

Pressure Groups and Canadian Recreation Services in the 1930s

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One of the major initiatives of the Canadian federal government is the promotion of “well-being,” including “wellness,” and “active living.” This paper reports on how the services which contribute to that well-being have developed--in particular, the recreation, sport and physical activity services developed by the federal government of Canada and begun in the 1930s. During the decade of the 1930s. surrounded by economic, political and social turmoil, the federal government was being urged by certain individuals and groups to promote and support activities which we today would consider to contribute to the well-being of Canadians.

This investigation addresses the efforts and impact of these influential individuals and groups as advocates for national recreation services in Canada in the 1930s. Preoccupied through the decade with economic depression, unemployment, and social and political unrest, the Canadian federal government did not put leisure, recreation and sport matters into top priority in the 1930s. However, several groups of social reformers and practitioners were promoting financial and moral support for recreation. They focused on play or sport or physical activity as recreation in the “out of doors.” Examples of these groups include the Canadian National Parks Association, the Canadian Council on Child Welfare, the Canadian Physical Education Association, the National Council of Women of Canada and the U.S. based Playgrounds and Recreation Association of America. Individuals who played high profile roles in support of these advocacy efforts included J.J. Kelso, prominent social reformer, Charlotte Whitton of the Council on Child Welfare, Major Bowie of the Montreal Parks and Playgrounds Association, A.S. Lamb of the Physical Education Association, and Ian Eisenhardt of the B.C. Pro-Rec Movement, as well as others who may not have been allied with an organized group.

While not all of the efforts of these prominent groups and individuals were directed at the federal government, this investigation focuses their work at that level. The most evident support for national recreation services involved the unsuccessful bid to establish a National Ministry of Sports (including recreation) in 1937, and the successful work to include recreation as part of the Youth Training Programs of the Department of Labour in the late 1930s. However, the almost a decade of work which preceded these endeavors has not been the subject of research and thus this investigation fills that gap.

This research provides a historical context for current policies, and it identifies the role of advocates (including both social reformers and professionals) in their development and implementation. This is necessary to help clarify the position currently being advocated by proponents of recreation and active living regarding well-being.

This paper describes the impact of various individuals and groups who attempted to promote recreation (including play, physical recreation, outdoor recreation and sport) in Canada in the 1930s. Those advocates worked at the national level either because of their own personal interest, or because the mandate of their group. The level of federal involvement that these advocates sought varied from the creation of a Ministry of Sport to financial support for programs offered by other agencies.

Past research, such as that by Blackstock, Bray, McFarland, Galasso, Gear, West, Sawula, Lapagge, Broom and Baka, Schrodtt and Gurney attribute the federal government's involvement in recreation and sport to the work of a few individuals and groups such as Ian Eisenhardt and the British Columbia Pro-Rec Movement, and A.S. Lamb and the Canadian Physical Education Association, with a passing reference to the 1937 efforts by H.J. Plaxton, M.P. to introduce into the House of Commons a Bill which would establish a Ministry of Sports. This investigation uses archival material to indicate the existence of several other very active advocacy groups such as the Canadian Council on Child Welfare, the Canadian National Parks Association and the National Council of Women.

The Canadian Council on Child Welfare and its Recreation Division was very involved in promoting recreation and sport services throughout Canada. The Council attempted to promote recreation throughout Canada, and communicated with those who were working in recreation in Canada in the United States. The Canadian National Parks Association which began as an advocacy group with strong ties to the Alpine Club of Canada, promoted recreation in the out of doors, Through its executive, individual members and member organizations such as the National Council of Women, the CNPA worked throughout the 1930s to promote government involvement in recreation citing the various benefits to individuals and community health and using as a proposed model the German "out into the open" movement. The National Council of Women, an umbrella group for a wide variety of groups advocating social reform, pursued goals that included recreation, conservation, health and planning.

While the literature and research noted to this point has dealt primarily with organized groups and their employees or executive members, there were also individuals who were active in promoting recreation as part of their advocacy work for several causes including social welfare. One of those individuals was J.J. Kelso, social reformer. His work and that of any other individuals whose activities regarding recreation have not previously been recorded have been investigated and are part of this paper.

The contribution of this paper to our understanding of history is through the investigation and publicizing of the role of groups and individuals whose contributions have not been previously recognized as contributing to the development of leisure, recreation and sport in Canada and to concepts such as well-being which we currently promote.