

PAST JUDGEMENT: SOCIAL POLICY IN NEW ZEALAND HISTORY
Edited by BRONWYN DALLEY and MARGARET TENNANT
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Reviewing a book on the history of social policy in New Zealand in the midst of an election campaign inevitably focuses the mind on its value to the present and the future. Editors Bronwyn Dalley and Margaret Tennant set out to create that link by highlighting the ways in which historical perspectives can and should infuse contemporary policy debates with understandings that are more subtle, complex and multidimensional than usual.

At first glance, the 14 contributions to *Past Judgement: Social Policy in New Zealand History* canvass a random mixture of specific policies and general themes, written by academics, officials and practitioners. Their varied typologies, methodologies and disciplines turn out to be surprisingly complementary and are woven together in an introductory essay on "History and Social Policy" by Margaret Tennant. This provides a thought-provoking framework for appreciating the relevance of history to contemporary policy, the relationship between high policy and operational practice, and the place of the human dynamic in translating this to lived experiences.

Several themes emerge strongly and clearly from the collection.

First, understanding social policy means looking beyond its formal manifestation and stated intentions in statutes, policy manuals and political pronouncements to see what happens at operational levels and where policy intersects with people's lives. Reflecting on the history of old-age pensions ("Beyond the Statute: Administration of Old-age Pensions to 1938"), Gaynor Whyte stresses:

Eligibility rules, pension rates and other legislative criteria are just one element in the life of income maintenance schemes. The social and economic environment in which they are administered, negotiated and delivered also influences outcomes. (p.139)

Too often, retrospective critiques of policy agendas, philosophies and practices assume a high ground for contemporary understandings that is unwarranted. As a result, those critiques are generally oversimplified. They fail to acknowledge the

relevance of context and ignore the creativity with which practitioners can circumvent or amplify aspects of social policy in practice. Equally, such critics forget that present approaches are themselves transitory and liable to face similarly harsh assessments by future commentators.

Bronwyn Dalley's discussion of child abuse ("Deep and Dark Secrets: Governments' Responses to Child Abuse") argues that the phenomenon of child abuse, and related public debates and case work files, are products "of their times" that reflect prevailing concepts of the family, gender roles and dysfunction. Bronwyn Labrum ("Negotiating an Increasing Range of Functions: Families and the Welfare State") challenges contemporary analysts more directly in her essay on families:

Too often there is a considerable gap between what policy-makers in the past thought they were doing and how others in the present have interpreted their actions. It is tempting to judge past actions by current standards, which leads to simplistic, functionalist accounts that cannot explain the historical development and implementation of social policies and their effects on those they targeted. (p.157)

A second theme depicts periodisation as a blunt instrument that overstates the disjuncture between one era and the next, and simplistically delineates one from another. This encourages a one-dimensional, ahistorical and linear approach that overlooks how continuities and legacies span different periods. In reality, the policy frameworks, bureaucracies, institutional practices and voluntary organisations created in one era tend to survive long beyond their original rationale and are adapted, often uncomfortably, to serve new paradigms.

Warwick Brunton ("Out of the Shadows: Some Historical Underpinnings of Mental Health Policy") shows how policy swings have historically influenced policies for mental health, under varying names. Yet the legacy of colonial policy and philosophy endured in government and the professions, as well as in organisational structures, bureaucratic boundaries and even buildings.

Concepts born of one era also become captives of very different philosophical agendas, as with the neoliberal agenda for deinstitutionalisation and community care in mental health policy. The meaning of some concepts shifts more radically than others. In discussing social security entitlements, Margaret McClure ("A Badge of Poverty or a Symbol of Citizenship? Needs, Rights and Social Security, 1935–2000") argues that "need" is a cultural construction that reflects value judgements of the time, which make notions of social rights especially vulnerable:

An historical perspective on social security suggests that social rights are not irrevocable, and can be overturned more easily than political or civil rights. No pattern of social security remains inevitable, for the social and political agendas of each era have produced different emphases. (p.154)

Shifting perceptions of need are explored at a more conceptual level by Michael Belgrave (“Needs and the State: Evolving Social Policy in New Zealand History”). While the term “need” remained constant, its meaning was periodically transformed. “Need” looked different through the lens of the morality state, race protection state, family welfare state, rights-based welfare state and targeted consumer welfare state. At the same time, Belgrave observes there is a residue from one era to the next. Similar observations apply to the ubiquitous “society and community” that provides the reference point for many a policy platform or critique.

Margaret Tennant’s second essay (“Mixed Economy or Moving Frontier? Welfare, the Voluntary Sector and Government”) reinforces that point: when the role of the state vis-à-vis the voluntary sector is renegotiated in response to changes in the economy, social structure and dominant ideology, it builds on existing foundations. Tennant’s historical story of tensions, mutual dependence and a division of labour between the volunteer sector and state agencies resonates with contemporary accounts of the commercialised relationship between the state and voluntary sector. The history of Plunket, seen through Lynda Bryder’s eyes (“‘Plunket’s Secret Army’: The Royal New Zealand Plunket Society and the State”), reinforces Tennant’s argument that voluntary agencies are creatures of their times, with the associated strengths and frailties. Some (IHC for example) were able to adapt and assume a more professionalised and commercial persona in the neoliberal environment; Plunket remained largely captive to its conservative gendered image and was less able to stave off competition from voluntary and for-profit agencies that were seen as more appropriate to the times.

Similar tensions are apparent in Peter Lineham’s survey of the uneasy relationship between the state and Christian churches, and the way that approaches to philosophy, social justice, morality, benevolence, charity and doctrine pulled church leaders and their congregations in different directions. Like Plunket, they struggled to adapt effectively to changing times. Attempts at ecumenism during the 1960s and 1970s rarely permeated the local congregations, who remained loyal to specific denominations. Those same denominations struggled for relevance as mass membership declined and competition from evangelicals grew. The attempt to reassert a prophetic role with the cross-denominational Hiko of Hope in 1998 was still underpinned by those enduring tensions.

A third theme stresses the human dimension, in a very different way from the “agency theory” of neoliberalism. Social realities at any particular time are shaped by diverse players, from the policy makers to senior bureaucrats, welfare officers and social workers, community volunteers and the people who are the targets of those policies. In the social policy arena, where discretion and subjectivity play such a central role, there is ample room for individual interpretations and human ingenuity. Gaynor Whyte in her essay on pensions emphasises that, “Policy outcome is shaped by a complex interaction of the measure, its administrators, recipients and the environment” (p.139). This process is chronicled in Derek Dow’s account of “Māori and Health Research”, as research by Māori medical practitioners, government officers, and politicians, alongside that of non-Māori, both reflected and influenced changing times.

The importance of agency, the way that continuities underpin transition, and the subtleties of resistance comes through most clearly in the contributions from Aroha Harris and Danny Keenan on Māori. Aroha Harris (“Māori and ‘the Māori Affairs’”) illustrates the evolving roles of Māori committees and the Māori Women’s Welfare League in servicing family, social and cultural needs as their communities underwent massive transformations. Their local presence meant there was space for diversity and creativity in mediating a relationship with the Department of Māori Affairs that was both strained and mutually beneficial:

Servitude was not an unavoidable consequence of collaboration. Even the most co-operative relationships were tempered with resistance where required. (p.203)

This connects well with Danny Keenan’s (“The Treaty is Always Speaking? Government Reporting on Māori Aspirations and Treaty Meanings”) reflection on the Treaty of Waitangi and Māori ambivalence towards Labour government initiatives in the late 1980s to abolish the Department of Māori Affairs and initiate devolution through the Runanga Iwi Act. Keenan’s story sums up many of the book’s themes. The Treaty is an enduring, foundational document, yet its profile in policy is episodic, its meaning mercurial, and its status a matter of political expediency. History infuses contemporary policy and practice, but perceptions of that history are limited and simplistic. There is a chasm between policy rhetoric, Māori expectations and actual outcomes. “Successfully” forcing issues onto the policy stage prompts an ebb and flow of concessions, cooperation and subordination on the part of governments, which in turn gives rise to new challenges, demands and policy responses.

There is certainly plenty in this book to stimulate thought and debate, especially for social policy makers, practitioners and students. As always with edited collections, the quality of contributions is uneven. Some essays read like summaries of a doctoral thesis. There is also a tendency to overstate the case. For example, the failure of the churches to sustain the Hikoī of Hope belies the implied optimism at the end of Lineham's essay. Some essays tend to overcompensate and gloss over the negatives. As someone who was involved with the Auckland Committee on Racism and Discrimination exposés of abuses in New Zealand's social welfare homes and psychiatric hospitals, I was surprised to see no discussion of the shifting conceptions of the role of the state in response to those disclosures and their recent resurrection.

The book also provides few direct insights for those who are interested in the political economy of social policy, and how the state's role changes in relation to ideological and economic imperatives. Most of the authors recognise the importance of shifts in economic conditions, yet it is really only Belgrave who acknowledges (but still does not explore) the deeper contradictions between a rights-based approach and the fiscal crisis facing the state in the lead-up to neoliberalism. This reader was left wanting more.

The high point was Margaret Tennant's opening essay, which provoked me to reflect on how history has shaped the role and relationships of the state, the government of the day, voluntary agencies and the for-profit private sector today. In defence of the authors, this does claim to be a book about the history of social policy. Nevertheless, the lack of engagement with contemporary history is disappointing, especially the advent and dysfunctions of neoliberalism, and what history might tell us about new ways forward. At the very least, each essay could have concluded by offering some reflections on these links, and done this more substantially and self-consciously.

By the end of the book, the synthesis that began with such promise in Tennant's introduction is lost in the subject and thematic studies. The essays needed to be drawn together in a conclusion, rather than relying on the concluding interview with Merv Hancock ("A Practitioner's Perspective on Change"), although as a chapter, it is interesting and helpful. Hancock reinforces warnings about oversimplification and the need to recognise diversity and complexity. He also highlights the critical role of agency in ways that should inspire individuals who work in social policy to believe that they can make a difference to the lives of others and to the directions of policy, even in an unsympathetic environment. But this interview was not a substitute for a conclusion that linked the historical insights to the contemporary debates as we seek to understand the underlying dynamics of neoliberal social policy, the implications of

extending or retreating from that (as various political parties currently propose), and the potential new pathways we might follow. Instead, readers are left with the tantalising final paragraph in the interview with Merv Hancock on the prospects for new social formations post-neoliberalism:

At the moment we may be on the verge of a change. Globalisation is accelerating but it does seem to me the nature of it may be yielding new forms of welfare that we hadn't expected ... It seems to me that re-emergence of an emphasis on a neo-liberal approach to the state is under challenge right now, not only in New Zealand but all around the western world. What I suspect it means is that there's going to be a multiplicity of small voluntary organizations which are likely to emerge. Some of them will come from the traditional women's organizations, some from religious bodies, but many will spring up as new social formations in the community ... One of the curious paradoxes we will see in the next period is the confident status of the profit-based welfare organisation, small in scale, that will challenge the traditional voluntary bodies. (p.238)