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## **Women, Poverty Policy, and the Production of Neoliberal Politics in Ontario, Canada**

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*This article contributes to our understanding of the production of neoliberal policies and political culture by offering an anthropological analysis of women, poverty policy, and Third Way politics in Ontario, Canada. After tracing the history of neoliberal politics globally and in Ontario, I consider two examples of women's attempts to shape poverty policy drawn from ethnographic research in the legislature. The first centers on a social assistance recipient who was unexpectedly thrust into the media spotlight, thus given a chance to speak publicly about Ontario's welfare policies. The second focuses on a consciously planned challenge to policy by a coalition of feminist researchers and front-line workers. These cases illuminate the challenges facing feminists who seek to shape Third Way government policy, as discussion of gender and socioeconomic inequality is actively avoided by politicians, and women's experiences of poverty and demands for action are ignored, obfuscated or re-packaged.*

**KEYWORDS** *women, poverty, policy, neoliberalism, feminism, Ontario, Canada, Third Way, political culture, domestic violence, and welfare*

### INTRODUCTION

There is a growing and important body of interdisciplinary feminist scholarship on governments and neoliberal policy at the municipal (local),

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provincial, and national levels (see, for example, Babb 2001; Bakker 1994; Bashevkin 2002, 2006; Bezanson 2006a, 2006b; Bezanson and Luxton 2006; Brodie 1996; Cohen 1997; MacDonald 1999; Porter 2003; Winkler 2002). This article contributes to our understanding of the production of neoliberal policies and political culture by offering an anthropological analysis of women, poverty policy, and Third Way politics in Ontario, Canada. In other words, the emphasis here is on the politics of the production and contestation of policy, rather than on a detailed analysis of the policy itself.

I use the term production to foster analysis of politics and policy as conceptualized, constructed, disseminated, challenged, and defended by real social actors. I seek to capture the active labor and multi-levelled factors that shape government projects in context, and emphasize the ideological and material work that shapes policy. Approaching government action in this way allows us to more fully understand the complexities of contemporary political projects, and helps us develop rich feminist analyses of the relationships among women, politics, and policy as an important element of effecting change.

I focus on how one government “wrote out” women’s poverty as part of producing their Third Way approach (e.g. Giddens 1998). This process most often involved avoidance or obfuscation, although it also involved the strategic re-telling of women’s experiences to make them fit with Third Way emphases.

I use two cases to examine women’s efforts to influence the social assistance and domestic violence policies of a Third Way government in Ontario, a wealthy province that is home to more than one-third of the national population, and to expose the production of government in action. First I examine the case of Deb Peliti, a social assistance recipient who was unexpectedly thrust into the media spotlight for performing a good Samaritan act, and, who, as a result, was given voice and a location from which to speak publicly about Ontario’s welfare policies. I then look at an example of a consciously planned challenge to government policy and neoliberal political culture by a coalition of feminist researchers and front-line workers, through the release of the report *Walking on Eggshells: Abused Women’s Experiences of Ontario’s Welfare System* (Mosher et al. 2004).

In confronting inadequate social policies and the political terrain on which the policies exist, these women exposed the difficulties of challenging both neoliberal policy and political culture. Although the current Liberal government in Ontario engages in rhetoric about the value of public services, its Third Way approach ensures that neoliberal policy approaches prevail, although in camouflaged and modified forms. In this way, neoliberalism is deepened and normalized, and discussion of gender and socioeconomic inequality is largely avoided by government politicians. The category of women is obfuscated and disaggregated, both discursively and materially within neoliberal political culture and restructuring. Even when

women's poverty is temporarily forced into the spotlight, the government communications team actively stage-manages the scene and uses a conciliatory, defusing tone in order to deflect media focus from critiques of government policy and approaches and to emphasize strategic narratives that reaffirm Third Way priorities.

Social actors in the Ontario government, including women in cabinet and various staff positions, are reproducing broader neoliberal policy patterns and are reinforcing a political culture that promotes de-gendered, class-less neoliberal subjects, while actively avoiding consideration of the systemic causes of poverty and collective solutions that challenge the neoliberal policy paradigm. Government projects are presented as pragmatic and balanced but ultimately they perpetuate neoliberal policies which negatively impact many women and present serious intellectual and political challenges for feminists.

## METHODOLOGY

For this analysis, I draw data from my 16 month ethnography conducted at Queen's Park, the provincial legislature of Ontario. My research base inside Queen's Park, was the New Democratic Party (NDP) caucus. This social democratic party is the small third party in provincial politics, the other two parties being the Liberal Party, which forms a majority government, and the Progressive Conservative Party, the official opposition party. My location with the NDP caucus gave me insider status and enhanced my ability to engage in participant-observation in/of the range of experiences, relationships, and types of work constituting everyday life in the legislature. I chose to immerse myself in the work of the legislature and conduct naturalistic observation as an important method of data collection.

Between January 2004 and May 2005, I participated in the daily machinations of the legislature and the broad range of activities therein including formal parliamentary proceedings such as question period, media events, social gatherings, and lobbying receptions. I also collected the reflections of politicians and political staff through participant-observation and formal, semi-structured interviews. The partisan staff members worked in a range of positions as executive, legislative, and general assistants, researchers, policy advisors, press secretaries and communications directors, legislative affairs directors, and senior strategists. They were engaged in political labor that promulgated and defended government policy, and thus they occupied a variety of positions on what I call the "spin assembly line," an analogy that recognizes intellectual and political work as part of the active, material production of government. I also observed the efforts of members of representative professional and community organizations, as well as everyday people, who came to the legislature to try and shape

government policy and public knowledge both about policy itself, and its effects on people's lives.

During my fieldwork, I developed personal relationships with politicians and political workers across the three parties. I draw on the insights gained from these contacts, as well as from interviews and naturalistic observation, but I have been careful not to exploit the private stories of individuals or reveal information that would specifically identify informants when it might have an impact on their careers.

These research processes were part of the analysis of the public presentation and marketing of government, as well as of media coverage, policy pursuits, and budgetary allocations. By adopting an ethnographic approach to data collection, I was able to identify two broad but interrelated arenas of activity. One was the official, formal presentation of government as it was actually produced and disseminated. This is the absolutely crucial, public, intentional face of the government in Ontario. The second arena of activity involves the private, informal, behind the scenes maneuvering and strategizing that occurs inside the legislature. By collecting data from both arenas, the social actors involved in policy production and dissemination are illuminated and a broader and deeper understanding of the gendered politics of policy in Ontario is possible.

### THE NEOLIBERAL PRESENT

In order to situate the two Ontario cases, it is necessary to theorize neoliberalism, consider the ways governments have conceptualized and implemented neoliberal policies internationally, and highlight the particular history of neoliberal government policy in Ontario. This contextualization is important for seeing the connections between the local specificities of Ontario and international neoliberal policies, and for better understanding the historical trajectory of neoliberal policies and policy-makers globally.

Neoliberalism cannot be seen solely as an economic agenda or simply as an ideology, but rather must be understood as a multi-faceted project with real institutional and economic restructuring, coupled with reinforcing cultural and ideological processes. Neoliberalism must be theorized as an "economic, political and moral doctrine that posits the individual as the fundamental basis of society" (Gill 2000, 3). In this context, there is a deliberate push for an emphasis on individualism, and on consumption as a source of identity and a vehicle for social participation. A changed understanding of the relationship between government and citizens is promoted as neoliberals emphasize people's identities as tax-payers or service users.

Neoliberalism translates into a movement away from a social state and redistributive policies towards government that focuses less on social programs used by women and men, and more on optimizing conditions for

market activity and capital accumulation (Harvey 2006). The applications of neoliberalism across time and space do vary, but are underscored by a prioritization of market ideas and practices. As Fourcade-Gourinchas and Babb (2002, 534) put it, “local institutional conditions and dynamics shaped perceptions of the necessity and purposes of economic liberalization, and the channels through which neoliberal ideas could diffuse and influence policy.” Thus a consideration of broader, global characteristics, the local specificities, and the connections between these levels is important.

The basic roots of neoliberalism originate with classical liberal economic theory; however, economists in Germany and the United States refined and expanded this approach in the middle of the 20th century (Lemke 2001; George 1999). Gledhill (2004, 340) argues that the prefix “neo” is used because it is a distinct, changed form of liberalism, an “elision of the distinction between a market economy and a market society, to the point where the latter seems to engulf life itself... It is the ideology of the period in which capitalism deepened (and is deepening) to embrace the production of social life itself, seeking to commoditize the most intimate of human relations and the production of identity and personhood.”

The early shifts towards neoliberal government policy and political culture were interwoven with the economic conditions in the 1970s. Increased oil prices resulting from the Arab oil embargo, the Iranian Revolution and the establishment of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), and the increased movement of manufacturing plants to countries with cheaper labor pools by transnational corporations contributed to “stagflation,” a combination of economic recession and high inflation, in many industrialized countries including Canada (Little 1998; McBride and Shields 1997). The post-war economic prosperity and expansion which had been the foundation for an active, redistributive, regulatory state and government was damaged and neoliberals saw it as a fertile political economic climate within which to promote their approach.

Peck and Tickell (2002) and Harvey (2006) highlight the overthrow of the democratically-elected socialist Allende government in Chile in 1973 as the first real world “test run” for neoliberal ideas. Chicago-trained and supported Chileans in the Pinochet government used the military coup as an opportunity to try neoliberal restructuring in a national setting. Then, in 1976, the Labour government in Britain sought an economic bailout from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and accepted the structural adjustment-like conditions which accompanied the money. Peck and Tickell (2002, 388) argue that the Chilean experiment turned the handle, but the British move opened the door to neoliberalism’s entrance onto the global political stage because blame for “macro-economic crisis conditions... was unambiguously laid at the door of Keynesian financial regulation, unions, corporatist planning, state ownership and overregulated labor markets” and not on any weaknesses of capitalist economics.

The Thatcher, Reagan, and Mulroney governments in the United Kingdom, United States, and Canada are recognized as the neoliberal seizure of government in the North during the 1980s (e.g. Cohen 1997; McBride and Shields 1997; Peck and Tickell 2002). Cohen (1997, 99) writes, “The shift...which leads people to begin to abandon their support of the public sector required both the idea that the public sector could no longer be adequately supported collectively through taxes, and the erection of an apparatus internationally which assured that this thinking would appear logical. These two developments are inseparable.” Put simply, the goal of neoliberal proponents was and is to foster the cultural and discursive climate within which political and economic institutions can be changed and different sorts of neoliberal policy directions can be easily pursued.

Social actors in government draw from a range of neoliberal policy options as part of translating the theoretical approach into public policy. These include privatization through direct asset sales; privatization of services through contracting-out and outsourcing to the for-profit sector; delisting of services previously within the public umbrella; user fees of various sorts; public-private partnership arrangements for capital, operations and/or the financing of institutions, programs or infrastructure; income trusts; and promotion and celebration of volunteerism, charity, or fundraising as a substitution for public investment.

The neoliberal ideological project includes these policies, and reinforces the political culture that emphasizes and promotes individualism, individual responsibility, and choice, without any accompanying discussion about existing inequities in power and economic status or between genders, and how these influence the ability of people to make choices in their lives. Private sector priorities are applied to government, and the public sector is subject to the same evaluative criteria as a for-profit institution, rather than to the needs of the collective, the public good, or quality of life assessments. Neoliberal proponents in the public and private sectors actively promote the prioritization of one’s identity as service user, consumer or tax-payer instead of as citizen, community member, or woman.

Some political parties and governments pursue a doctrinaire, radical form of neoliberal restructuring while others seek to merge neoliberal approaches with certain social democratic strategies. The latter is known as the Third Way approach and is particularly associated with the governments of Tony Blair in the United Kingdom, Bill Clinton in the United States, and Jean Chrétien in Canada (Bashevkin 2002).

Giddens (1998) is now a pivotal Third Way scholar-proponent, and he posits that a substantial, new agenda is under way which seeks to abandon central economic planning and an unregulated free market, instead focusing on merging “sound” public financial management with concerns of social justice and social inclusion. Many scholars dismiss the approach as neoliberalism in disguise and challenge the rhetoric, assumptions, policies,

and impacts (e.g. Bashevkin 2002; Bastow and Martin 2003; Coates 2003; Fielding 2003; Todd, Ware, and Taylor 2002; Savage and Atkinson 2001). Peck and Tickell (2002) and Gledhill (2001) argue that Third Way approaches are characterized by a rhetorical promotion of balancing social and economic interests, while the government actively avoids debate or action on economic regulation, inequality, and corporate power. This ultimately reaffirms neoliberal priorities and approaches; gives primacy to policies that will benefit corporate interests and further the optimal conditions for profit-seekers; and avoids redistributive measures to counter the poverty caused by the free market, particularly among women.

It is telling, then, that the Liberal government in Ontario consciously and deliberately connected its agenda to the Blair government in the United Kingdom by consulting and hiring Blair government advisors, and by enlisting language and policy avenues used in the United Kingdom. This linkage occurred after eight years of more aggressive, explicit neoliberal restructuring by a Conservative government in Ontario.

### NEOLIBERAL POLICY IN ONTARIO

Ontario has had its own particular political, economic, and cultural history within the broader neoliberal terrain. It needs to be understood as a province with internal regional, ethnic, and economic heterogeneity but also as deliberately constructed political jurisdiction and entity within Canada and the world. Constitutional division of government jurisdiction in Canada affords provincial governments significant responsibility for their own revenue generation and collection, and the funding and delivery of health care, elementary, secondary, and post-secondary education, social services, environmental protections, children's services, and housing, among others.

Like many industrialized, capitalist countries, Canada headed into a recession in the early 1990s. Unemployment was high and the industrial and manufacturing sectors were hurt by continental integration and free trade. High rates of welfare use resulting from a lack of jobs in the province and a backlash to some of the anti-racist, pro-equity initiatives implemented in the early 1990s by the provincial social democratic government (the New Democratic Party) culminated in a political climate where hostility towards the poor and minorities, as well as to government itself, was widespread (Noel 1997).

In 1995, the vehemently right-wing Conservative party won the first of two consecutive majority governments. During the election campaign, the Ontario Conservatives, led by populist neoliberal Mike Harris, blamed the welfare state, government regulation, and public spending for unemployment that had actually resulted from increased neoliberal free trade and a transnational capitalist recession. In doing so, the party succeeded in using

the negative economic and emotional terrain created in large part by neoliberal national and international trade policies to successfully present neoliberal provincial policies as a solution. People who were forced into unemployment and thus became dependent on social supports were used by the Conservatives as a contrast to “hard-working tax-payers,” as the political focus shifted to an unabashed emphasis on the individual, tax cuts, and claims that the government needed to be substantially reduced in size (Cohen 2001; Ontario Progressive Conservative Party 1995). Indeed, Clarke (2001) traces a very similar process in Thatcher’s United Kingdom in the 1980s, with the citizen identity being split into tax-payer, consumer, and scrounger.

In Ontario, the Conservatives simultaneously brought the neoliberal agenda into the centre of Ontario’s political culture, and deliberately fostered a more widespread acceptance of neoliberal premises. They were aggressive and unapologetic as they began their substantial restructuring of government. Long-serving Conservative MPPs openly describe the first two years of government as a time for across the board cuts. The government immediately set about implementing its agenda: employment equity was eliminated; social assistance rates were cut by 21.6 percent, then frozen; municipal grants were cut by 35 percent; the province went from building 6,000 units of affordable housing per year to zero; women’s shelters and second stage housing and counselling faced substantial budgetary cutbacks (McLellan 2001; Noel 1997; Crone 1995, A10; Toughill 1995, A1). The Conservative government also froze Ontario Disability Support Payments and the minimum wage. Later in the mandate, one of the Community and Social Services Ministers, John Baird, toyed with the idea of mandatory drug testing for welfare recipients, complete with a photo-op holding syringes and suggesting that welfare recipients would no longer be allowed to shoot their cheques “up their arms” (Blackwell 2001, A1). Vilification of the poor was actively pursued by government actors and it took on a gendered shape through the targeting of single mothers on welfare in particular (Little 1998, Little and Hillyard 2001; Mayson 1999).

The Conservatives’ significant reductions in spending in certain areas, coupled with asset sales, including the sale of a major highway and partial sale of the hydro transmission lines, led to multiple balanced budgets, which the government, in keeping with neoliberal ideology, held up as indication of its success (e.g. Ontario Progressive Conservative Party 1999, 2003). The Conservatives tapped into existing feelings on the part of some people that the public sector was “wasteful” and explicitly trumpeted privatization through rhetoric such as “history has shown that the private sector can use such assets more efficiently and provide better service to the public” (Ontario Progressive Conservative Party 1995,17). The Conservatives also took credit for any jobs that were created in Ontario, and rarely specified that these were most often temporary, minimum wage, contract, or part-time work.

There was substantial resistance to these neoliberal pursuits among large segments of the provincial population, and some of the largest political demonstrations in Ontario's history occurred, including a major public sector strike, the largest teachers' strike in the history of Ontario, and the 1995–1996 “Days of Action” which took place in Toronto, London, Hamilton, and other cities to oppose the cutbacks to public services (Kerr 2006; Turk 1997). The provincial minimum wage, and welfare and disability support payments remained frozen during the entire Conservative tenure and women's and anti-poverty activists continued to criticize the government for its damaging policies.

Overall, the post-1995 Conservatives are remembered for a combination of tax cuts, spending cuts, deregulation, and privatization (Cohen 2001; Kozolanka 2007; Ralph, Régimbald, and St-Amand 1997). Feminists have created a significant body of literature on the detrimental effects of the Conservative's neoliberal agenda on women, and analyse the deeply gendered impacts of these policies and this phase in Ontario's history (see, for example, Bashevkin 2002; Bezanson 2006a, 2006b; Little and Hillyard 2001, Mayson 1999; Vosko 2006). Yet the Conservatives firmly entrenched neoliberal priorities and evaluative criteria into Ontario's mainstream political culture, and, by the end of their regime, central neoliberal political ideals had been accepted and normalized.

Heading into the 2003 provincial election, the Ontario Liberals, led by Dalton McGuinty, opted for a professional, slick campaign under the broad banner of “Choose Change.” For the Liberals, the 2003 election was about presenting an alternative to the Conservatives' ideology, language, and policy, but an alternative that was simultaneously comfortable to Liberals and appealing to enough voters within the remade Ontario to garner a majority government. The Liberal leadership and campaign directors reflected strategically on the new complex reality of the political cultural terrain in Ontario and developed a platform, image, and approach they felt would work. In the same way New Labour had come to power after a radical national neoliberal project under Thatcher's Conservatives, the Liberals sought to form government within a jurisdiction that had already experienced an explicit form of neoliberal restructuring. It is not surprising, then, that they sought advice and direction from British Third Wayers directly.

As part of creating a Third Way chimera, the Liberals touted the importance of re-investing in social programs, particularly health and education, while merging this with an emphasis on productivity, economic growth, and development (Ontario Liberal Party 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2003d, 2003e). In addition, the Liberals' campaign often referred rhetorically to community and communities, and to the need to care for seniors, children, the vulnerable, future generations, our neighbours, and our environment. The party also incorporated language emphasizing

transparency, accountability, value for money, and evaluative mechanisms characteristic of neoliberal new public policy managerial approaches. The Liberals wanted to be seen as sound managers, but with an interest in public services. The 2003 election was framed by the Liberals as tax cuts versus public services with the Liberals promoting the latter, but 'responsibly.' The overall campaign program, put in the most basic terms, seemed nice, and that was an integral goal.

In October 2003, the approach proved successful and the Liberals formed a large majority government garnering 46.5 percent of the popular vote, with 56.9 percent of eligible voters casting a ballot (Elections Ontario 2007). On election night, the Liberals had won 72 seats, the Conservatives 24, and the social-democratic NDP 7.

The Third Way approach of the Liberals produced during the election campaign continued after they formed government. As noted, this approach is characterized by a rhetorical assertion about transcending both traditional left and neoliberal approaches, and instead constructing an adaptive, pragmatic, balanced, non-ideological program. However, when we examine how the Liberals' approaches to poverty and domestic violence affected women, and how government actors responded to women's attempts to shape policy, critiques of Third Way agendas as strategic, linguistic, and policy *mélanges* masking damaging neoliberal projects are strengthened and bolstered.

Indeed, much can be taken from both the policy and political communications of the Liberal government in Ontario to more thoroughly understand the insidious form of neoliberalism that is produced under the Third Way rubric. Liberal, individualistic ideas and expressions of diversity comfortably co-existed and individual achievements were celebrated. The Health Minister was openly gay, the first Speaker of the House was black, a few women were seated around the cabinet table, yet the complexity of race, gender, and class politics was actively avoided. There is substantial ethnographic evidence to expose the many contradictions and obfuscations of Liberal neoliberalism (Coulter 2007), including the way even Liberal women's internal efforts to shape government policy are strategically managed by largely, but not exclusively, male dominated government power centers.

One example of this was evident when Deb Matthews, a Member of Provincial Parliament (MPP) and the Ontario Liberal Party President, was assigned the task of consulting with anti-poverty advocates, assessing the state of provincial welfare policy and developing policy recommendations. As Fielding (2003) notes, the enlistment of blue ribbon, expert panels or government representatives leading consultation rounds is common, especially among Third Way proponents, and constructs the appearance of dialogue, while postponing the need for action. It is also worth noting that Matthews was chosen to lead this initiative, in part, because she articulates

concern for the poor and is widely regarded as a nice woman. The dissemination of an appearance of niceness, irrespective of what they were or were not actually doing was a key part of the Liberals' Third Way approach.

The Matthews report was tabled in December of 2004 and anti-poverty advocates identified strengths and inadequacies in its proposals. As time passed, anti-poverty groups became particularly concerned by the failure of the Liberal government to implement even the modest changes Matthews suggested (e.g. Income Security Advocacy Centre 2005). Their critique reveals an awareness of the disconnect between government rhetoric and action among anti-poverty advocates, and their substantial familiarity with the side-lining and marginalization of poverty issues through various means, including polite receipt of reports, even government-sanctioned ones, followed by little policy change, a pattern central to my argument in this article.

In addition to the marginalization of policy critiques as a method of Third Way management, we also can identify other strategies for re-writing or erasing women's experiences of poverty or their demands for action. To elucidate this process further, I now turn to the cases of Deb Peliti and the *Walking on Eggshells* report.

#### A WOMAN IN POVERTY AND IN THE MEDIA SPOTLIGHT

One winter morning in 2005, the media reported that a Toronto woman had found \$40,000 on the road. The money had been misplaced during a transfer between a bank and an armoured vehicle. The woman had returned the money to the bank, and was given \$2,000 as a reward for her honesty. This woman was Deb Peliti. She was a recipient of social assistance because one of her sons was very ill, and it was necessary for her to stay home to care for him. At existing rates of social assistance, the sum of \$40,000 was equivalent to more than three years of Peliti's annual income. The media coverage mentioned that Peliti was on welfare, but did not discuss the reward money in relation to her annual income.

The morning the story broke, the staff of the second opposition party, the New Democratic Party, wondered if the reward money would be clawed back from Deb Peliti in keeping with government policy that specified that any additional income earned by welfare recipients would be deducted from social assistance payments. This 'clawback' policy also explains why the National Child Benefit Supplement was withheld from all mothers on social assistance every month. The supplement, historically called the baby bonus, is a small federal transfer payment sent to provinces to be distributed to mothers who are poor. The provincial Conservative government began to claw back the benefit from mothers on social assistance in order to retain the

total amount of monthly government-provided support payments at the provincially set level, and the Liberals continued this policy despite an election promise to eliminate it. In essence, through a punitive provincial policy, poor mothers and their children were denied access to an income supplement intended for them.

The NDP caucus decided to raise a question in the legislature about the reward money given to Peliti in order to make a connection with the clawback of the National Child Benefit Supplement. Peliti and her sons were called and invited to come to the legislature for question period to witness first hand the answer to the question about whether the reward money would be clawed back, *and* whether the clawback of the National Child Benefit Supplement overall would continue.

The entire legislature gave Peliti a standing ovation when she was introduced and the question was asked by the NDP. Sandra Pupatello, at the time both Minister of Community and Social Services and the Minister Responsible for Women's Issues, confirmed that the reward money would not be clawed back and referred to some small social policy changes pursued by her government, but she would not seriously engage with the issue of the ongoing legislated clawback of the National Child Benefit Supplement despite the fact that it affected hundreds of thousands of families on social assistance. In other words, she placed discursive emphasis on the nice individual story, and avoided serious consideration of women's poverty.

The theatrics of the day were not confined to the legislative chamber. After the question period, the journalists formed a very large scrum around Peliti in the hall. In response to reporter queries, she credited her upbringing for her honesty, and said she had called her welfare case worker once she had received the reward money because she knew about the monthly clawback policy and thought it would apply to the reward money. As part of the media frenzy and for a promotional clip, the journalist from the television station that had first covered the story, Toronto 1, asked Peliti to look into the camera and thank the station by name. The journalist had Peliti do so three times to ensure he had a good take. This commercialization and appropriation of Peliti's story in this instance stands in stark contrast to the absence of coverage for women's poverty more generally.

Even the Premier, capitalizing on the media interest, came before the cameras to greet Peliti and congratulate her. The Premier virtually never participated in media scums following question period so this was an unusual event and demonstrated that McGuinty and his senior strategists felt the need for top level stage-management. A television reporter seized this rare opportunity and asked Peliti what she would like to say to the Premier. Taking advantage of this chance to speak to the Premier and the wider public through the media, she replied, "Say what you mean, and mean what you say," a telling reference to the Liberals' broken promise about ending

the clawback of the Child Benefit Supplement if they were elected. Premier McGuinty simply nodded and thanked her again for providing an example of honesty. When questioned further by reporters, the Premier sought to regain control of the agenda since journalists were probing the broader clawback policy question, raised by the NDP in question period. He emphasized the contrast between his government and the previous Conservative government, and in keeping with Third Way messaging, constructed his party as more empathetic. He said, "But for fate, we would be on welfare, so we've got a responsibility to lend a hand" (T.O. woman to keep reward for turning in loot 2004, n.p.).

This spin encapsulated the Liberals' Third Way vision of poverty as an individual, external problem for which government can provide but some modicum of help. For the Premier, poverty lies outside the "we" of his government and the voters to whom he and his government spoke. This statement also identified the Premier's view of poverty as stemming from someone's destiny, disconnected from structural unemployment and government and economic policies. In his view, poverty is unfortunate, but also naturalized, inevitable, and peripheral.

As for Deb Peliti, she spent part of her reward money on a family dinner in a Chinese food buffet and on haircuts and small gifts for her sons. She did not get to spend her baby bonus money on her family that month. The clawback continued, but for a brief moment Deb Peliti challenged a government to say what it meant, and mean what it said, thus drawing attention to the clear disconnect between the government's selective utterances of concern for poor women and its policy responses.

### PUTTING WOMEN IN POVERTY IN THE SPOTLIGHT

The Liberal government was also forced to confront women's poverty, albeit briefly, with the release of a report entitled *Walking on Eggshells: Abused Women's Experiences of Ontario's Welfare System* (Mosher et al. 2004). The report was the culmination of a collaborative research project between feminist scholars and front-line workers. It was lead by Dr. Janet Mosher, a professor at York University's Osgoode Hall Law School, who worked in conjunction with other professors, and staff from the Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses and the Ontario Social Safety Network.

The research findings were chilling and powerful. Based on research with 64 women in Ontario who had been victims of intimate violence and were forced to rely on social assistance or Ontario Disability Support Payments, the report demonstrated that support levels were wholly inadequate for meeting basic accommodation, food, transportation, and living expenses; that rules and regulations in the welfare system were unclear or undisclosed; and that women were not being adequately

supported in their desire and efforts to become employed. Consequently, women in Ontario were (and are) returning to abusive relationships, endangering themselves and their children. The report stated: "For many the experience of welfare is like another abusive relationship... Disturbingly, the decision to return to an abusive relationship is often the 'best' decision for a woman, in a social context of horrendously constrained options" (Mosher et al 2004, v).

The researchers found that many of the welfare policies implemented by the previous Conservative government and retained by the Liberals were being used by abusive men to control and intimidate women. In particular, the authors showed how the welfare fraud report line, which allows people to anonymously report individuals suspected of welfare fraud was used as a tool by abusive men to control and terrorize women. Further, the Conservatives had defined welfare 'fraud' very broadly, and the lack of clarity continued to plague recipients and incite their fear of losing social assistance and support for their children. For example, a worker with an anti-poverty organization in London reported anecdotally that a woman was threatened with charges of welfare fraud for failing to declare turkey leftovers she had been given by her mother as additional income.

Mosher and colleagues (2004) developed specific policy recommendations including increasing social assistance rates to reflect the cost of living, stopping the clawback of the National Child Benefit Supplement immediately, providing accurate and complete information to every social assistance recipient, and revamping fraud policies and practices. The report also insisted on the importance of a shift in the way the public, welfare workers, the justice system, and the government view the poor in Ontario. Mosher and colleagues (2004) did not advocate for merely a change in rhetoric. Instead, they argued for a more fundamental political-cultural and public policy change to challenge some of the effects of neoliberalism on women in Ontario.

Unfortunately, they were not heard. Instead, a clear indication of the specific form of neoliberalism produced by the Liberals was revealed in mid-December 2005, when the Minister Responsible for Women's Issues, Sandra Pupatello, finally launched the Liberals' domestic violence action plan in a flashy media conference. The Liberal policy did provide some funding for community supports, training, and anti-violence education but this was coupled with the celebration of corporate sponsors, and the announcement that private fundraising by shelters would be institutionalized as a central means for generating operating revenue. The Conservative government had made fundraising necessary, and the Liberal government announced it would be providing institutional support to help shelters with that fundraising. This, of course, was in place of the public funding that would have alleviated the need for fundraising in the first place.

The front-line workers responded with anger and shock to this policy, and their critiques were incorporated into the day of media coverage accorded to the launch (e.g. Leslie 2004). However, because the Liberals possessed the power of government, women's critiques were muted by comparison, and the plan was implemented. Women's shelters are now without reliable, sufficient public funding. Instead they are heavily reliant on the charity of private and corporate donors and required to devote substantial human and fiscal resources to fund-raising in order to provide utterly crucial services, a powerful indicator of the where women fit into the policy priorities of the Liberals in Ontario.

Despite the efforts of Mosher and colleagues (2005) and ongoing attempts by other feminists to make the links between poverty, welfare policy, and domestic violence, foster a more holistic understanding of the causes and effects of poverty, and wed domestic violence strategies to a broader set of collectivist social and fiscal policy responses, the Liberal government was unresponsive. In addition to pursuing a regressive agenda of partial privatization constricting shelters' abilities to deliver or expand services, the government failed to see domestic violence policies as interwoven with women's poverty. The government, represented in this case by Minister Papatello, constructed an empathetic presentation style characteristic of Third Way approaches which shaped not only the timing and tone of the announcement, but also established the parameters of discussion. Domestic violence was about women and could be under the spotlight on this day, but consideration of the particularly suffocating experiences of poor women confronting domestic violence was avoided. Poor women were not vilified, but they were ignored.

### CONFRONTING NEOLIBERAL OBFUSCATIONS

As we have seen, depictions of the gendered experiences of government policy, poverty, and economic inequality were not absent from Ontario's political terrain, nor were challenges to neoliberal political culture, policy, and language. Women like Deb Peliti and Mosher and colleagues (2004) promoted policy that would utilize collective, public resources to adequately support women facing poverty and/or violence. This is important for reminding us that the Liberal government is presented with alternatives, and makes active, conscious choices. In this context it is important to briefly review and further elucidate the overall government project in order to understand where poverty policy and women fit into the broader goals and work of government actors.

The Liberals sought to be seen as kinder than the Conservatives yet just as "fiscally prudent," thus reflecting that neoliberal objective, and in turn, reaffirming its centrality in Ontario's political culture. As a result, the Liberals

prioritized a few core areas valued by the majority of the public, namely health care, education, and the economy, but their work was framed with a combination of progressive language and neoliberal evaluative or accountability criteria. And above and beyond the rhetorical fusion, and even within the prioritized public service areas, actual neoliberal policies were pursued. For example, certain health services were delisted or removed from the universal, publicly funded provincial health coverage, thereby forcing patients to pay out-of-pocket for optometry, physiotherapy, and chiropractics, a clear form of privatization. As well, the more than a dozen government ministries that were not prioritized had their budgets reduced or, in an odd metaphor of death, “flatlined,” in both of the first two Liberal budgets as part of the construction and celebration of “fiscal responsibility” (Government of Ontario 2004, 2005). These constraints limited the financial resources available for expanding public services or even maintaining existing levels, and contributed to the increased prevalence and size of user fees.

Because the Liberals sought to be seen as kind, yet “responsible,” they avoided confrontation and effused conciliatory, pragmatic language as part of spinning their Third Way approach as adaptive and non-ideological. Throughout my fieldwork, in public statements and in interviews, the Liberal social actors promoted their approach as taking from the left and the right in the creation of a realistic, “balanced” government. For example, leader Dalton McGuinty’s biography on the Liberal election web site in 2003 (Ontario Liberal Party 2003f) said: “Leader of the Ontario Liberals since 1996, and the MPP for Ottawa South since 1990, McGuinty has watched both the NDP and Tories [Conservatives] govern Ontario. ‘One was an economic disaster, the other a disaster for the social fabric of our province,’ McGuinty says. ‘It strengthened my belief in new ideas, instead of old ideologies. I want to move Ontario forward, not to the left or right.’”

Seeking to obfuscate ideological allegiance and camouflage an ideological agenda is a neoliberal strategy enlisted by social actors seeking to produce the appearance of a new, flexible, and responsive approach that is ready-made for selection by individual consumers in a political marketplace. Such an approach both reaffirms existing neoliberal ideas, *and* furthers neoliberal visions of the political arena, simultaneously. It implies that the political terrain can be re-made by proposing technocratic solutions to problems and avoids addressing or even identifying structural or systemic causes. In fact, critical debate is denied and avoided, and replaced with abbreviated sound bytes, spin, and with “issue management.” Such an approach is about reducing expectations within a narrow understanding of political possibility, while, at the same time, constantly reaffirming and contributing to the narrowness of possibility.

In other words, this very denial of ideology is an ideological act reinforcing neoliberal supremacy. It is inextricably intertwined with the fashioning of political rule by Third Way parties, and with the deepening and

normalization of neoliberal political culture. For women, and particularly for women in poverty, the consequences of such an agenda are significant. The rhetorical shell wrapping the implementation of detrimental neoliberal policies and a political cultural project obfuscates and denies women's real experiences and hence makes many solutions improbable. The Liberals' institutionalization of fundraising for public sector agencies in particular, illustrates this active masking process, as does senior politicians' rhetoric about poverty being merely unfortunate destiny.

Government actors worked to re-package Deb Peliti's story into an individualistic, feel good tale of honesty. Consistent with the historical pattern of constructing "deserving" and "worthy" poor women exposed by Little (1998) and Mayson (1999), Peliti was constructed as a poor woman who understood her duty and followed the rules, and the broader social causes and realities of poverty were avoided. When understood as part of the production of Third Way politics, we see that this active discursive and cultural process was also about ensuring that the story was less political, seen as non-ideological, disconnected from increasing economic polarization and the feminization of poverty, and put simply, was not about hungry mothers and their children who do without.

The *Walking on Eggshells* (Mosher et al. 2005) case and the government's own domestic violence policy response provides a strong example of how governments do not see poverty and violence as connected in significant and dangerous ways, and ignore poor women's experiences when domestic violence policies are conceptualized and implemented. Certainly domestic violence, a woman-focused policy area, did not figure prominently in the broader agenda of the Liberal government. When it did appear in the public spotlight, it was presented without consideration of the particularly troubling experiences of poor women. Women's lack of access to both economic security and real shelters from the storm of violence does not fit comfortably with Third Way, technocratic, so-called pragmatic approaches, and thus the issues are avoided. At the same time, the government's conceptual and material approach to domestic violence turned from the provision of an essential public service to the institutionalization of partial-privatization of funding for shelters, a financial de-prioritization of this vital area of policy in its entirety.

Within Ontario's political cultural mix, women appear as individuals or, on commemorative days or media launches, women appear rhetorically as victims of domestic violence. Poor women are not encouraged to appear, and when they do, their experiences and challenges are re-written for public consumption by government actors. Ontarians and tax-payers are the audience and the focus of Liberal communication strategies. Brodie (1995) and Kingfisher (2002) identify this neoliberal government practice as the active construction of a presumed "ordinary," de-gendered neoliberal subject who does not experience or resist gender discrimination, violence,

or poverty. In neoliberal Ontario and under a Third Way government, public policy debates have shifted away from women as any kind of collective category and political actors certainly do not seriously engage with issues of gender inequality. Pay equity debates have vanished, child care is about caring for children and not about women's right to access the labor market, and without question, government representatives do not acknowledge or debate structural inequality, systemic unemployment or patriarchy.

The "strategic silence" about the gendered implications of neoliberal policies identified by Bakker (1994) continues and deepens as the government largely ignores the implications of its agenda for women in poverty, develops few policies specifically addressing women's material conditions, and speaks to and for a de-gendered neoliberal subject. This reproduces a hegemonic neoliberal political culture in which women are simply assumed as present primarily as undifferentiated members of the service-users or tax-payers categories, and in which poor women are largely made invisible.

## CONCLUSION

As we have seen through the cases of Peliti and Mosher and colleagues (2004), policy or public dialogue that envisions or addresses women collectively or acknowledges the feminization of poverty more broadly is avoided by government, or submerged under a neoliberal Third Way public relations wave. The Ontario government did not address gender and economic inequality and failed to heed calls for meaningful policy change, while simultaneously obfuscating the severity and existence of gender and economic inequality.

In fact, poor people overall appear in government rhetoric only occasionally together with people with disabilities as a category called "the vulnerable," an inference that these subjects are in danger from some future, elusive bad thing. Goode and Maskovsky (2001, 10) recognize this strategy in their ethnographic work as "a mode of governance, economy, and politics in which the poor are not so much vilified as they are marginalized or erased." The difference between the vilification and direct, individualized blame common to aggressively neoliberal governments and the marginalization seen with Third Way governments like the Ontario Liberals is important for understanding the evolution of the handling of economic inequality by neoliberal governments of various kinds. Both processes, vilification and marginalization, are active, but the latter defuses opposition. Government actors enlist empathetic rhetoric to placate concerns or re-package women's experiences into Third Way spin when confronted directly or publicly, while using simple avoidance at most other times. This combination creates a public perception that women's poverty does not really exist.

Liberal government representatives regularly contrasted their approach with the antagonist confrontations generated by the previous Conservative government, an important Third Way strategy. Various attempts by the poor and their allies to change public policy, including the *Walking on Eggshells Report* (Mosher et al. 2004), were at least politely received by the Liberals, even though they were ignored. The inflammatory rhetoric of the Conservative government was replaced by the Liberals with empathetic language of care and concern and occasional small policy changes. At the same time the poor, the majority of whom are women and children, were quietly de-prioritized because education, health care, and “the economy,” the established priority sectors with cross-class but especially middle-class appeal, were emphasized discursively and materially in the Liberals’ neoliberal Ontario. In this, Ontario offers another example to bolster critiques which show that Third Way policy approaches are façades which mask many detrimental neoliberal policies (e.g. Bashevkin 2002; Coates 2003; Gledhill 2001).

Masking strategies are significant and present theoretical and political dilemmas for those seeking to resist neoliberalism in all its guises. Feminists have done significant research on dogmatic neoliberal policy and its effects, but we need to analyse the evolution and repackaging of neoliberalism in its mature, camouflaged Third Way costumes. Decontextualized references to the public good and public service reprioritization by Third Way neoliberal governments that do not translate into tangible, experienced material benefits can serve to confuse and undermine public understandings of the public good and public services. Elements of positive material change targeted to appeal to and influence the middle class, in particular, are implemented and celebrated, and cannot be discounted, but this construction of a kinder, gentler government and the deliberate lowering of the political temperature dilutes and disaggregates opposition. In addition, expressions of neoliberalism are not named, or are given misleading names. Neoliberalism itself is denied or blurred.

It is important to highlight that neoliberal proponents inside and outside government invest substantial resources into constructing a strategic public image of what government is doing, while simultaneously obfuscating much of what it actually is doing materially (or not doing), and what impact policies are having in the lives of real people. By studying the ways women’s experiences and demands are stage managed by governments and by recognizing the depth and breadth of the normalization of neoliberal political culture, we can see the need for broadening the ways women communicate and shape public knowledge. Actions by individual women like Deb Peliti momentarily challenge neoliberal policies, and collective efforts to educate the public and articulate feminist analyses and experiences, as was done with the *Walking on Eggshells* report (Mosher et al. 2004) can help to create more discursive space for critique, and offer

viable, alternative policy approaches. However, this alone is not enough to effect real change, as Third Way proponents and other neoliberals with government power demonstrate a lack of openness to collective political culture, anti-poverty policy strategies and redistributive measures. A revived, organized, effective women's movement to articulate collective experiences and analyses, and repeatedly confront and expose the neoliberal offensive in its various forms would provide a more consciously political platform from which to operate and make demands on governments. How this movement might be achieved is less clear, although political possibilities are suggested by women's organizing in Scandinavia, Latin America, the Middle East, and elsewhere (e.g. Brodsky 2003; Cockburn 2007; Monasterious 2007) and both feminist research and political action are certainly crucial. Finally, it is clear that government matters in the neoliberal present. Conscious feminist engagement in formal political processes is necessary to hold governments to account and to produce governments committed to implementing policies that truly benefit women.

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