² Thus it was not a coincidence that J.L. Cohen published his digest of *Mother's Allowance Legislation in Canada* in 1927. In it he argued that because needy widows and their children were being forced to work for wages, and because deserted, divorced, and unmarried women as well as those with husbands in prison were excluded, both the wage standard and trade union solidarity were threatened. The State, he contended, was establishing a dangerous precedent by using social policy as an economic lever; by conceiving of mothers' allowances in terms of a 'business undertaking,' the State had become a 'competitive factor' in industry.¹³ In an effort to end this government practice of utilizing family policies as an economic weapon with which to interfere with the independence of labour, Cohen presented his case in terms barely distinguishable from those of Charlotte Whitton. Like Whitton and other traditionalists, he interpreted mothers' allowances not in terms of women's rights, but as founded on the principle of 'assistance to dependent children.'¹⁴ His intentions differed from hers insofar as he wanted mothers' allowances to become a rights-based entitlement that could be upheld in the courts, as well as a means of establishing a more comprehensive national system of social insurance. Nevertheless, he underscored that endowment for motherhood was not just a remedy for economic want – its chief goal was to protect the home, the primary 'unity of the social fabric,' by correcting 'ethical and social maladjustment' within the family.¹⁵ However, he emphasized – as had reformers during the earliest campaigns for mothers' allowances – that if the stability of family life was the central preoccupation of government social policy, then *all* children no matter the character or marital status of the mother, should be protected through a system of 'special relief' at rates that would ensure a standard of living above a subsistence level and that would preclude the need for a supplementary income.

166 Engendering the State

The battle between social work professionals and public opinion (through grass roots organizations of women and labour) over who would dictate family welfare policy dates from the Cohen and Ivens salvo of 1928. In 1929, Whitton rallied her social work troops and mounted a counterattack, having established herself as a one-woman Royal Commission to study the administration of mothers' allowances in Manitoba. Her social work ranks fanned out across the province interviewing working-class families, with the goal of bringing Manitoba's system of allowances in line with the wages of the 'breadwinner group.' Needless to say, Whitton's phalanx of social workers received little help from local labour leaders, who objected to their interrogations of working-class families about their income and household budgets.¹⁶ Likewise, Whitton canvassed 500 former beneficiaries in order to demonstrate the need for a more centralized system of government control and to argue for greater participation in family reform by private agencies such as the CASs. She skilfully deployed the life histories of these women to reorient the system of mothers' allowances back to its original principles – that is, as a policy not just of economic relief but also of family reform. To shore up the character-building aspects of this system of state guardianship, Whitton firmly declared that 'greater effort should be made to require the head of the family [the widow] to enforce contribution from earning children,' and that mothers should fulfil their breadwinner role by working out as a means of 'encouraging ambition, thrift and independence'¹⁷ among the next generation of wage earners.

The labour campaign built on the growing popular perception that mothers' allowances ought to be claimable as a legal right by all women who had lost the economic support of a male breadwinner. This labour initiative was, however, firmly squelched in Manitoba. In early 1929 the government tabled Whitton's report. As E.W. Montgomery, the Minister of Health and Public Welfare, reported the situation to Whitton, Ivens and a delegation from the TLC received the report 'to say the least ungraciously.' This is not surprising, for in it Whitton made insidious use of the testimony of hundreds of working-class beneficiaries to thwart all of labour's claims for reforming mothers' allowances. Ivens had never approved of a one-woman Royal Commission, especially when that woman was Charlotte Whitton, and was apoplectic when he discovered that the report was 'more generous to the government than it is to the widows'¹⁸ and that it had significantly forestalled any further expansion in government responsibility in the

Labour, Social Work, and Social Catholicism Debate 167

sphere of family welfare by shifting the power base for the administration of widows' allowances back to the voluntary charity and philanthropic organizations. Thereafter, the CASs of Manitoba had much more influence over policy; from that point on, investigations would be more rigorous and would be made in accordance with a specific concept of what constituted a 'fit and proper mother.'¹⁹ Whitton was also well aware of the depth of popular feeling regarding making unmarried mothers beneficiaries of mothers' allowances; so she strategically placed all casework for unmarried mothers firmly in the hands of the CASs, thereby isolating it from any association with mothers' allowances.

Dr E.W. Montgomery, the provincial Minister of Health and Public Welfare, remained in close consultation with Whitton at the Canadian Council on Child Welfare throughout the ensuing weeks as her report was debated in the legislature. In February 1929 he warned her that the political situation in Manitoba was 'very tense.' Fearing that her report would be ignored by the legislature, Whitton retorted fiercely that she hoped that 'there is so much material in the Report that Mr Ivens' speech thereon will be so lengthy that it will empty the House and you will therefore be able to get your estimate through an empty House with no discussion.'²⁰ As the new recommendations wended their way through the legislative process, the political will to oppose the minister, who was armed with Whitton's voluminous technical data, was clearly absent. Labour opposition was split when F.W. Tipping, the labour representative on the Mothers' Allowances Board, was co-opted by supporters of the legislation. When the legislative committee convened to discuss the report, only a weak tail of opposition remained; only Ivens and a Mrs Edith Rogers appeared on behalf of organized labour and women's groups.²¹

Whitton had won her first battle against those who argued that it was the responsibility of all governments to materially assist all families deprived of adequate economic security. But as Harry Bentley, the chief investigator for the Ontario Mothers' Allowances Commission, remarked: 'The war is still on and keeps us pretty busy all the time.'²² Indeed, Whitton's conservative social work juggernaut continued to sweep across Canada, from provincial government to provincial government, relentlessly suppressing popular forces working to expand government welfare programs. Since 1920, when she established the Canadian Council on Child Welfare, Whitton had been able to transform her organization into the leading centre for collecting social

168 Engendering the State

statistics in an era when universities and philanthropic agencies were too small and underfunded to undertake specialized social welfare research. Because the Canadian Council on Child Welfare was a clearing house for numerous local voluntary family welfare organizations, Whitton was able to assiduously collect and analyse the newest information regarding welfare legislation and social data. Thus, she was able to establish herself as the foremost expert on Canadian welfare policy. Moreover, when in 1933 Helen MacMurchy retired from her position as head of the Child Welfare Division of the federal Department of Pensions and Health, Whitton and her organization usurped her role. This conferred even greater powers on Whitton, who became in effect an inner governmental adviser to the minister.²³ Along with her large storehouse of technical information, Whitton had, as Harold Putman put it, 'masculine logic, feminine charm and energy the despair of all'²⁴ – not to mention a large amount of political combativeness and an unquestioning faith in the moral rightness of her position. All of this enabled Whitton to become the policy adviser for a number of provincial governments as well as the federal government between the two world wars, and enabled her to put her imprimatur on government legislation in these formative decades of family welfare policy-making.

After her successes in Manitoba, in 1930 the financially strapped government of British Columbia called on Whitton to streamline its mothers' allowance bureaucracy. As Whitton confided to Mrs D.G. McPhail, a member of the Mothers' Pension Board, the management of mothers' allowances in that province was in a 'deplorable state.' The government was spending a million dollars a year, she remarked, but there was virtually no casework to monitor mothering skills and there were only six visitors, all of them ineffectual and untrained.²⁵ To her amazement and chagrin, Whitton discovered that it was regular practice among investigators to explain to potential beneficiaries the strategies they might use to balk the system. One investigator told a woman who was living with a man that if she wanted to keep her government assistance she must either leave him or marry him; she then went on to show her how to get her assessments down low enough that she would be able to keep her allowance. Another friendly visitor often advised deserted women to apply for a mother's pension once they were divorced. It was to curb such practices, which were subtly expanding the boundaries of the original government legislation, that Whitton set about making the welfare regulations 'watertight.'²⁶

Labour, Social Work, and Social Catholicism Debate 169

British Columbia was at the time heavily pruning its civil service, so Whitton was unable to establish a broader base of professional social work investigation in British Columbia.²⁷ Even so, the obvious need for downsizing in the midst of the Depression meant that she could easily exact large cuts to mothers' benefits; at the same time she could aggressively weed out those mothers who were so hopeless, feeble-minded, or immoral that no degree of material aid or social investigation would be able to restore their families to 'social stability and independence.'²⁸ The provincial government cooperated fully with Whitton's plans to draw strict boundaries between mothers' allowances and general relief, having grown tired of municipalities dumping more and more of their relief cases on the Mothers' Allowances Commission, which was provincially funded.²⁹ Also Whitton's desire to rid the government of families that could become self-sufficient through work meshed with the labour minister's personal interest in having widows fill the growing demand among middle-class families for domestic servants.³⁰ British Columbia had long had the most liberal system of mothers' pensions in the country and had regularly granted generous benefits to widows as well as to deserted, divorced, and unmarried women. Whitton's arguments about the vital need to limit government intervention in the realm of family welfare would not have been persuasive under normal economic conditions; but this was the Depression and her recommendations for retrenching welfare benefits and for restricting the range of beneficiaries were both compelling and practicable. As a result, she was given free rein to radically restructure child and family policies in British Columbia. Endowment for mothers traditionally had been defined as a rights-based 'pension' in that province; following Whitton's assault, it was reinvented and placed on a much more voluntaristic, charity-based course. Later it would be debased even further and become a scheme of general welfare assistance.³¹

Not all provinces incorporated Whitton's proposals into their child welfare legislation. Despite representations from Whitton, the Ontario government extended mothers' allowance benefits to widows and 'other women on Indian reserves' and in 1934 was succumbing to outside pressure to allow widows with one child to apply for assistance.³² One might have assumed that Whitton's perorations against government-funded welfare programs would have found a ready hearing in Quebec, where church-based charitable institutions were well entrenched. But even though Whitton was one of the main

170 Engendering the State

'expert' witnesses to testify at the 1931 Quebec Commission on Social Insurance,³³ her recommendations and those of Mlle Cécile Joncas, who had established an experimental scheme of mothers' allowances in Quebec City with funds from the Department of Health, went largely unheeded. When a government program of allowances for needy mothers was established by the Duplessis regime in 1938, it was administered by the Department of Labour 'as a pension' to be paid automatically 'irrespective of the character of the home.'³⁴

In 1930, in a missive directed to all provincial welfare officials from the Canadian Council on Child Welfare, Whitton reasserted the guiding principle of mothers' allowances, which she believed had been diluted by lack of bureaucratic attention and by external public pressure. Whitton wrote that because they were a form of 'public' assistance, mothers' allowances, 'cannot be considered as entirely the granting of financial aid to which the mother is unquestionably entitled ... It is rather a measure of social investment, on the part of the State, whereby mothers, of whose fitness for these responsibilities, the state assures itself, are indirectly subsidized by public grant, in exact proportion to their actual needs, to enable them to perform their parents' responsibilities towards their children, with the hope that these children should become desirable citizens, and social assets to the community.'³⁵

It was in Nova Scotia that Whitton's conviction that policies for home protection must focus on the moral character rather than simply the economic security of the family had the most profound influence. In that province, with the strong support of Ernest Blois, the Director of Child Welfare, she was able to impress in its entirety her vision of welfare policy, in the shape of the 1930 Mother's Allowance Act. This vision was outlined in one of her famous memoranda: mothers' allowances must be funded by both the municipalities and the provinces, to proscribe against financial irresponsibility; no grants were to be made to wives of incarcerated men, as it was a grave social injustice to support dependants of crime; unmarried and deserted women must seek redress through the court system; women with one child must be excluded, as it was more morally efficacious if they be kept busy and earning a wage rather than having too much 'leisure' time; and benefits must be kept below the lowest wages of casual labourers and farmers. Above all, this 'investment of the State' must be repaid through attentive family casework.³⁶ As Nova Scotia's Parliament considered the legislation during the spring of 1930, Blois concurred in all that

Labour, Social Work, and Social Catholicism Debate 171

Whitton advised through her extensive correspondence with him. Like Whitton, Blois believed that the allowance was only a 'grant-in-aid,' comparable with payments issued by the provincial Workmen's Compensation Board, and not a pension. Accordingly, he took steps to ensure that all older children contributed to the family income.³⁷ Blois was able to fend off popular agitation that interpreted mothers' allowances as a measure for women's rights; he also squelched any future campaigns to extend maternalist state provisions by reaffirming that the legislation was distinctly a child welfare provision. Luckily for Blois, the anticipated protests surrounding his bill were superseded by the public's reaction to a liquor control bill. Nevertheless, in order to quell any movements to amend the bill, Blois strategically framed the legislation so that *'no mother will have any right to an allowance, in fact no allowance will be paid to any mother, in all cases the allowances are paid towards the maintenance of children.'*³⁸

The Nova Scotia Bill was, as Blois himself attested, 'a very conservative scheme for allowances.'³⁹ However, after 1932, as the Depression wore on in a province where mothers' allowances was the only real form of government-funded outdoor relief, the pressure to extend benefits to deserted women and to wives with incapacitated husbands became particularly acute.⁴⁰ Moreover, many of the strict provisions incorporated into the act were unenforceable. For example, as even casual, unskilled work dried up during the 1930s, welfare officials were unable to fully implement their policy that older children of mothers' allowance beneficiaries be compelled to work. Indeed, the Depression itself was the event most responsible for altering the underlying principles of mothers' allowances – despite the constant, conservative hectoring of Charlotte Whitton – and for shifting those allowances inexorably in the direction of unspecialized, general relief. Even Ernest Blois, a rigorous defender of morality-based family welfare policies, began to back away from distinguishing between worthy and unworthy mothers,⁴¹ as the overwhelming need for simple economic relief rendered untenable his earlier preoccupation with the spiritual and affectional bonds of family life. In the end, the foundation on which mothers' allowances had been built (i.e., that they were a means to reform the character and child-rearing practices of working-class families) was eroded away by the Depression, as the gravity of the problem of unemployment swept aside maternalist definitions of deservedness and established new notions of an individual's worthiness to receive government assistance. By the end of the decade, moth-

172 Engendering the State

ers' allowances no longer enjoyed special status. Thereafter, women were granted this form of assistance not because they had fulfilled a specific national goal by raising the next generation of citizens, but because they were deemed to be 'unemployable' and so eligible only for local outdoor relief. By 1940 mothers' allowances were seen as simply another form of general welfare. In order to understand how this came about, we must first examine how the boundaries between mothers' allowances and relief subtly shifted between 1930 and 1940, and how prevailing notions of welfare entitlement changed so that they emphasized economic security rather than the more sentimental aspects of family life.

Arguably the most important force eroding the special status of mothers' allowances was the introduction of relief on a massive scale during the Depression. The introduction of government relief policies resulted in an immediate lowering of mothers' allowance benefits all across the country. 'The widespread development of direct relief,' reported Whitton in 1933, 'by force of circumstances on a minimum scale, has thrown into comparison the higher standards of aid generally available under mother's allowances, and is causing a steady pressure towards the lowering of the latter to correspond with the former.'⁴² As a longtime advocate of reducing benefit rates in order to force widows and their children into the workforce, Whitton supported this trend in family welfare policy. In the depths of the Depression, her view that all relief should be set below the minimum wage level of the unskilled worker in order to sustain work incentives among the general population gained widespread acceptance. Accordingly, in the early 1930s almost every provincial jurisdiction began to reduce benefits paid to widows. Manitoba had always adjusted its levels of assistance to track the cost of living, but it reduced benefits another 10 per cent in 1932, as did Alberta. But the widows who suffered most from this were those in Saskatchewan. There, mothers' allowances had always been restrictively defined as a mere 'grant-in-aid'; but as the number of applicants mushroomed during the Depression, rising 56.7 per cent in 1932 (the highest in North America), welfare officials slashed the already meagre flat rate payments, thereby forcing thousands of single women with children onto direct relief.⁴³ And to further erase the boundaries between mothers' allowances and relief, many municipalities began using the mothers' allowance system to shift the financial burdens of welfare onto the provinces. Thus, in the city of Brandon, Manitoba, only twenty-four married and four single

Labour, Social Work, and Social Catholicism Debate 173

men were on actual relief, while thirty-five relief families were assisted through mothers' allowances. A similar trend was emerging in Nova Scotia, where the mothers' allowance was becoming the obvious dumping ground for relief cases – especially for unemployed youths who continued to live in the parental home.⁴⁴

Cash relief erased any remaining differences in standard of living between families on relief and those supported by a low-wage earner.⁴⁵ It also extinguished any remaining ideological demarcations between unemployment relief and the mothers' allowance (which was ostensibly 'a salary paid to the mother'⁴⁶ for her services to the nation). By merging mothers' allowances with general relief, the Depression removed those gender distinctions that favoured women – distinctions that had long been consciously embedded in family policy. As the Depression wore on, the glaring discrepancies in benefit levels between the mothers' allowance and direct relief created a popular backlash against welfare programs that privileged certain groups, such as widows. In no small way, this situation helped undermine the special status that maternalist welfare policies had by then achieved.

Whitton valiantly attempted to preserve older family case work norms, which insisted that material relief be granted not just on the basis of economic need but according to the character of the family and its potential to be ideologically and morally reformed. However, Whitton's ability to control the parameters of welfare policy was greatly inhibited by the levelling effects of unemployment. Not only men but also women and children were unable to find work, and this directly challenged one of the central tenets of mothers' allowance legislation – the need to preserve the work ethic. More disturbing, the growing tendency among widows on government assistance to include older 'unemployed' children within their family budget was extremely corrosive of the child protection aspects of mothers' allowance legislation. Whitton watched with growing apprehension as even professional social workers became more and more willing to blur the boundaries between unemployment relief and state payments for motherhood, by permitting single-parent families whose older children were unemployed to become beneficiaries of the mothers' allowance system. Faced with pressures from municipalities to take over the devastating burden of relief, and with the need to solve the growing problem of single men and women on relief, Manitoba welfare officials allowed older children on relief to remain at home with their families; in this way they were informally lifting the sanctions, introduced into moth-

174 Engendering the State

ers' allowance statutes, against idle children. Gertrude Childs, the head of the Mothers' Allowances Board of Manitoba's Department of Health and Public Welfare, explained how the overwhelming problem of unemployment was subtly changing how welfare entitlements for widows were defined:

While many applications have been received where the family could be self-supporting if the children of earning age could find employment, the Child Welfare Board has taken the attitude that the Act provides for bereaved and dependent children only where such children cannot be provided for from the resources of the family, and that therefore it should not be used as a relief against unemployment. Many families under allowance where the children have been contributing are in difficulties, due to the children having only part-time employment, and in a few cases it has been necessary to make an adjustment for loss of earnings.⁴⁷

Gertrude Childs was attempting to balance welfare theory with practice; Ernest Blois was less sanguine about Whitton's tenacious defence of traditional family reform practices. Indeed, as the Depression lingered on, social workers in Canada found themselves divided over a very basic question: Should the line be held against diluting mothers' allowances and child protection policies, or should unemployment relief become the determining principle in all family welfare policies? This was only partly a question of social work ideals;⁴⁸ mainly, it was a debate about the theory and practice of social work. As Blois noted, by 1932 there were two clearly defined camps: One group studiously maintained that mothers' allowances must protect children and establish 'Canadian standards of living' – a concern raised most often in the prairie provinces, with their large immigrant communities. The other group acknowledged that the widespread distribution of relief had radically altered the terms of debate within welfare policymaking, and recommended that provision for widows be placed under 'general relief.'⁴⁹

Blois himself belonged to the latter group, and on several occasions during the Depression he chided Whitton for her lack of knowledge of practical welfare administration, pointing out that however much one might wish to uphold the privileged status of mothers' allowances as part of long-term national goals, prevailing economic conditions were dictating otherwise. As he informed her in 1934, too many widows were claiming access to state benefits on the basis of economic depen-

Labour, Social Work, and Social Catholicism Debate 175

dency alone, and because they were widows with several children, they could not – according to the letter of the mothers' allowance statutes – be deemed 'unworthy.' If, as Blois argued, widows were entitled to assistance on strictly economic grounds, what differentiated them from other relief recipients – namely, unemployed married men – who were forced to accept much lower levels of family subsistence? 'It is said, and with considerable truth,' wrote Blois in 1932, 'that probably our widows drawing Mother's Allowance and Workman's Compensation are by far the best off people in the country. This hardly seems fair or likely to create the proper spirit.'⁵⁰

Blois was arguing that because relief had now become largely a problem affecting unemployed married men, the mothers' allowance was a discriminatory piece of welfare legislation. In the past, it had been believed that the stability of the family (and society) rested almost entirely on the spiritual and disciplinary guidance of the mother. But family policy now revolved almost exclusively around the problem of economic security and the pre-eminence of the male breadwinner. The 'moral economy' embedded in the administration of mothers' allowances was often invasive and coercive; even so, it established a set of distinctively maternalist state entitlements that recognized the difficult existence of 'abnormal' female-headed families. Depression-era welfare policies, however, had become totally preoccupied with the problem of the unemployed breadwinner, in that sense were seeking to resurrect the 'normal' family. The Canadian family was now conceived in strongly patriarchal terms; ideally, the father provided economic support for his dependants; but now he was also to usurp the spiritual and educational roles traditionally reserved for women.⁵¹ It is from this perspective that we can make sense of the ideological about-face that Blois was making when he castigated the system of mothers' allowances as a piece of 'class legislation of a decidedly bad type.' Mothers' allowances no longer sufficiently rehabilitated families because in practice it now functioned merely as a form of material relief; not only that, but they established higher standards of living for female-headed families than for 'normal,' male-headed families on relief. It was by this logic that Blois critically assessed mothers' allowances: in his view they discriminated against deserving men, and thus fostered, in his words, 'considerable unrest.'⁵²

As late as 1935, when it became palpably clear that there was no work available for children of mothers' allowance beneficiaries, Whitton adamantly maintained that both mothers' allowances and

176 Engendering the State

workmen's compensation must remain separate and distinct from 'emergency unemployment relief.'⁵³ Her protests against submerging mothers' allowances in general unemployment relief did not arise out of fears that family stability would be threatened. Rather, she feared that making mothers' allowances 'relief under another name' would obviate the need for investigation and thus establish such state provision as a legal right. As she argued, once one removed the 'proper guardianship' clauses from mothers' allowances, there was no longer a criterion by which to decide whether a mother was 'deserving' other than the fact that she was unemployed.⁵⁴ Thus, even while Whitton was defending the original conception of mother's allowances, she was obliged to concede that the practice, widespread among single women, of applying for an allowance as a form of 'direct relief' had already transformed welfare entitlements from a claim founded on motherhood to one defined exclusively by an individual's employment status.

It is indeed ironic that although Whitton desperately wished to shore up the investigative aspects of mothers' allowances during the 1930s, her equally strong commitment to upholding the work ethic by reducing all welfare benefits, together with her goal of cutting government expenditures, tended to dissolve the very boundaries she wished to preserve between mothers' allowances and general relief. Like Blois and other welfare policymakers of the 1930s, Whitton believed that the frontline of defence for the integrity of family life was first and foremost the protection of the livelihood of the male breadwinner. Whitton spent much of her time during the Depression ensuring that relief policies were correctly implemented according to her own world view. Because of her overarching concern for maintaining the principles of lesser eligibility in all welfare provision, she unwittingly contributed to the unravelling of the very principles that had long been the hallmark of Canada's various mothers' allowances systems.

Throughout the Depression, Whitton reinforced the practice – already followed in many provinces – of administering mothers' allowances as if they were another form of relief.⁵⁵ In several provinces, many widows – especially those with one child – were assisted through local relief. Indeed, Saskatchewan led the way in erasing in practice the lines that divided mothers' allowances from unemployment relief. Benefits were so inadequate that almost all beneficiaries of mothers' allowances were forced to accept either city relief or charity.⁵⁶ Similarly, in Ontario, in 1938 municipalities were instructed by the pro-

Labour, Social Work, and Social Catholicism Debate 177

vincial relief officer to distribute fuel to mothers' allowance cases, thus placing them in the category of accepting 'partial relief.'⁵⁷ Widows with one child were particularly vulnerable to this process of achieving welfare parity by reducing all welfare benefits to relief levels. In British Columbia, all 'one child' mothers' allowance cases were transformed into direct relief cases. As if to underscore the degree to which the system of mothers' allowances had been demoted, its administration was shifted from the Workmen's Compensation Board to the Department of Welfare. More significantly, the new Director of Public Welfare, Harry Cassidy, began to refer to mothers' pensions as 'mother's relief.'⁵⁸

Mothers' allowances were also a casualty of unemployment insurance, which created a distinctly two-tiered welfare system comprising contributory and non-contributory state benefits. The concept of maternalism vanished for good from Canadian welfare policy in 1940, when a national system of unemployment insurance was introduced, which amounted to formal acknowledgment that henceforth, state welfare benefits would be founded on the principle of waged labour. Moreover, advocates of unemployment insurance insisted from the start on a strict division between rights-based contributory insurance and needs-based relief. By doing so, they further dislodged mothers' allowances from their original privileged position in the welfare edifice. By the end of the Depression, welfare programs had been completely transformed. Widows were no longer accorded special treatment by virtue of their status as mothers of future citizens; rather, they were flung into the undifferentiated, stigmatized category of 'social assistance,'⁵⁹ which traditionally had been occupied by the residuum of the idle, incompetent, undeserving poor. Although many continued to expound the original principles that had animated maternalist state entitlements, it was clear by 1940 that the trends in social policy were toward eradicating the last vestiges of maternal citizenship. The constitutional discussions revolving around the publication of the Rowell-Sirois Report (1940) resulted in clear hierarchies being established between federally funded, contributory, self-help insurance schemes and provincially and municipally funded general assistance. This in effect gave legal ratification to what had previously been a set of loose administrative assumptions and thereby institutionalized the ideological segregation between contributory and non-contributory welfare programs.⁶⁰ In the wake of the 1940 report, many welfare officials, including J.H. Creighton in British Columbia, recommended

178 Engendering the State

either the total eradication of mothers' allowances or at the very least their dissolution into the clearly stigmatizing American-inspired formulation of Aid to Dependent Children.⁶¹ From that time on, widows and deserted and divorced women, along with unmarried mothers, found themselves classed as 'unemployables,' a concept for which the sole reference point was male work. Even former soldiers on War Veteran's Allowance were granted a more favourable position than women. Although veterans were paid according to need, their benefits were deemed rights-based simply because they were seen as legitimate citizens, not only because they had defended the Canadian nation-state during the First World War, but also (and more important) because they were able to demonstrate evidence of partial employability.⁶² The gendered bias of state welfare benefits had thus shifted away from women and reproduction toward men and the workplace. This ideological transformation would be accelerated by the concurrent debate over a national system of family allowances, initiated by the Independent Labour Party between 1926 and 1928.

The Failure of Family Allowances

In Quebec, Father Léon Lebel, a priest and teacher of philosophy at Immaculate Conception College in Montreal, had long recommended a system of family allowances as a measure that, by raising the standard of living for French-Canadian working-class and agricultural families, would help stem the flow of out-migration to the United States.⁶³ However, it was J.S. Woodsworth, the ILP member from Winnipeg, who first introduced the idea of family allowances in the House of Commons. In his speech of 14 December 1926, Woodsworth, like Lebel, conceived of family allowances as a redistributive class measure that would directly relieve poverty among working-class families. Woodsworth quoted from Paul Douglas, who the year before had published his landmark critique of the traditional wage structure in the United States, *Wages and the Family*, and who, like Woodsworth, used wage statistics to demonstrate the enormous gap in standards of living that existed between single workers and married breadwinners burdened with growing family responsibilities. Woodsworth was not the first to bring to public attention the growing problem of working-class poverty. In the latter half of the 1920s, the Montreal Council of Social Agencies carried out a series of surveys of working-class households and demonstrated that after years of strong economic growth, the wages

Labour, Social Work, and Social Catholicism Debate 179

even of skilled construction workers could not ensure a *'barely decent standard of living'* owing to seasonal interruptions in employment. Similar family budget studies were undertaken by the Catholic Guilds of Montreal, and by Miss Margaret Gould in Toronto; all of these confirmed that the wages of the father alone were rarely sufficient to meet family needs, even when the mother managed her household carefully.⁶⁴

The leading champions of family allowances in the United States and Britain, Paul Douglas and Eleanor Rathbone, had offered systematic critiques of the theory of the living wage, pointing to the gap between the husband's wage and the needs of large families. In contrast, Canadian commentators placed their campaign for family allowances firmly within the debate over the living wage and conceived of them as a government measure for shoring up, rather than supplanting, the male wage earner's economic function as the breadwinning head of the family. For example, social workers in Montreal lobbied for governments to contribute to the male *'family wage,'* believing that this would help women and children escape being forced into the workplace by poverty and the inadequacy of the male pay packet.⁶⁵ In the same vein, Georges Pelletier argued that the payment of a *'sur-salaire'* for *'des chefs de famille'* by means of family allowances was a corollary for labour's arguments for a family wage, in that it would keep women from working outside the home. Pelletier, writing from a Catholic perspective on the family, believed that returning women and children to their natural domain, the home, would help secure the rights of the male wage earner by protecting his role as the exclusive and independent breadwinner.⁶⁶ These advocates of family allowances believed that by thus providing large working-class families with economic security, both traditional gender relations and the integrity of family life would be preserved.

The foremost exponent of family allowances in Britain, the feminist Eleanor Rathbone, had urged a government program of family wage supplements as a means of addressing the problem of women's economic independence. In the United States, Paul Douglas had recommended that these allowances be paid to the mother, even though his goal was less overtly feminist than that of Rathbone. In Canada, the campaign for family allowances was decidedly antifeminist in its overtones, and was entirely unrelated to the problem of acknowledging women's unpaid work in the home. Lebel and Woodsworth championed this novel approach to family policy with a view to helping

180 Engendering the State

organized labour achieve its goal of a 'living wage' for the male breadwinner and to thereby fulfil its ideal of worker independence, which was founded on the notion of family self-sufficiency. It is not insignificant that Woodsworth turned to the idea of family allowances only after the 1925 parliamentary committee to consider a 'minimum living wage' for male workers had failed. As Woodsworth explained to the House of Commons the following year, he believed 'that all workers, including common labourers, shall be entitled to a wage ample to enable them with thrift to maintain themselves and families in decency and comfort, and to make reasonable provision for old age.'⁶⁷ Far from being a feminist measure, Woodsworth's recommendation for family allowances was conceived as an attack on single female workers, who, protected by the existing minimum wage legislation, seemingly benefited at the expense of married men with family responsibilities who, without a wage floor, were compelled to eke out a living on wages barely higher than those of women without 'the responsibility of the family.'⁶⁸ In many respects the idea of family allowances was a radical measure insofar as it was intended to redistribute income from single to married workers; and from a socialist perspective it often was used to criticize the prevailing profit motive in industry.⁶⁹ However, in Canada family allowances carried conservative implications for gender relations, for they were consciously introduced by the ILP as a system of family security. Their intent was thus to reinforce the breadwinner ideal, the concept of a family wage, and the rights of labour to organize.

Although the idea of family or children's allowances had been incorporated into the Canadian Patriotic Fund's assistance policies during the First World War, it was still a novel idea in Canada during the 1920s. After the war, the more radical concept of family allowances had been diluted and diverted into provincial movements for mothers' allowances or pensions. Woodsworth's campaign between 1926 and 1928 was not the result of a popular movement within social work, or among feminists, or even within organized labour; it arose Athena-like, dictated largely by events taking place within the British ILP. There, in 1924, Eleanor Rathbone had published *The Disinherited Family*, in which she marshalled a massive amount of compelling statistical evidence on national income, wages, and population to demonstrate persuasively that the redistribution of national income by means of family allowances would address a very real and widespread social problem. Although Rathbone was concerned mainly about women's