

The State, Public Employment and Legitimacy in Canada¹

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In his early writings on the state Marx accepted the general distinction between the state and civil society, although he disputed the assertion that the state could transcend the individual interests in society and, acting as a universal class, secure the common interests (Marx, 1975: 45-46). In Marx's conception, the state arose as the principal form through which the dominant class constituted its political power. Given this development, the real 'communal interest' became an abstraction since its realization necessitated the dissolution of the antagonistic interests dividing civil society. The most fundamental contradiction, then, was not between the state and civil society, but between the state as the organ of power of the dominant class and the subordinate class subject to power.

While fundamental, this assertion does not exhaust the contradictions of the state. While the 'real communal interest' has been dissolved by private property, there remains a material basis for a general interest within civil society itself based on the necessary interdependence of the division of labour, which becomes simultaneously an 'illusory general interest' because the division occurs within an exploitative productive system. Jessop argues there is a contradiction between necessary social coordination, expressed unavoidably by the state in class societies (Jessop 1978: 55). The state is an organ superimposed upon society while being at the same time the mode of organization of that society. It becomes a mechanism for the reproduction of the power and position of the dominant class and simultaneously for the reproduction of 'society in general'. The state, then, becomes a principal focus of struggle for the subordinate class not only in the long run with respect to conditions prevailing within the 'illusory general interest' (Jessop 1978:55). As the expression of necessary coordination and the mechanism for social reproduction, the state provides essential services and meets some immediate interests of the subordinate classes which form part of the foundation of the legitimacy of the state. The degree of independence of the political from the economic makes the state, in principle, susceptible to pressures from the dominated classes and other groups. What needs to be emphasized is that reforms are extracted by working class and other group's collective organization and pressure in what they perceive to be in their interests. An emphasis on the creative rather than the determined side of class struggle highlights the often conflicting or contradictory interests which inform organizational, ideological and political action.

There has been room for considerable reform within the boundaries of the general interests of capitalism which, if part of a movement of transformation, can have important implications in the long and short run. Government workers in the institutions of the state, then, can be allies or protagonists of this struggle. More generally, state workers share an interest in the expansion of government services. These can take the form of the growth of repressive agencies or of institutions providing more positive needs – a factor which indicates that different types of government employees have somewhat different relations to some of the goals of mass struggles. It should be noted, however, that even the repressive agents serve some of the general needs of the population in their present circumstances. This can be seen in sharp focus in relation to foreign

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intervention, and more locally in police strikes. The distinction between agencies producing repression and those producing legitimacy is not at all clear. Nor are the abstract functions easy to separate in practice.

Both the issue of the provision of essential services and the possibility of some political influence over policy-making help to generate legitimacy for the state. It should, however, be noted that there is a distinction between the legitimacy of the state per se and the much more frail legitimacy of the governing political party. Disillusionment with the latter often occurs within the context of the accepted legitimacy of the state. In Nova Scotia workers talk about "never voting for the Buchannan government again". One of the consequences of the greater personalization of politics is that people identify policies with individuals. Since they come and go and have relatively short political careers, the policies are to a degree divorced from the parties.

It is important not to over emphasize the cognitive components of the stability of the state. Social stability is also maintained by sheer habituation, by privatization, by the hidden nature of exploitation and by coercion. Normative considerations are important and acceptance of the status quo may more reasonably be interpreted as acquiescence to what is defined as normal and regarded as inevitable. The general acceptance of cynical 'knowledge' may be a more predictable outcome of attempts to delegitimize the state. These issues need to be considered when debating the depth of the crisis of legitimacy in advanced capitalism. The state may be prepared to jettison some of the basics of the democratic traditions, but it will be done in the context of competing claims for legitimacy on the grounds of defending the national interest or the general welfare against sectional interests. Public employees are particularly vulnerable targets of this process, especially when apparently pursuing sectional ends.

The contemporary crisis was initially characterized by a general economic stagnation (including high unemployment by historical standards) coupled with an unprecedented continuation of relatively high inflation. As the manager of the national economy, the state has been charged with correcting the latter problem. At the same time, the rise in prices has been linked in popular consciousness with the expansion of government spending, especially deficit financing, and particularly the less immediately productive aspects of this spending. Hence the dogmas of supply side economics: reduce government spending, lower the deficit and 'discipline' organized government workers. On both counts -- as expendable labour in the rush to cut back social services, and as the principal protagonists in causing the 'wage-push' inflation -- state workers became the initial focus of the government's attempts to solve the economic crisis (Balfour 1972: 214). To the extent that the government is successful in legitimating its cutbacks, or in intimidating public employees, and there is no viable alternative social movement of protest, then the employee response will be ambivalent (Anderson & Kochan 1977).

The Survey

Within the Civil Service of Nova Scotia there have been few episodes of trade union militancy over the years. The chief exception to this generalization is among some health workers in the provincial hospital. Both nurses and technicians have, within the last decade, adopted a mass resignation tactic to press collective bargaining. As demonstrably the most trade union-oriented sector of provincial employees, I surveyed a sample of hospital workers to assess their trade union consciousness relative to their occupational position. The overall findings suggested that, despite potential for trade union orientation, most workers were not militant, were not trade union

conscious, and were conservative on social questions. There was, however, a more radical minority that could be a nucleus for a more militant response.

One hundred six respondents were interviewed and given a survey to complete, equally divided between males and females, and chosen from four sectors: service, clerical, technical, and middle management. This number represented a 67% response rate, with the service sector (blue-collar workers) least represented. Only one in four service workers agreed to take part.

The findings reported here do not demonstrate the simplistic prediction that public sector workers, who are directly affected by the manifestations of the current economic crisis as mediated by the state, will necessarily be in the forefront of opposition and deligitimation. The determination of response is affected by a contradictory nexus of interests. In addition, when other social issues such as the history of militancy of the employees interviewed, the ideologies to which they have been subject, and the leadership which purports to represent them, are all taken into consideration, the analysis of the actual conditions becomes even more complicated.

One of the primary concerns of the research was to elicit a sense of the differences respondents perceived between working in the public as opposed to the private sector. Several questions were concerned with whether the private sector was superior on a number of items and respondents were asked to indicate their evaluations, with the results summarised in Table 1.

Table 1
Proportion Reporting the Private Sector to be:

	Worse than Public	Same	Better than Public	(n)
Wages and Salaries	24	40	35	99
Working Conditions	21	58	21	97
Labour/Management Relations	14	59	27	96
Job Security	54	30	8	97
Promotion Opportunities	14	26	60	100

From the survey, 82% thought that “working for the government was “different from working in the private sector” while 10% said it was not different. Among the former, 29% cited better benefits as the major difference. One female manager said, in one breath, that the sick leave provisions were so generous as to be “a joke” and in the next that it had been fortunate for her when she was off for “two months but received full pay.”

In addition to fringe benefits, a higher security of employment has been one of the traditional benefits of government work. For some, however, this differential had been larger in the past and was now being diminished. One technician felt that, while a civil service position used to be permanent, "now, if they decide that the job is redundant or if you make a mistake, your job is on the line." Management can decide that the job is unnecessary and according to "the new contract, they can let you go." Another felt that the sense of security people may still feel in the hospital was false. "Ten years ago we didn't even pay unemployment insurance deductions. That isn't so today. Now there are lay-offs."

Other evidence suggests that this was a minority sentiment. Only eight percent had indicated that they felt insecure when this question was asked directly. This sense of relative permanency was linked by both management and non-management to a lower efficiency in the public service. From management's perspective, this benefit was a crucial limitation on their

decision-making power: "It is almost impossible to get rid of someone then they become entrenched. In the private sector once someone reaches the end of their usefulness, then they are let go." "You almost need an order from the Premier to get them fired." The workers sensed this as well. According to one clerk, "in the civil service things have to get pretty drastic before they can get rid of you."

This greater security was directly linked with inefficiency, the civil service: "no matter how far you work you get no further ahead." Private sector workers give more to their jobs because "they can benefit from it, for example, by advancement". The clerical workers were particularly likely to accept the designation of civil servants as inefficient. In business "you have to be on your toes because you're responsible for profit and loss." If you "botch a job in the private sector, you're out on your ear." lack of positive incentive, coupled with the absence of negative incentives because of the automatic security and the absence of management powers to discipline, were seen as the primary causes of the inefficiency of government work.

One attribute of government employment which for some appeared to counter-balance this tendency to job inefficiency was the service ethic. One successful female manager thought that many hospital workers were still "professionals dedicated to their responsibilities". They worked harder than someone down-town in purchasing or public works" and are trained to think of the client first. This service ethic made up for the absence of a profit motive.

Overall, then, civil service employment was seen as different because of better benefits and security, conditions which had several ramifications. Management felt their powers were too restricted. The civil service was regarded as inefficient, a fact which was reflected in the work attitude of the non-management personnel and was caused by a combination of factors associated with management rights, the attitudes civil servants developed by being socialised at work, and the nature of the bureaucratic service itself.

One obvious question here is the reference, or comparison point used by the respondents in their evaluations of the two sectors. It seems from their answers that the comparisons were made with other large concerns rather than, for example, the more marginal competitive sector. Wages would tend to be better, working conditions similar, labour/management relations perhaps better and certainly superior promotion opportunities (Wein, 1979). Among the service respondents, however, a different reference point can be detected in many of their replies. One of the differences between the two sectors, for example, was that in the civil service you have an association to "back you up" and protect your rights with respect to management, a situation which was less common in the less secure, small business and marginal enterprise sector of the economy.

Finally with respect to the difference between private and public sector work the items 1 to S can be combined into a single Lickert scale to produce a 'private sector superiority index. There was a tendency for those who had experienced promotions to rate the private sector significantly lower than the public (- .28) a correlation which was lower, although in the same direction, for promotion opportunities (- .12). Those high in authority tended to rate the private sector lower than the public (- .33) as did those with long service in the hospital (-.26). The difference among occupational levels, age, education and degree of autonomy were lower. However, those who were more satisfied with their jobs and those who got along well with management, not surprisingly, also considered the public sector to be significantly better.

A second set of questions on the general survey focused on other issues of public concern regarding government spending and taxation policies (see Table 2).

Table 2
Results of General Attitude Survey

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	(n)
6. Not enough money is being spent on health care	8	25	25	35	8	101
7. The biggest problem in the country is inflation	26	49	6	18	2	101
8. The government wastes a lot of taxpayers' money	35	54	7	3	1	100
9. Wage and price controls held down wages not prices	48	38	10	4	1	101
11. Government has to cut down on its spending	17	56	15	10	2	100
12. Government should sell Petro-Canada to private sector.	5	13	36	31	14	97
13. Best way for gov't to save is to cut welfare and U.I.	15	27	24	24	10	100
14. Taxes in this country are too high	16	31	33	18	2	100

There is considerable agreement on many issues. 89% agreed that the government wastes a lot of taxpayers' money. Furthermore, more respondents agreed that taxes were too high (47%) than disagreed (20%). However one-third thought that not enough money was being spent on health care. On the question of the austerity measures, 42% thought that the best place for the government to save money was to cut down on welfare and unemployment insurance payments while 34% disagreed. There was a negative attitude to these social security measures that emerged in the interviews, both generally and with direct reference to hospital turn-over. One clerk was "very much against unemployment insurance. People should work if they can." Five years ago, people "really wanted to work but now welfare and unemployment insurance are an acceptable part of things, In his department, turn-over was very high, there was a large percentage of minority group workers, and the age level was quite low: "The general trend today is to do as much work as you have to, to qualify for unemployment payments."

The original expectation of the research was that there would be an overall tendency to agree between items 8 (government wastes money), 11 (need to cut back) and 13 (best place is welfare and U.I.) and, second, that this pattern would also hold for 6, a positive correlation indicating that hospitals should be expanded. That is, the general acceptance of the need for austerity would be accompanied by an identification of other areas of government spending as more appropriate than the specific one in which the respondents were employed. The relationships can be shown by the r correlation coefficients in Table 3:

Table 3 Relationship between Public Sector Attitude Variables

	6	7	8	9	11	12	13	14
6	--							
7	.22*	--						
8	-.10	.38*	--					
9	.09	.51*	.70*	--				
11	-.33*	.41*	.61*	.36*	--			
12	.04	.06	-.11	-.08	.08	--		
13	-.03	.22*	.16	.15	.25*	.13	--	
14	.06	.27*	-.24*	.35*	.24*	.14	.40*	--

Correlation coefficients reported are gammas. * Indicates significance .05 (Tau B).

The belief that the government must cut back (11) was significantly correlated with six of the seven variables, the only exception being item 12 concerning the somewhat different issue of nationalisation of the petroleum industry. A positive correlation with this item would have been consistent with the expected pattern, indicating that the government should refrain from spending money to buy out private companies. The correlation was positive but not significant. Most of the expected agreement does appear from this table of relationships and can be expressed as follows: inflation is too high and so are taxes; the government wastes a great deal of taxpayers' money and should cut back on its spending. In general, the best place to make these savings is by cutting back on welfare and unemployment insurance payments. This last item was not entirely consistent with the expected pattern for, although the correlation between 13 (cut back on welfare) and 8 (government wastes money) was positive, it did not reach significance. In general, however, this pattern represents a dominant conservative orientation.

The second part of the expected pattern did not emerge. There was a negative correlation between 11 (need to cut back) and 6 (hospitals need more money): those who agreed with austerity in general disagreed that not enough money was being spent on health care. They either believed that enough was being spent but should be left alone, or that health services should also be cut back. The question does not allow a differentiation between these possible responses and the latter interpretation would have provided a better test for the second expectation above. The view might have been that there may be no need to expand health services, but it ought not to be cut back.

On the other hand, the negative correlation between items 6 (health care underfunded) and 11 (need for austerity) indicates that those who thought more money should be spent on health care disagreed with the general point that the government needed to reduce its spending. This represents a second pattern in the data, with a minority holding a more liberal orientation.

Of the public service variables, the items which consistently inter-correlated were: 7 (inflation biggest problem) , 8 (government wastes money), 9 (Controls held down wages), 11 (austerity) and 14 (Taxes too high). Item 13 (Cur welfare, UI) did not correlate significantly with 8 (Government wastes money) or 9 (Controls held down wages). Of these, 7 (inflation biggest problem) is common to both the liberal and conservative orientations discerned, and is a separate historical issue. Because 13 expressed the most potentially controversial issue – that cuts should be made in welfare – it was included as one element in a Lickert index to measure 'public service conservatism', along with 11 (government must cut spending) and 14 (taxes are too high)

Management proved to be slightly less conservative than non-management, with the blue

collar group being the most conservative ($\gamma = -.10$). Males ($-.12$) and older workers ($.05$) were also slightly less conservative, although none of these three relationships was significant. Generally speaking, on issues of attitudinal liberalism, the more educated will tend to score higher than those with less education. This proved to be the case in this study, with the least conservative being those with the highest education ($-.25$)

Generally speaking, this evidence (which tends to be confirmed by the actual response of public employee unions in the province) suggests that there is no crisis of legitimacy among these government workers. Not only is the question of capitalism *per se* not an immediate issue; not only is the 'state' as a whole generally accepted; but the actual policies of the current government are approved by the majority of one group which is being, to a degree, adversely affected by them. This is, of course, by no means the whole story. Attitude surveys are notorious for hiding more than they reveal, and different questions would uncover the layers of frustration and alienation which undoubtedly exist. This, however, would only describe in a more complete way the contradictions and ambiguity of employee consciousness; it would not negate their tendency to accept some conservative orientations at one time and place.

Conclusion

The public sector worker has been pushed to the forefront of militant labour in Canada by the government's response to the contemporary economic crisis. Prior to 1983 the dimensions of the crisis were unprecedented: the combination of high inflation and the persistence of high unemployment resulting in the coining of a new, if unattractive, word – stagflation – and placed the public sector worker in the first ranks of the class struggle. With the partial abandonment of Keynesianism and the adoption of variations of supply-side economics and monetarist doctrines in the U.S. and the U.K., the crisis has been brought to a point where it resembles a more classical pattern of falling inflation and increasing unemployment. Even the recent and much trumpeted recovery, which is proclaimed in the belief that investor confidence is itself a key factor in accumulation, will do little for unemployment as more efficient production methods permanently replace workers.

The key to what success the new Right's economic policies have had, however, has been the partial dismantlement of the welfare state, or more precisely, the liberal elements of the advanced capitalist state. The liberal state has been in decline for a decade and the primary victims of this process are two. First, the recipients of government services, particularly those in the most vulnerable positions, have had to endure cut-backs, user fees, substandard service and a host of other measures designed to deny them the rights to which they have had some access. Second, public employees who provide these services were the first to feel the economic pinch in the form of selective wage controls, rationalization and speed-up. They were also faced with a serious relative decline in their status position. Formerly very securely employed, they face the increasing prospects of supposed redundancies and actual layoffs.

The government's watch-words are restraint, austerity and efficiency. The governments are banking, or the success of this policy, on their ability to isolate public sector workers from the 'public'. They have used the necessary reproductive role of the state for the social formation as a whole, against the public employee. The ambiguity of the services position of government workers, and their triple role as taxpayers, clients and providers of services, underlie their ambivalent attitude and response in the face of the current crisis.

This often conservative orientation, which is paramount in the pronouncements of the

government, the media and the associations of businessmen, also enters the consciousness of public workers. For those interviewed in the survey reported in this paper, a conservative response to the crisis tends to predominate. The majority of the civil servants' broadly accept that governments are wasteful; they accept the view that governments need to spend less money; they wish to reduce taxes and feel that welfare and unemployment insurance are appropriate places to make the necessary cuts. The private sector was generally seen as more efficient and as being superior to the public sector, by both management and non-management. This is not simply a question of the acceptance of an outside conservative ideology, however. The ambiguity of government work provides the structural basis for this orientation. But this 'structural' explanation is not a simple determination principally because it is contradictory, a fact which denies any simple conceptual leap from structure to predicted response. In turn, while ideology and politics make sense of this contradictory situation for the individuals within it, there are different ideologies and politics which can be supported, more or less completely, by the structure.

The concluding point must be to suggest that there is no inevitability in this conservative response. The structural determinants of attitude and action are contradictory and the result in a complex grid of interests and perceptions. The most that can be said is that, in the absence of an alternative conception which is seen as legitimate by workers, the tendency is to accept the prevailing discourse, to put sectional ahead of more abstract general interests, and to accept the dominant definition of those interests which are immediately apparent and paramount: the costs of the welfare state are increasingly borne by individual taxpayers and the logical immediate response is to demand fewer taxes rather than a more equitable distribution. Similarly, the first response may well be to defend your own work and security at the same time that you resent the social taxation that supports others. Such a complex of responses may be understandable. They may even be predictable in a province where social democracy has made few inroads into the social consciousness. But perhaps more importantly, they reflect the importance of developing a viable and legitimate alternative.

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