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Are Governments Smarter Than We Think?
The Welfare State in Canadian Provinces

Abstract: The welfare state was created to mitigate inequality between citizens. With the objective to alleviate housing inequalities in terms of affordability and suitability, low-income housing policy was a key social policy within the welfare state expansion in the post-war era. Over the past decades, many changes pertaining to low-income housing policy have taken place in most Western countries, including in Canada. These changes raise certain issues for our understanding of the welfare state. Three major changes related to housing policy instruments

But what in fact is learning? The irony is that the importance and ubiquity of what we might think of as learning in turn makes it difficult to define. What does it mean to learn, and how do we do it? Our commonsense assumptions about learning are those we have from school. It seems to have something to do with teaching, with lessons, with doing well or badly. And then, on reflection, we seem to learn as much by informal as by formal processes: we learn from experience (which is sometimes gained by experiment), and from others, including our parents and peers. Often, the two are mutually reinforcing …

- Freeman (2006, 367) in *Oxford Handbook of Public Policy*

The concept of learning is far from novel in political decision making (see for example Heclo 1974; Hall 1993). In a seminal article that has largely influenced the 'new institutionalist' turn in political science, March and Olsen (1984, 745) wrote: ''It is a frequent observation of institutionalism that institutions accumulate historical experience through learning.'' However, the concept of learning remains elusive and is marginalized by many contemporary scholars of institutional change and welfare state reforms (Morgan et al. 2010; Pierson 2004; Van Kersbergen and Vis 2014; Palier 2010). The elusiveness is explained by the lack of a common understanding of 'learning' as a driver of institutional change, the actors involved in the learning process, the intentions

(Salamon 1995, 1981), etc.

such changes are mostly described as the 'everyday job' of public administrators or say policy analysis 'as usual'[4] (Hall 1993, 283, 288). But what if everyday learning or everyday policy analysis had amounted to profound institutional changes? ''[I]mportant changes often take place incrementally and through seemingly small adjustments that can, however, cumulate into significant institutional transformation'' said Mahoney and Thelen (2010, xi). That is exactly what this paper will explore, using learning as the main driver of the three major changes to policy instruments.

However, the mechanism of policy feedback must also be acknowledged for two major changes: grants to non-profit organizations (NPOs) and the use of private market instruments. Affiliated to the concept of path dependence, the mechanism of policy feedback (Pierson 1993) explains to a certain extent the continuity of these two housing policy instruments. The stage of policy formulation that precedes the launching of a new program is rarely similar to a *tabula rasa*. That stage is rather a moment of reflection by public administrations on the current situation and the kind of policy direction they want to follow which implies looking at government's experience with previous policies (Howlett et al. 2009, 110, 199-202). The effects of the policy feedback mechanism have guided the decisions of policy makers to renew or reproduce former federal and provincial policy tools like grants to NPOs and market-based instruments. Overall, that path dependence mechanism produce a counteracting movement to the force of the learning mechanism, in other words it constrains the number of possible innovations that could result from learning.

 Before presenting the conceptual findings, some background information will be provided. The first section on low-income housing policy clarifies the distinctions between the policy instruments under study. The second section of the paper offers a brief overview of the federal government's involvement in the low-income housing sector as well as the increasing provincial autonomy. Finally, the third section is the core of the paper. Starting with empirical material collected in archives and through interviews with policy elites, this section aims to uncover the mechanisms that can explain how and why (Falleti and Lynch 2009, 1143) provincial governments turned away from government delivery of housing to embrace non-profit and private sectors provision of affordable housing.

I. Low-income housing policy: instruments under study

The next paragraphs will detail the most important housing policy instruments in the Canadian context, designed by the central government and/or provincial governments to support *low-income renters*[5]. But note that these housing policy instruments are very similar to those implemented across the globe (Lévy-Vroelant 2011; Schwartz 2015).

Public housing is owned and managed by public authority, whether at the provincial or municipal level. During the post-war decades, public housing projects featured high-rise buildings containing large number of units (CMHC 2011, 130, 134). Non-profit housing projects are owned and operao[(im)23ts at2(1342h)7 pr4TBT1stnd1 471 0 0 1 476 TJs t

or volunteers to run it. Most of the time, non-profit societies were founded by community groups, faith groups, service clubs, foundations, and so on. Housing co-operatives are own collectively by their members/residents, who also take an active part in the management (CMHC 2011, 131-4). ''The majority of the co-operative housing stock is non-equity, which means that the housing is for use only and the resident does not hold a financial or equity stake in the resale of the property'' (Sousa 2013, 24). Characterized by small-scale developments and a strong sense of community, non-profit and co-operative housing became more popular in the 1970s, partly in reaction to the public housing model (CMHC 2011, 133-4; Bouchard et al. 2010, 93-5). Non-profit and co-operative housing are often grouped together under the label 'third sector' housing (Fallis 2010, 181).

Private market instruments were also developed. The rent supplement program, in its private rental version, allows public authorities to seek agreement with private landlords and then to lease their units to low-income households at subsidized rates. This program was also introduced in the 1970s by the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC 2011, 134). The rent supplement program designed for private rental units (or private landlord rent supplement) will be analyzed along with housing allowances as both are private market instruments. Housing allowances are cash transfers with the aim of augmenting ''the capacity of the household to occupy an appropriate dwelling unit by attaching the housing subsidy to the given household'' (Galster 1997, 561). The household chooses its accommodation and if it moves, the subsidy moves with it. That gives the ''portable'' character to these housing allowances (also known as housing vouchers/benefits) typically used on the private market (Riccio 2008, 192). In addition to being portable, housing allowances are also confidential in the sense that landlords are usually not aware which renters receive financial assistance (Steele 2007, 65-80).

II. Overview of the low-income housing sector in Canada

According to the Canadian constitution, housing is a matter of provincial jurisdiction. However, Bacher (1993, 9) stresses that the constitutional division of powers did not have an important effect: ''Although federalism in Canada poses some additional challenges to social-housing advocates by blurring the lines of political responsibility, the structure itself has not impeded any government from taking action.'' Despite the fact that the federal government has always acknowledged that social or affordable housing was not under its jurisdiction, it has made several interventions using its spending power (Banting 1990, 117, 126) as it did with other social policy under the purview of provincial governments (Noël 2008). Indeed, many authors highlight the strong federal role in the development of public housing after World War II and then third sector housing in the 1970s (Rose 1980, 29; Bacher 1993, 211-2; Pomeroy and Falvo 2013, 184-6)[6].

The strong federal role in low-income housing policy formulation and funding during the post-war decades was partly explained by the weak one that provincial governments had back then (Carroll and Jones 2000, 280-1). Nevertheless, the situation has changed over time, with provinces building their institutional capacity and expressing their desire to acquire more control on policy direction in the 1970s (see Banting 1990, 128-9). After a first round of federal-provincial global agreements in 1979 where provinces have gained a bit more control over the delivery of low-income housing projects, the 1986 agreements have increased the provincial role a step further (Pomeroy 1989, 12). Provinces who wished to implement specific programs had to provide a minimum of 25% of their

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[6] The federal government has also supported private entrepreneurs through a variety of means to encourage them to build rental accommodation for low- to moderate-income households (CMHC 2011, 131; CMHC 1988, 6-7).

funding. ''However, the federal government maintained ongoing leadership in terms of policy, coordination and accountability'' (CMHC 2011, 136). Yet funding remained an important issue for the federal government as the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation

P/Ts have the choice to maintain existing programs and/or introduce new initiatives to meet local needs and priorities. Initiatives under the Framework can include new construction, renovation, home ownership assistance, rent supplements, shelter [or housing] allowances, and accommodations for victims of family violence. Contributions by other local parties, including the private and not-for-profit sectors, are also encouraged.

Before introducing AHI in the early 2000s, the federal government acknowledged that provinces had developed stronger institutional capacity for policy formulation and implementation of housing programs. CMHC (2011, 137) stresses that ''bilateral agreements have provided them [provinces] with increasing flexibility'' on these matters. Despite this increased flexibility which may had led provinces to either take very different paths or maintain the status quo, provincial governments went in the same direction and have done quite the same thing. As highlighted in the introduction, provincial governments of British Columbia, Alberta and Quebec turned away from the direct government delivery of housing and mostly relied on NPOs and market based-instruments. From a theoretical perspective, that convergence is rather surprising. At least since the federal withdrawal in the mid-1990s, one would have expected further difference between provinces given that they had more autonomy to design and implement their own policy (Wallner 2014, 5; Banting 2006, 44; Ferejohn et Weingast 1997, x). How do we explain these similar patterns? The next section will provide some answers by using a process-tracing methodology along with a mechanismic approach (Gerring 2008), but will start by presenting quantitative data.

III. Provincial housing policy

The data shown in figure 1 give a good overview of the use of housing policy instruments over a time span of forty years. To make it very simple, the figure only contains percentages. These percentages represent

requires evidence of 'increased intelligence and sophistication of thought'[13] about the policy or implementation design,''

(Esping-Andersen 1990; Huber et Stephens 2000). Thus partisan politics cannot account for the abandonment of the public housing model. In fact, the public housing formula has not been tossed aside at the same time in each province, but the mechanism of instrumental learning explains why even left-wing governments have mostly chosen other alternatives to provide affordable housing.

In British Columbia, the mechanism of instrumental learning, operating directly and indirectly, has mainly driven the decision making process that accounts for the permanent abandonment of the public housing model. Provincial administrators drew lessons through negative local and international experiences with public housing projects, because of high costs and social problems arising from the concentration of poverty. The social-democratic NDP government in power from 1972 to 1975 has built many public housing projects during its short mandate. In spite of this, policy elites expressed worries about the weaknesses of this policy instrument.

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You know even left-wing governments have to be business-minded […] They still have to manage the provincial budget and if there is a cheaper way you have to… If you want to deliver a thousand units and you're committing to it for thirty or forty or fifty years, if it's more publicly acceptable and lower cost to do it through the third sector than even a left-leaning government will do that. (interview J. Bell 2015)

Quebec provincial government has maintained the construction of government-owned public housing until the early 1990s (SHQ 1994, 27), under the governance of both right-wing Liberal party and social-democratic Parti Québécois. The electoral victory of the Parti Québécois in 1994 coincided with the disengagement of the federal government, which has triggered the reflection on the part of provincial officials about the future of low-income housing in the province. The movement of the instrumental learning mechanism was visible in the policy process. The provincial housing agency produced a policy paper in 1997 (SHQ 1997) which was released the same day of the 1997-1998 provincial budget. That budget had the objective to improve public finances and maintain the path towards zero deficit (Quebec 1997, 30). The purpose of the policy paper was to assess the different policy instruments implemented over time. Public housing was the one receiving most criticisms: ''The high costs of low-income housing programs such as public housing impose significant limits to the volume of interventions that the State can achieve […] Thus to accommodate a single person on welfare in a public housing unit, the government spending reaches $680 per month if it is an existing public housing unit and would be $1,062 in the case of a new unit'' (SHQ 1997, 4-5).

The former CEO of Quebec housing agency, in office when the public housing program was abandoned in the mid-1990s under the social-democratic leadership of the Parti Québécois, is one of many interviewees who have expressed their dissatisfaction with the public housing formula: ''Public housing… it is so expensive, it's exorbitant if one considers the overall 'unit cost'

profit sector was secondary (Alberta Municipal Affairs 1994, 3). Indeed, the strategy evoked in the last quote has not materialized before the turn of the century since no capital funding for new housing units was made available until then.

When capital funding was resumed in the early 2000s onward, Klein himself and subsequent

In 1994, the NDP government introduced HOMES BC, the new *made in B.C.* housing program after the federal government withdrawn. That program which was established to ''showcase the creativity and expertise of B.C's non-profit sector'' according to the then housing minister (BC Housing 1994), also demonstrates the presence of a path dependency. Policy feedback effects of the previous federal non-profit housing program have greatly influenced the design of HOMES BC. Indeed, the guidelines of both programs are extremely similar (BC Housing and CMHC 1993, 1; BC Housing 1994, 5). This quote from the same senior official illustrates these policy feedback effects: ''We just stuck with what we knew. We had a formula that was developed with the federal government on how to deliver programs. We delivered… BC Housing delivered the federal provincial programs [since 1986]. So we were familiar with how to deliver and get units built'' (interview J. Bell 2015). About HOMES BC he said: ''We were able to refine it, but basically use the same delivery model that we did previously with the federal-provincial housing'' (interview J. Bell 2015).

For government and NPOs, that is a win-win arrangement. In fact, the endurance of the non-profit model in British Columbia housing policy is also explained by the mobilization of third sector groups themselves, through the mechanism of policy feedback. Since these groups receive funding through such policy orientation, they benefit from its continuity. A former executive director of the BC Non-Profit Housing Association tells her personal story: ''HOMES BC, I was involved in getting that program… lobbying government to implement that program, from the non-profit sector side and the co-op side. The co-ops and non-profits actually put that concept of that program together and promoted it to the NDP when they were still in opposition, promoted the concept. Then when they got elected, they said "Ok, let's take a look at this program"'' (interview A. Sundberg 2015).

Under the governance of the British Columbia Liberal Party since 2001, provincial officials continued to promote the non-profit housing formula for its economic as well as its non-economic advantages. This quote taken from the provincial housing strategy summarizes both path dependence and learning mechanisms: ''The Province's long term policy has been to support a strong non-profit housing sector. Non-profit housing providers are best suited to manage the social housing stock and attend to British Columbians in need. This successful policy approach has resulted in 90 per cent of our stock being directly managed by non-profit organizations'' (British Columbia 2014, 15).

The case of Quebec has many similarities with that of British Columbia. The same learning and path dependence mechanisms also interact. The main difference between both provinces is that Quebec provincial government decided to focus on third sector groups in the mid-1990s after the federal government disengagement. Even though numerous co-operative and non-profit housing projects had also been supported since the 1970s, in parallel of public housing projects, the shift towards third groups was mostly visible in 1997 with the introduction of AccèsLogis program under the social-democratic leadership of the Parti Québécois. That program has been the main affordable housing program ever since (Ducharme and Vaillancourt 2012).

The adoption of the third sector housing model by the Quebec government is chiefly explained by the instrumental learning mechanism. As mentioned earlier in the quote of the former CEO of the provincial housing agency who disbanded public housing and focused instead on grants to third groups, public housing was not the most adequate option from a cost-benefit analysis. He indicated that this was especially true for large cities where big public housing complexes were built in the post war decades. In fact, he emphasized that the shift to the third sector housing approach was also

explained by the desire of decision makers to avoid 'mistakes of the past', referring to social problems that arose from the concentration of low-income families in such public housing complexes (interview J-P. Beaulieu 2016).

However, [a] path dependency is also visible in the policy

their proposal to obtain funding in order to produce new units (Alberta Seniors and Community Supports 2005, 33; Alberta 2008; Alberta HUA 2010, 11-

not contribute to over concentration of social

accommodation to do so if they choose. Third, since it works in conjunction with private sector accommodation and has a controlling mechanism built into the formula, it required far less subsidy on a per unit basis. Fourth, SAFER greatly reduces the inequity between the treatment afforded [to] those living in the public/non-profit sector versus those living in the private market. (Armitage 1978, 17)

As the previous quote has demonstrated, the introduction of SAFER derives from decision makers' efforts to improve the housing policy by making it more effective, efficient and equitable[20]. The policy process was guided by the goal of helping the maximum number of people with limited resources. Even if the solution found was not necessarily 'optimal', the cost-benefit analysis behind this new program is visible. Benefits are not strictly conceived in terms of the number of people supported. Qualitative aspects are also taken into consideration since we cannot 'measure' the added benefit of having the freedom to choose the accommodation where one wants to live. Depending on the situation of the person in need and the housing market in one location, private market instruments can be very useful.

Premier Ujjal Dosanjh leader of the NDP has also realized that. Even if the NDP government

democratic Parti Québécois government in 1980. A former senior official who has work on the design and implementation of Logirente confirmed that him and his colleagues at the Quebec housing agency were very much inspired by the SAFER model in British Columbia (interview F. Renaud 2016). In fact, Logirente was an identical copy of SAFER: targeted to seniors, using the same formula to calculate benefits, etc. But with the difference that it also included owners who were spending over 30% of their income on shelter costs (SHQ 1992, 25). That same senior official and the division he was part of were producing research on housing policy trends in Canada. The SAFER program had caught the attention of then Quebec housing minister Guy Tardif who wanted to develop a Quebec version of the program (interview F. Renaud 2016). Yet Guy Tardif was quite pragmatic about Logirente after its implementation. He has indicated that it was not a policy instrument appropriate for all cases, but he underscored that it could help many people who just had an affordability problem,

housing allowance program was introduced, the Direct to Tenant Rent Supplement Program (Alberta HUA 2011a, 10). Another initiative must be mentioned. Even if it didn't last long, the Homeless and Eviction Prevention Fund was also introduced as a new measure (Alberta HUA 2010, 15). The program provided ''a range of short-term assistance to any Alberta individual or family at risk of losing their rental home, including: payment of rental arrears, utility arrears, and rent shortfalls'' (ASFAH 2008, 22).

The instrumental learning mechanism was driving the policy process, with policy makers trying to address the housing crisis. That is very apparent in the words of Mike Leathwood, assistant deputy minister at the ministry responsible for housing: ''For immediate assistance they [government] brought in the Direct to Tenant program. They said we can help people right away by providing rental assistance. And a fund that was called the Homeless and Eviction Prevention Fund because you had people moving to the province, with limited financial resources, but needed to fill the job vacancy market'' (interview M. Leathwood 2015).

But again, the instrumental learning mechanism interacts with the policy feedback mechanism since political and bureaucratic elites were searching for the best solutions to solve a problem, and that is usually done by looking at the various policy instruments in the toolbox for inspiration. The Task Force set up by the Prime Minister of Alberta to find solutions to the housing crisis wrote: ''The more timely and efficient solution to get people into affordable housing is to increase the current allocation to rent supplements […] A portion of the RSP [rent supplement program] allocation would be used for a pilot project to test the feasibility of attaching subsidies to qualified individuals, rather than to units'' (AAHTF 2007, 17). That pilot project became the Direct to Tenant Rent Supplement, which is now a permanent program. This program is an innovation in itself, but that does exhibit some form of continuity from a previous one.

> As a result of Task Force, we introduced the Direct to Tenant Rent Supplement program. We had never done that before. We had done the traditional Private landlord subsidy program cost-shared with the feds, with the agreement with the landlord to set units aside and then you subsidize the person to the unit […] We brought in the Direct to Tenant program as an immediate measure to get financial assistance to households in need in a hot housing market, that had close to 1% vacancy and rapidly rising housing costs. (interview M. Leathwood 2015)

In short, whether they were run by right-wing or left-wing parties, governments in all provinces have learned over several decades that private market instruments can be effective, efficient and equitable. Yet these instruments may not be appropriate in every circumstances. But that subsection has demonstrated that private market instruments were useful enough to be reproduced showing the effects of the policy feedback mechanism.

Conclusion

In this paper, I've developed an analytical framework to explain similar patterns of welfare state reforms. As a key social policy, low-income housing still has the objective to reduce inequality between citizens, to provide affordable and adequate housing for those in need. However, the policy instruments or techniques have changed over time. A detailed analysis of provincial housing policy in three Canadian provinces from 1975 to 2015 has revealed similar changes. Decision makers have mostly turned away from the 'traditional' public housing model and chosen to support the development of new affordable housing through third sector providers instead. Policy elites have also

embraced private market instruments such as housing al

has oriented the decision making. In fact, senior officials are now fully aware of the strengths and weaknesses

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