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The Third Way to Adult Education

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Abstract: This paper examines how Third Way politics play out in policy discourse in adult education in Canada and New Zealand. It then places these findings in the larger context of the debates on “second modernity.”

Context

At the turn of the 21st Century, globalization theorist and famed social scientist Anthony Giddens laid out his vision for how individuals and governments could creatively learn to live with globalization without losing sight of cherished values such as ‘community’ or ‘democracy’ (Giddens, 1999; 2000). In *The Third Way: the Renewal of Social Democracy*, Giddens put forth his plan for how governments could help citizens respond to rapid technological change, increasing job insecurity and competition by forging a mid-way point between neo-liberalism and old-style socialism. Playing a central part in the “Third Way” is education. As one of Giddens’ most famous advisees, Tony Blair, recently put it: “education, education, education” (Lloyd & Payne, 2003, p.86). Adult education and lifelong learning have been a focus of all Third Way governments from Bill Clinton to self-professed Third Wayers Helen Clark in New Zealand, and Canadian former Liberal Party leaders Jean Chretien and Paul Martin.

In this paper I examine the discourse around lifelong learning and adult education in some key policy documents from New Zealand and Canada over the past decade, and elucidate how Third Way rhetoric places the economic and social imperatives side by side. I then conclude with an analysis and discussion of the Third Way vis-à-vis globalization and late modernity.

Adult Education: A Change in Focus?

While adult education policy came under major criticism in the 1990s for having been co-opted by neo-liberal and New Right thought (Collins, 1991; Cruikshank, 1998), by the following decade scholars had begun to note changes in discourse on adult learning in policy from the OECD and EU, as well as from Blair’s New Labour government (Field, 2003; Rubenson, 2005; Martin, 2003; Green, 2002; Hyland, 2002). These researchers—among others—have noted that whilst in the 1990s, policy on adult education and learning almost exclusively centered on the idea of ‘training for the new economy’, by 2000 policies had begun to include references to the importance of educating for social inclusion, democratic citizenship and civil society—thus advocating a Third Way approach by striking a balance between economic concerns and issues of cohesion and equality.

However, scholars remain skeptical as to whether changes in writing actually signify a shift in focus away from a model dominated by neo-liberalism and towards greater concerns of equity and social justice, and whether the promises made in policy will actually come to fruition (see Green, Preston & Sabates, 2003). Some are cynical that this recent ‘Third Way’ trend of incorporating social concerns alongside economic ones is little more than neo-liberalism in sexier clothing. Newman & De Zoysa (2001) state that the Third Way still locates itself within the market paradigm and moves no closer to reclaiming the social consensus than the neo-conservatives that

came before them. They write, “New Labour in the UK seem no less Thatcherite in their economic policies than Thatcher herself (p.92)”. There indeed exists evidence that the realm of economics still dominates politicians’ concern for adult learning; as Blair announced during one of his Prime Ministerial speeches: “Education is the best economic policy we have” (Martin, 2003, p.567)

The Third Way in Canada & New Zealand: A Look at Policy

The “Third Way” has been embraced by traditional leftist parties in a number of Western democracies, including Canada and New Zealand. For this paper I examined the way in which the Third Way idea of integrating both social and economic concerns were framed and dealt with in two initiatives that emerged at approximately the same time: *Canada’s Innovation Strategy*, which comprised two main documents ‘Knowledge Matters’ and ‘Achieving Excellence’, and *Growing an Innovative New Zealand*. These publications seek to raise the economic performance of each respective country by calling upon citizens to acquire skills and knowledge. At the same time, both governments claim to retain their commitment to “maintaining a core dedicated to social justice” (Giddens, 1999, p.64). Examining national budgets from the past five to ten years in both countries also allowed me to see both the rhetoric around, and financial commitments to, adult learning.

The Canadian Way to (L)earn a Living

Both ‘Knowledge Matters’ and ‘Achieving Excellence’ underscore the importance of education, skill building and training in raising Canada’s competitiveness and productivity in the world. To ‘Achieve Excellence’ the government highlights four federal priorities: knowledge performance, skills, the innovation environment, and strengthening communities, while ‘Knowledge Matters’ calls for a collaborative approach among all sectors of society to ensure Canadians have the tools they need to participate in Canada’s workplace. ‘Knowledge Matters’ tells us that countries that succeed are adaptable, creative and with highly-skilled populations; that a “knowledge-based economy means an ever increasing demand for a well-educated and skilled workforce” (Government of Canada, 2002b, p.2). Individuals are urged to undertake their civic duty and participate in lifelong learning or post-secondary education, knowing that “Canada’s education advantage diminishes as other countries’ participation rates rise” (p.6). Achieving Excellence aims to encourage the “individual entrepreneurial spirit” (Government of Canada, 2002a, p.5), as business and entrepreneurship of individuals are the “key drivers of innovation” (p.9). According to the documents, the national project is to have a skilled workforce and innovative society (p.2)

These documents do not solely appeal to self-interest but to a national interest. The U.S. is often used as a comparison point. For example, ‘Achieving Excellence’ states, “we must become more productive and improve at a faster rate than the U.S” (Government of Canada, 2002a, p.14). Canada’s current competitive ranking and innovation performance are compared only to America’s. We are told that “Canada’s innovation performance is weak” and there is a critical shortage of skills (Government of Canada, 2002a, p.22). The answer to this is for “Canadians to become more innovative” (p.25). The responsibility lies with the Canadian people. The papers evoke a sense of urgency; Chretien, quoted in ‘Knowledge Matters’, states “prosperity depends on innovation” (p.1), alluding to the idea that if Canadians do not become more flexible, knowledgeable and creative they might be doomed to a life of poverty. Both policies claim that literacy and education levels need to be raised so that citizens can participate in the knowledge-based economy

Conversely, in keeping with Third Way discourse, *Canada's Innovation Strategy* also seeks to strengthen communities, civil society, and social entrepreneurship. The tension between economic and social goals is apparent. Calls to social inclusion or strengthening democratic citizenship are somewhat muted and drowned out by the appeals to strengthen the economy. We are told that knowledge is required for the “*economy and society*” (Government of Canada, 2002b); that “Canada has many *economic, social and cultural strengths*” on which to build (Government of Canada, 2002a, p.83); and that “Canada is a good place to *invest and live*” (p.21). As Chretien informs us, “*economic and social goals are pursued hand-in-hand... [and] Canada [is] a society marked by innovation and inclusion, excellence and justice*” (Government of Canada, 2002a, p.1). In all of these examples, economic concerns are placed first; it is difficult to find an example where social cohesion was given preference to economic innovation or competitiveness. ‘Achieving Excellence’ states that “economic policies create wealth to address social priorities which, in turn, fuel innovation and economic growth (Government of Canada, 2002a, p.25); although economic policies are linked to social priorities they are linked back to growth and innovation, implying that it is perhaps not enough for policies to address social issues alone.

Canada’s federal budgets also provide insight into the social cohesion/neo-liberal divide. The following table shows the titles and themes of the budgets over the past 8 years:

Figure 1. Titles, Themes, and Budgets: Canadian Federal Budgets 1997-2005

	Titles	Themes/topics					
05	Delivering on commitments	Accountability	Communities	Economy	Environment	International	Social
04	New agenda for achievement	Accountability	Communities	Economy	Health	Learning	
03	Building the Canada we want	Accountability	Economy	Health care & society			
01	Securing progress in an uncertain world	Fiscal progress	Security	Investment			
00	Better finances, better lives	Tax reduction plan	More innovative economy	Improving quality of life			
99	Building today for a better tomorrow	Fiscal management	Health care	Tax relief & fairness	Federal transfers	Knowledge & innovation	
97	Building the future for Canadians	Restoring confidence in the country's finances	Investing in jobs & growth	Investing in a stronger society			

From appearances, the Federal budgets fit within a Third Way framework of utilizing discourse around neo-liberalism/human capitalism as well as that of social provision/cohesion. It could be argued that over the past eight years, the language has become more geared towards social cohesion and the humanizing elements of the Third Way—especially since 2004 when communities was introduced as a budget priority. In the 2005 budget, the Liberals promised “a new deal for Canada’s communities”. In this statement it is hard to miss the reference to the “New Deal”, a term used to refer to Roosevelt’s welfare state. ‘International’ refers to Canada’s “meeting global responsibilities”, while ‘social’ entails the government’s guarantee to “secur[e] social

foundations”. ‘The environment’, a proclaimed pillar of the Third Way (Giddens, 1999), signals a commitment to “the green economy”. Embedded in the 2005 Budget is the notion of Canadians’ commitment to each other and Canada’s responsibility to others in the country and overseas—state strength is conceived to be more than GDP.

In terms of adult education, 2005 marks the first time in the past decade or more that money has been allocated to adult literacy (\$30 million). While in 2001 money was specifically set aside for up and coming entrepreneurs (‘Budget 2001’), by 2004 the emphasis had shifted to lifelong learning (‘Budget 2004’). This budget suggests a change in discourse away from a solely economic conception of skills and society, towards a more socially conscious model. Nonetheless, the adherence to market values remains; the budget calls for: “strategic investments in building a highly skilled and adaptable workforce” (p. 15); moreover, adult education is located in the “investing in people” section, suggesting a human capitalist approach to education. In terms of monetary commitments, adult education and training will receive \$155 million over three years, whereas in 2003 1.5\$ billion were allotted for post-secondary training and education. The commitment to social cohesion, then, may be perhaps greater rhetorically than financially.

Carving out the Middle Ground in New Zealand/ Aotearoa

As Anthony Giddens observed, “education and training have become the new mantra for social democratic politicians” (1999, p.109). The idea of building a ‘skilled’ and ‘innovative’ workforce has definitely been part of the mantra for New Zealand’s Labour government. If we take some of the budgetary themes from over the past several years, we will find overlap with those written under the Liberal government in Canada. What is most striking, however, is the change in emphasis from the Rightist National party to the Third Way Labour Party. From being almost entirely absent from national budgets, adult learning and ‘skill building’ have taken a central role in budget priorities. Further, lifelong learning is advocated as an important policy issue:

Figure 2. Themes and Quotes: New Zealand National Budget 1999-2004

YEAR	THEMES & QUOTES	Focus on Adult Ed
04	Building skills and talent of workforce Improving communities access to skills & information	Workplace literacy
03	Education is key as it “leads to the skilled and well-trained employees needed for a successful innovative economy , while assisting individuals to reach their individual potential” (p.12)	Education Industry training
02/01	“Improving New Zealanders’ skills” (2001 p.6) “To develop a modern and cohesive society ”	Literacy Apprentice
00	“there are gaps between skilled and unskilled New Zealanders” 1st priority: creating an innovative economy, 2nd improving skills 5th priority: strengthening national identity (p.5) Transition from National to Labour government in 1999	As lifelong endeavour
99	Choice & productivity “We should encourage enterprise & innovation ” (p.2)	Competition
99	Fiscal prudence & economic growth “ reward the self-reliance of new Zealanders” (p.6) “Welfare dependency has “crippled many families” We are committed to helping New Zealanders move from their dependence on the state to independence (p.3)	Training

The growing financial commitment to adult education and training is also well documented. As a report released in February 2006 illustrates, adult and community education is a government priority for which there will be \$900,000 invested per annum (TEC, 2006).

While social cohesion and nation-building are also vital to New Zealand's Third Way, skills for innovation for innovation's sake dominate the policy arena. Eerily reminiscent of Canada's Innovation Strategy, *Growing an innovative New Zealand* prioritizes the idea of creating an innovative and skilled workforce to help raise New Zealand's relative position in the world economy. In the same way that Canadians are urged to upskill, so too New Zealanders are told: "We must become a nation known internationally for our innovation, our creativity, our *skills*, and our lifestyle" (Government of New Zealand, 2002, p.63). In fact, the word 'skill' is mentioned 60 times in the 64-page document. One of the main aims of the government is to return NZ per capita income to the top half of the OECD (p.6). New Zealanders are told that the country needs to improve relative to world rankings (p.12) while being reassured in the next sentence that "this government does not believe we can put on hold social and environmental growth. Implicit in the quality of the growth we are seeking will be integration of the economic, environmental and social pillars of sustainable development... the choice of economic policy instruments will be influenced by their interaction with social and environmental factors" (p.12).

As to why the country is not succeeding, citizens are told "we have a lack of skills... and a skewed distribution of human capital with a significant number of students leaving school without qualifications. Without these basic skills, workers are less productive, which has a negative effect on economic performance" (p.17-18). Here, we see skills equated with qualifications and also a shirking of government responsibility to the individual. As in other Third Way inspired documents, individuals are more or less held responsible for their country's economic performance. Citizens are told that there needs to be "an integrated effort" (p.17), where each individual complies with her civic duty to 'up-skill' and become a 'productive member of society' (p.37). The document states 'skill shortages are rife [and] adult students need skills for a modern economy and society' (p.38). The government seeks to sustain "an open and competitive economy, a modern cohesive society, a healthy population and a highly-skilled population" among other things. Nonetheless, as in the Canadian documents, the economy is given precedence over the society.

The Third Way—a road to somewhere different?

There is ample empirical evidence to suggest that discourse surrounding adult learning and education has started to incorporate more social concerns. I venture to claim that this is a trend occurring in countries with and without explicitly Third Way governments. Governments in many Western democracies are looking for ways to help citizens "pilot their ways through major revolutions of our time like globalization, transformations in personal life, our relationship to nature" (Giddens, 1999, p.64). I argue that the Third Way is a logical extension of post-modernity, or as it has been termed by Ulrich Beck "reflexive" or "second" modernity.

In the same way that post-modern inspired philosophers have challenged Enlightenment ideals such as universalism and rationality, which were and are reflected in the acceptance of categorical binaries, so too does the Third Way. As Ulrich Beck has pointed out, the boundaries between old antagonistic divisions, such as state/market; public/private; individual/collective; virtual/real have become troubled through processes of globalization and late capitalism (Beck & Lau, 2005). The Third Way, as political ideology and practice, acknowledges and embraces the diffusion of categories while simultaneously rendering traditional differences as unproblematic, promoting hybridity and partnerships through state/market, state/community, community/market

collaborations. Where there were once clear divisions, there is now fusion and amalgamation (Beck & Lau). As the above policy documents suggest, however, claiming to have surpassed politics and have remained ‘unbiased’ is false. Chantel Mouffe (2005) has alleged that denying politics has actually helped shift entire debate to the right. Indeed, striking a balance between Right and Left or the economic and social goals of adult education is not as easy as one might think. Furthermore, while the Third Way may claim to have moved beyond techno-rationalist instrumentalist universalisms by institutionalizing and recognizing plurality, claims to boundary dissolutions and syntheses are often over-emphasized. By not recognizing the differences between categories we may mislead and deceive ourselves.

It appears that in Canada and New Zealand, educating for the marketplace and for an innovative society still takes precedence over educating for social cohesion or democratic citizenship. Further, as the Third Way state seeks to enable rather than administer lifelong learning, responsibility for learning is shifted directly onto the learner; learning is conceptualized as a moral issue whereby the non-skilled individual becomes faulted for a lagging economy. Adult education is not so much conceived as a broad initiative but rather is often stigmatized as an ambulance measure reserved for those who have ‘fallen through the cracks’. Although social priorities may have been put back on the table, adult education for collective and individual happiness is often an afterthought. Lamentably, learning to react to an existing world rather than to act to change the world we’re in seems to be the Third Way to adult education.

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