POST- MATERNALISM AND THE END OF WELFARE

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In 1996 Bill Clinton's 'end of welfare' Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Act (PRA) replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), a new revenue sharing program with the states. The surprisingly muted response of liberal women's organisations to this significant legislation has its roots in the ambivalence of the American women's movement to the strategy of protective legislation for women and children advocated by social reformers in the early twentieth century. There were similar divisions when the precursor of AFDC was included as a welfare measure in the 1935 Social Security Act between those who supported the protective legislation strategy and those who supported equal rights. Historians have been critical of 'maternalist' welfare strategies such as AFDC which supported the domestic role of women rather than their paid workforce participation, reinforcing women's family position rather than positioning them as independent wage earners.¹ However, seeds of a revisionist history are evident in some recent books which question the extent of women's influence on social security legislation and the usefulness of the rigid duality of interpretations of protective legislation versus equal rights for women's activism in the post-war period. In her recent book on economic citizenship, Alice Kessler-Harris has a meticulous examination of the development and passing of the 1935 Social Security Act and questions the extent to which women and their organisations actively or effectively supported social security legislation. In her biography of Eleanor Roosevelt, Blanche Weisen Cook also notes that 'the women's movement seemed moribund and quiescent' when Eleanor sought public support for the Social Security Act.² Kessler-Harris suggests (albeit in a footnote!) that this lack of support could problematise dominant maternalist interpretations of the
emergence of the welfare state. It would also seem that the muted response of women's organisations to the PRA has an historical precedent.

Also pointing to new interpretative directions is Kathleen Laughlin's book on the Department of Labor's Women's Bureau in the post-war period. Although the Women's Bureau has been portrayed as the obdurate bastion of the protective legislation strategy, Laughlin argues that the Bureau was in fact engaged in a broad range of community activivism, was significant in the civil rights movement and that the full extent of its initiatives and influence has been under-estimated. As a fellow Visiting Scholar with Laughlin at Rutgers University Institute for Research on Women in 1997 when she was writing this book, I gained an appreciation of the extent of opposition among American women academics to this more positive view of the Women's Bureau. In a review in *The Journal of American History*, Eileen Boris reflects that the message of the Women's Bureau study is that historians should recognise multiple feminist responses to women's participation in the workforce beyond the duality of protective legislation versus equal rights and the limiting concept of maternalism.

The continuing ambivalent attitude of women's groups to welfare legislation was evident in the critical but low-key response to the PRA from the National Organisation for Women (NOW), the peak Washington lobby group for liberal women's organisations. Yet this low key response still provoked a backlash and according to Gwendolyn Mink, a NOW appeal for funds to support 'economic justice' litigation 'aroused so much hate mail that the organisation stopped direct mail on the welfare issue.' More active was the Women's Committee of 100, a consortium formed in 1995 after a meeting at the annual conference of the Organisation of American Historians to fight the image of the welfare mother promoted by Charles Murray and Newt Gingrich. The Women's Committee of 100 including among its member historians Eileen Boris, Gwendolyn Mink and Linda Gordon, all of whom have published significant work on women, welfare and workforce issues. The formation of the Committee demonstrates the greater preparedness of American women historians to get involved in national policy issues compared with their Australian counterparts. The Committee organised a Washington demonstration to protest against the Act but as Boris concedes, middle class women's organisations demanding gender equality in the paid workforce were not embracing welfare rights and the campaign did not develop momentum. Like many critics of the PRA, the Committee was largely silenced by the acclaim and self-congratulation given to the initial success of the legislation in getting women off state and city welfare rolls and into the workforce.

The emphasis in TANF on women's workforce participation and rejection of a domestic motherhood role for single mothers is consistent with the goals
of liberal feminists who have equated women's emancipation with participation in the paid labour market, playing down the family and problematising motherhood. The significant increase in funding for childcare - $14 billion over five years - also appealed to liberal feminists. The importance of quality childcare if the PRA was to have long-term success in moving single mothers with very young children into the workforce was personally emphasised by the Clintons. The President organised a White House Conference on Children in November 1997 which included contributions by women academics.

Complicating the response to the 1996 legislation is that support for single mothers and their children is not only a gender issue but also an issue of race and increasingly ethnicity, given the huge Hispanic and Eastern European migration of recent years. AFDC had become synonymous in the public mind with teenage African-American single mothers in big city 'ghettoes'. However, civil rights advocates have also been reluctant to criticise the legislation indicating not only a fear of a continuing culture of poverty and dependency in inner city black communities but also the hostility of working poor black families to those on AFDC. The influence of William Julius Wilson's predictions of the growth of a black underclass had been influential in the introduction of the legislation and it was significant that Wilson was appointed to head a Russell Sage Foundation research project on the Act's employment initiative. The studies found that African-American women on AFDC were receptive to work and training opportunities and the availability of affordable childcare under the new legislation. Organised resistance of African-American women to the legislation has come from the National Welfare Rights Organisation (NWRO) which has defended traditional views of motherhood and argued that the legislation denied dignity and choice. NWRO criticised the Act for not addressing the lack of jobs for black males and the low paying jobs for females, marching through the northeast rust belt from Philadelphia to New York to make their point. The march and other activities of NWRO had limited support from other women's groups and the organisation has been portrayed as protecting the vested interests of those on AFDC or those employed in the welfare system.

One of the most public and outspoken critics of the Act has been historian Gwendolyn Mink. Mink has argued that the muted response to the PRA has played into the hands of conservative authors such as Lawrence Mead who maintains that children are better off if the single mother is working and the father forced to accept more responsibility. Holding diametrically opposed views to Mead, Mink argues that single women with children should not be forced to undertake paid work but rather be paid a wage for their family care work in the home. Her book on Progressive Era and New Deal social policy
innovations affecting women, The Wages of Motherhood, was published in 1995 on the eve of the introduction to Congress of the Clinton bill. It is Mink's view that while the AFDC programme reflected the mistakes of early twentieth century proponents of welfare and was a 'politically vulnerable and targeted program' it should have been improved rather than abolished. 7 In response to the PRA, Mink shifted her scholarly attention to current issues, passionately arguing in Welfare's End for a 'new maternalism' - the need for public support of full time care giving for poor single mothers. The irony for Mink is that while public policy encourages middle class married mothers to stay at home and look after their children, poor single mothers are forced out to work. Why they should have to work outside the home? asks Mink; welfare policy should not regulate mothers but reward the work they do in the home. In the following year Mink published an edited collection Whose Welfare? Contributors included Dorothy Roberts, Frances Fox Piven, Rickie Solinger and Eileen Boris and focused on the impact of the PRA, especially the impact of wage work on care work for poor mothers, the rights of poor women to be mothers and to stay at home with their children and that care work should be recognised as work and attract payment.

A co-ordinator and steering committee member of the Women's Committee of 100, Mink in the Preface to Welfare's End, criticised the NOW response to the PRA and the general feminist silence about the stakes of welfare provisions for poor women and that silence gave permission to policymakers to treat punitive welfare reform as a no-lose situation. Feminists, she concludes, do not always act in the interests of other women.

Mink's advocacy for poor single women does not consider the resentment of men and women who also combine work and care and who feel their needs have been ignored in the PRA. They pay for childcare, pay taxes and are under stress in balancing low paid work with supporting those at home. An unexpected outcome of the 1996 legislation has been the popularity of the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). Although the EITC does not support full time care giving it provides assistance to all families, single or two-parent, through the tax system. Clearly the relationship to workforce and social changes was not adequately addressed in the PRA which was seen as a welfare initiative and did not consider long-term changes to the family. There is no acceptance that single parent families will continue to be a significant proportion of all families, a normative family rather than a passing aberration. Mink's work draws attention to the need for overall policies that are socially viable and help the new work patterns and relationships in the modern family. Hopefully her 'new maternalism' will be developed further and in a more inclusive way by herself and other feminist scholars.
The thrust of the PRA was enthusiastically embraced by the newly elected George W. Bush as evident in his appointment of Governor Tommy Thompson of Wisconsin to his administration. Thompson had extensively implemented the PRA in that state proclaiming that ‘we have started the welfare revolution in America. We think we can change for the better poor people and give them the opportunity to live the American dream.’ In doing this, the Republican administration has been described by Mink as ‘swift and brutal’. Although there has been no further major legislation, there has been the removal of entitlements to safety net benefits and the redirection of funds to programmes that promote marriage. Heidi Hartman's Washington based Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) has been one women's lobbying group that has consistently opposed the 1996 Act. The IWPR has continued with a monitoring role which has been useful given the difficulties of evaluation of the state-based PRA. The forthcoming publication of the results of an IWPR major evaluation study, *Life After Welfare Reform; the Characteristics, Work and Well Being of Low-Income Single Parent Families Pre and Post PRA.* finds that while the participation of many low-income single parents in the labour market increases, their earnings and wages remain low and their employment is concentrated in low-wage occupations and industries. The PRA may have stepped towards ending welfare but it has not ended poverty. The implications of these research findings for the everyday lives of single women are evident in two new books, both written by journalists and bringing together previously published articles. Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed* is based on participant research as a low paid waitress in three states. She writes that the focus on getting work rather than getting out of poverty in the PRA has swelled the ranks of the working poor - many people in low paying jobs keeping families in poverty. Ehrenreich also found that TANF did not deal with those who were still on welfare and that there has not been enough emphasis on education and training - just on work where conditions and the type of work offered are neither fair nor appropriate. LynNell Hancock's *Hands to Work* is based on case studies of three very different single mothers in the Bronx and is an excellent analysis of the uncertainty faced by poor women in a city with one of the largest concentrations of those impacted by the PRA. Hancock identifies the failure of TANF to deal with those with multiple problems who continue to remain on welfare.

These findings are worrying as the five-year time limits on welfare payments under the 1996 Act expire and tens of thousands of welfare recipients face the approaching cut-off on receiving aid. As Hancock writes, welfare reform in the prosperous nineties is pushing the first wave of families off public assistance amid today's recession. Church, county and
emergency relief programmes are feeling increased strain and states with high welfare populations are now under pressure and wondering if the cut off was too soon for such a massive change. Hancock's image of two trains moving towards collision, one the ending of welfare and one the threat of recession, is a telling one. Congress and the Senate are now under pressure from the Republican administration to pass further restrictive measures as they review the Act before the November election.

What has passed for welfare reform in the USA over the past two decades has been demoralising and punitive. To Australians who have felt the spin off in 'mutual obligation' changes to their own social security system, the PRA seems exceptionally draconian- especially in denying poor mothers the choice of staying at home and looking after their babies and young children. The question is whether USA feminists can overcome tensions and divisions and there are some signs that opposition to the Bush administration's proposed changes are having some impact in this respect with NOW taking a more vigorous position. There is a need to move on from the protective legislation/equal rights debates to develop new responses to a post-maternalism era - equitable policies for women and children within the broader framework of changes to work and family that are sustainable in the world's largest and fastest changing economy.

ENDNOTES