Book Review: Julie Vaillancourt, Ontario Works: Works for Whom - An Examination of Workfare in Ontario

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Book Review


Reviewed by: Professor Gemma Smyth*

In May 2009, members of the Ontario legislature unanimously voted to approve Bill 152, the *Poverty Reduction Act*. One of the first steps in the review of poverty reduction strategies was the appointment of the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario, which began its work in November 2010. The Commissioners have conducted consultations across Ontario with affected parties including people living in poverty, non-profits, advocates, academics, activists, and others. A report outlining recommendations based on the consultations was published in February 2012, followed by further consultations. The final report, entitled *Brighter Prospects: Transforming Social Assistance in Ontario*, was released October 2012.

Although the final report contained some potentially positive approaches to social assistance reform (increasing the maximum number of allowable assets for a recipient of social assistance, for example), the Commission also faces serious criticism. Activists have noted the *Brighter Prospects* approach to disability, particularly its focus on employment for those on ODSP (Ontario Disability Support Program) with little regard to the austerity agenda, the generally poor private sector support in Ontario, and the current legislated test for receipt of disability benefits. It is also unclear how the Ontario government’s measures to amend social assistance rates and cut the

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5 The Commissioners made a serious attempt to engage business leaders in the Review process. I remain deeply cynical about the possibility that businesses would meaningfully employ persons with recognized disabilities (“substantially disabled”) on a scale that would impact the number of people in receipt of benefits.
Community Start-Up and Maintenance Benefit (CSUMB) align with the Report’s recommendations.⁶

Julie Vaillancourt’s timely and accessible book, *Ontario Works: Works for Whom – An Examination of Workfare in Ontario*,⁷ sheds important light onto the realities of those living on – and through – the Ontario Works (OW) program, highlights its injustices and, perhaps most importantly, reminds us that welfare does not have to mean workfare. Although the book would have benefitted from a much larger sample size, interviews with program administrators, and more localized data, the text nevertheless provides a solid neo-Marxist analysis of OW, particularly for students new to poverty issues in Ontario.

In her research for the book, initially prepared for her Master’s thesis, Vaillancourt interviewed six OW recipients, three brokers⁸ and eight people from participating organizations or programs that ‘employ’ OW recipients as part of the OW workfare requirement. She was unable to interview program administrators. She therefore relies on the Ministry’s Directives, which, although helpful, do not highlight the sometimes stark differences between the Directives and the discretionary decisions employed by the Ministry.⁹ Using a neo-Marxist approach, Vaillancourt situates welfare within the capitalist state, which requires a certain number of people living in poverty to function.¹⁰ In this way, she takes the critique of OW to a deeper level than what her policy recommendations eventually address.

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⁶ It is also notable that the attention paid to the final report is substantially less vigorous than the earlier reports. Cynically, the Commission’s work may primarily have acted to delay investments in social assistance.


⁸ Vaillancourt defines broker agencies as “normally existing social service agencies that offer employment assistance activities to members of the community. For instance, a local centre that provides help with resume writing and job searching could apply to become a broker and deliver these specific activities to Ontario Works participants by tender. Most often, broker agencies are responsible for delivering the employment workshops and assistance, for recruiting employers and organizations to participate in the placement programs and for developing placements and then matching up the placements to participants.” *Ibid.* at 67.


¹⁰ Vaillancourt argues that “[t]he people benefitting from the Ontario Works program are not social assistance recipients; rather the beneficiaries are the social relations of capital, state relations and employers.” *Ibid.* at 95.
The problems [with OW] go much deeper than, for example, just having a bad caseworker and therefore the work that needs to be done to change the system needs to go much further than the Ontario Works program. The roots of the problem lie with the capitalist organization of society.\textsuperscript{11}

Vaillancourt focuses much of her critique on the OW employment requirement which both supports the capitalist state and forces recipients into potentially unsafe labour. She argues that OW takes advantage of cheap or free labour within the traditional labour market, ignoring the private and unpaid work that people - especially parents - do in the home, as well as in volunteer and public service work. She describes the work that OW recipients engage in as dangerous, menial, physically demanding, and meaningless for the purported purpose of preparing them for paying jobs (for example, people work to clean up parks, requiring them to pick up used needles, work which is neither safe nor productive in creating long-term relationships with employers).\textsuperscript{12} The book also addresses the marginalization of OW workers within their placements, particularly by waged workers who compete for jobs.\textsuperscript{13} Reflecting statements from her interviews, Vaillancourt writes that “social assistance recipients experience the [OW] program as a modern-day form of slavery”.\textsuperscript{14} Her interviews with brokers demonstrate the use of ‘motivation’ strategies that test recipients’ drive to participate in the OW-mandated workfare programs with no attention to the often significant barriers faced by recipients simply to get to the OW office.

Vaillancourt also addresses the moral regulation of recipients achieved by the current OW regime.\textsuperscript{15} Echoing the critiques of many anti-poverty activists, she notes that OW reinforces and creates stereotypes about recipients:

\textit{[t]he unfavourable depiction [of recipients] is achieved by portraying recipients as though they are not contributing to their communities and suggesting that they need help to find jobs, they are uneducated and illiterate and that they need help with parenting. Program practices, which include invasions of privacy and the physically demanding and dangerous type of work that recipients can be required to do in order to receive benefits, also serve to portray recipients unfavourably.\textsuperscript{16}}

The author also reminds the reader that workfare and welfare were not always inextricably linked. The current Commission’s focus on employment is not dissimilar to the rhetoric and process employed by the Harris government, responsible for fundamentally shaping what Ontarians once knew as welfare.

\textsuperscript{11} Supra note 4 at 98.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid. at 52-55.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid. at 86-89.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid. at 99.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid. at 71.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid. at 57.
into “workfare” – Ontario Works. Vaillancourt's work is laudable because it focuses exclusively on the OW program, which is often ignored in favour of the often more socially acceptable ODSP. Her analysis of how OW benefits corporations is also important.

Vaillancourt's book would have been further strengthened with reference to the myriad research on OW and ODSP conducted by researchers and policy advocates, most of this work is not cited in her study. Vaillancourt’s interviews are reflective of other studies and first-person accounts of people attempting to eke out an existence on OW or ODSP. Due to the very small sample size, Vaillancourt begins to employ the empirically sound approach desperately needed in the Social Assistance Review but does not capture the nuanced geographical and cultural differences between OW recipients across Ontario. Due to the level of discretion granted to the local OW service providers and differences in local economies, the experience of recipients in Toronto is quite different from recipients in Chatham or the far North. The text therefore falls prey to similar problems repeated by the Commission: we do not have meaningful empirical, evidence-based, localized analysis (outside Toronto) which is required to make solid policy decisions that will actually assist in assisting citizens living in poverty to make meaningful and informed life choices.

Vaillancourt makes nine recommendations to improve OW, many of which have also been made by other anti-poverty organizations, such as making access to higher education easier and allowing people to keep a greater portion of their wages. Her recommendations are nevertheless useful, particularly from an employment perspective. For example, she recommends that employment and training programs should be voluntary and that OW recipients should not be subjected to overly intrusive measures to secure a placement including criminal record checks for administrative positions. Ultimately, in keeping with her analysis, Vaillancourt recommends the abolishment of workfare programs entirely.

17 Particularly concerning were questions that asked citizens on ODSP to brainstorm about how they could participate in the paid workforce. Statements about willingness to work will likely be used against ODSP recipients in future policy, perhaps by enforcing Participation Agreements with workfare requirements much like OW.

Vaillancourt's interviews, analysis and recommendations will likely not add a new dimension to poverty law analysis for experts in the field; indeed, clinicians and other anti-poverty experts might take exception to the occasional lack of depth in the depiction of her subjects. However, this book is an accessible introduction for students new to the world of poverty law particularly in social work, labour studies, health studies and law.

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