




Neo-liberalism and the Women's Movement in Canada

POLS 350, Winter 2005, L. Trimble



Does electing women matter in a neo-liberal era?

- NO: Gotell and Brodie – it's "less than ever an issue of numbers"
 - Neoliberal state unsympathetic, even hostile, to policy demands of women's movement
 - Mainstream parties can avoid hard programmatic commitments to the women's movement by recruiting like-minded women
 - Women may achieve descriptive – but not substantive - representation



Does electing women matter in a neoliberal era?

- Yes: Trimble and Arscott – it's more important than ever to elect more, and more diverse, women
 - Neo-liberal policy decisions affect women, making the presence of women in positions of power crucial
 - Neo-liberal policies often affect women differently than men
 - Neo-liberalism is neither inevitable nor impermeable



The welfare state

- Welfare State - overview
 - Important role for the state in protecting people from the vagaries of the market
 - State intervention in the economy
 - Social rights/ social policy
 - collective welfare
 - state should meet basic needs of citizens
 - commitment to formal equality



Women and the welfare state

- Welfare State and women
 - Critical view
 - premised on liberalism - individualistic
 - reflected sexual division of labour
 - Positive features
 - jobs for women
 - concrete policy gains
 - logic of collective action for the women's movement



Emergence of the neo-liberal state

- Globalization
 - Changes in the post-cold war capitalist system
 - Rapid and pervasive diffusion around the globe of goods, services, technology, capital,
 - Marked by trade liberalization (e.g. NAFTA)
 - Promoted by neo-liberal ideology



What is neo-liberalism?

- Economic ideology promoting the free market, globalization
 - Market seen as the proper sphere for distribution of economic and social goods
 - Free market perpetuated by a global economy: free flow of goods, service, capital
- Response to the welfare state
 - Neo-liberalism sees the welfare state as:
 - An unreasonable constraint on the market
 - Costly
 - Inefficient
 - Harmful to "good citizenship"



Goals of neo-liberalism

- To minimize the state
 - Limit state intervention in the economy
 - Limit state intervention in the private sector/sphere
- To change the nature of the state
 - Norms of efficiency
 - Market principles should guide governance



Consequences for women

- Economic consequences
 - Job losses
 - Job degradation
 - Feminization of work
 - Re-privatization of nurturing
 - Feminization of poverty



Consequences for women

- Political Consequences
 - Commodification of government services
 - Restriction of democratic debate
 - Language of crisis
 - Language of choice
 - Language of universality



Neo-liberalism and the women's movement

- Site of struggle
 - Global organizing has increased, intensified
 - Domestic women's movement has suffered
- Demands
 - Focus is on prevention – stopping neo-liberal policies
 - Critique of globalization
 - "Nostalgic welfarism"?



Strategy: Mainstreaming

- Working with, or within, the existing system
- Strengths:
 - Legitimacy, inclusion in policy debates
 - Can achieve incremental change
- Risks:
 - Co-optation by the state
 - Reliance on the state for support
 - De-radicalization (reformulation of goals)



Strategy: Disengagement

- Working at the margins to challenge the status quo, change norms and institutions
- Strengths:
 - Radical, principled
 - Autonomy from the state
- Risks:
 - Marginalization: lack of visibility, impact
 - Tyranny of Structurelessness



Strategy: rhetoric

- Focus of global women's movement is on human rights, justice, equality
- Why not employ the language of liberalism to advance women's claims?
 - Personal liberty
 - Individual autonomy
 - Economic independence
- Is the electoral project a waste of scarce resources, or more important than ever?
