The Rise and Decline of Women's Policy Machinery in British Columbia and New South Wales: A Cautionary Tale

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Abstract. This article presents a comparative analysis of the institutional trajectories traced by women's policy agencies within government in the province of British Columbia in Canada and in the state of New South Wales in Australia. In both cases, a period during which the principal women's policy agency took the form of a freestanding government ministry was followed by a period during which that ministry (along with an array of women's policy agencies located elsewhere in government) was dismantled. The partisan complexion of the governments undertaking these initiatives has been quite different in the two cases, and presents an apparent paradox. The article explores this paradox, as well as other patterns observable across the two cases, and provides an assessment of their implications.

Keywords: • Comparative politics • Feminism and the state • State feminism • Women's policy machinery

Introduction

The final decades of the 20th century witnessed a significant increase in the number of jurisdictions in which the government established some form of women's policy machinery ("agencies dedicated to promoting gender equality and improving the status and conditions of women") within the state bureaucracy (True and Mintrom, 2001: 30). The proliferation of such agencies has fueled important debates about whether, or under what circumstances, they have the potential to make significant positive contributions to the well-being of diverse groups of women. The purpose of this article is to contribute to these debates by developing a comparative analysis of two cases – the Canadian province of British Columbia and the Australian state of New South Wales – in which key features of women's policy agencies, and the political contexts within which they have operated, have

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varied in interesting and theoretically important ways. In particular, the analysis explores the relationships between the partisan complexion and ideological orientation of the governing party; the institutional structure, location, mandate, and resources of women's policy agencies; and the extent to which government policies have been supportive of women's diverse needs and interests.

There is a growing literature on feminist activism and policy, women's policy machinery, and gender mainstreaming that focuses on the substate level in parliamentary democracies in the industrialized West (Chappell, 1995, 2006; Grace, 2005; Harder, 2003; Malloy, 1999; Sawer, 1990; Teghtsoonian, 2000, 2003). Much of this work presents insights drawn from a single case; a smaller number of studies have pursued a comparative approach, often using examples from both Canada and Australia (see, for example, Malloy, 2003; Rankin and Vickers, 2001). There is much to recommend a Canada/Australia comparative framework as a research strategy: both countries are governed through a set of institutional structures that reflect the legacy of the British parliamentary system and both are federal states. In addition, the governments of Canadian provinces and of Australian states are responsible for policies and spending decisions in a number of areas, many of which are of tremendous importance to women, including education, housing, social assistance, and health.

There are a number of important similarities across the two cases: in both the Canadian province of British Columbia (BC) and the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW), women's policy agencies have operated under governments formed by parties from across the political spectrum and with varying ideological commitments; women's policy machinery has undergone striking changes over time with respect to structure, location, mandate, and financial and political resources in both BC and NSW; and, for a time in each case, the principal women's policy agency took the form of a full-fledged government ministry focused on women. These similarities are accompanied by one intriguing difference: whereas in BC, the Ministry of Women's Equality was established by a government formed by the social democratic New Democratic Party (NDP)[1] and subsequently eliminated by the provincial Liberal Party as part of a wider set of neoliberal reforms, the Ministry for the Status and Advancement of Women in NSW was *established* by a government of the *right* (the conservative coalition government led by John Fahey) and was dismantled by a government formed by the Australian Labor Party (ALP). A comparative analysis of these and related developments in BC and NSW affords an opportunity to explore a number of theoretical and empirical issues relevant to our understanding of the relationship between the partisan composition of government, women's policy agencies, and a feminist policy agenda.

Theoretical and Empirical Terrain

Feminist scholars and activists have a long-standing interest in the relationship between the partisan composition of government and its willingness to move forward policies and programs that respond to the needs and interests of diverse communities of women. Amy Mazur (2002: 189) has noted "[t]he conventional wisdom that left-wing governments are more favourable to feminist-oriented policies" than those formed by parties of the right, a view which rests on a considerable body of scholarship and practical experience (see, for example, Bashevkin, 1998; Chappell, 2002a, 2002b). Much existing research suggests that

social democratic and center-left parties are more likely than those of the right to have established linkages to progressive social movements, and are more inclined to mobilize state resources and public policy in order to pursue these movements' social justice and equity goals (Mazur, 2001: 24). Researchers have also identified important correlations between the partisan complexion of government and the profile of women's policy machinery. For example, Jonathan Malloy has argued that "[w]hen power shifts from a neo-conservative party to a social democratic party with strong links to social movements, special policy agencies are likely to be expanded and transformed. Agencies may be encouraged to see ... their mandate as representing the movement's demands within government circles" (2003: 84). And, citing cases in Australia and Canada where a party of the right was elected to office, he notes that where governments are "less committed to [social] movements ... [a]gency mandates are likely to shrink in scope and to be confined more to 'coordinating' and 'assisting' in policy development, not to 'representing' movement demands" (Malloy, 2003: 85). This analysis is consistent with comparative findings, reported by Kylie Stephen (2000: 230), that governments of the left are more likely than governments of the right to establish women's policy agencies close to the center of government decision-making.

However, understandings of the differences between "left" and "right" have become complicated over the past decade. "Third Way" governments formed by social democratic or center-left parties have pursued a broad range of policies that often reflect neoliberal goals and commitments. These have included fiscal restraint, an increased reliance on private funding for – and provision of – social services, the integration of corporate management practices into the work of government and service providers, and a privileging of the individual and the market as the normative basis of social, economic, and political life (Kingfisher, 2002; McRobbie, 2000; Teghtsoonian, 2003, 2005). While supporters of the Third Way have argued that it offers a positive and distinctive alternative to the failures of both neoliberalism and socialism (Giddens, 2000), critics suggest that it serves as a thin cloak for sustaining neoliberal policy priorities (Kelsey, 2002).

In light of the significant challenges that neoliberal discourse and policies have posed to the well-being of diverse groups of women (Brodie, 1995; Hancock, 1999; Kingfisher, 2002), these developments raise important questions about the extent to which feminist activists can rely on parties of the left as political allies. Indeed, research to date suggests that Third Way-style governments formed by ostensibly social democratic or center-left parties have a problematic record when it comes to addressing women's interests (Bashevkin, 2002). Joan Grace, for example, argues that the NDP government in office in the Canadian province of Manitoba since 1999 "has not been a government that the progressive women's movement can count on" and has pursued a Third Way-inspired policy agenda that "does not attend to women's structural discrimination" (2005: 67–8). Moreover, although New Labour in Britain was responsible for the establishment and expansion of women's policy machinery in Whitehall during the late 1990s and early 2000s (Squires and Wickham-Jones, 2002, 2004), Angela McRobbie (2000: 99) has argued that Blair's Third Way "envisages a politics for women without feminism."

These developments suggest the value of exploring further the relationships between governments' ideological orientation, the particulars of women's policy machinery, and the capacity of the latter to contribute to policies that are supportive of the needs and interests of diverse groups of women. While acknowledging that

it is often difficult to pinpoint the specific contributions attributable to women's policy machinery in any given set of policy decisions, scholars and activists have nevertheless identified a number of features of women's policy agencies that appear to enhance their effectiveness. These include a range of political-institutional resources (a central location within government, good access to key decision-making venues, and strong political and bureaucratic leadership) and generous material resources (including budget and staff complement) (see, for example, Chappell, 2002a; Malloy, 1999; Sawer, 1996; Stephen, 2000). In addition to these institutional and material resources, Judith Squires and Mark Wickham-Jones (2002, 2004) have emphasized the significance of the degree of "ideological alignment" between a women's policy agency and the wider government agenda. They note that even though the Women's Equality Unit established by the Blair government in Britain "was well resourced and located in the centre of Whitehall policy-making" (Squires and Wickham-Jones, 2004: 94), its impact on policy was limited by the absence of consistent support from potential allies elsewhere in government – circumstances that they relate to a relatively weak ideological alignment between the unit and the New Labour agenda.

Feminists have also argued that women's interests are better served when governments recognize and address the gendered impact of the *full scope* of their policies and programs, rather than assuming that only a narrow range of issues have a particular effect on women – for example, those pertaining to the reproductive body or to women as victims of violence. While this suggests the importance of ensuring that the mandate of women's policy agencies is not unduly restricted, it is very difficult (particularly in a context of limited resources) for a single agency to develop and maintain a capacity to address adequately the entire range of government policy. Reflecting this reality, and flowing from the provisions of the 1995 Beijing *Platform for Action*, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of jurisdictions that have witnessed the launch of initiatives designed to "mainstream" attention to gender into the routine work conducted by departments throughout government.

Gender mainstreaming is a contested concept with various definitions (Hankivsky, 2005; Squires, 2005), but it is generally understood to entail "the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in any area and at all levels [of government] ... so that women and men benefit equally, and inequality is not perpetuated" (Economic and Social Council of the United Nations quoted in Hankivsky, 2005: 980). A central aim of gender mainstreaming is to avoid the "ghettoization" of attention to women's particular needs and circumstances within freestanding women's policy structures by requiring that *all* policy decisions across government be made using a gender lens. At the same time, it is not intended to serve as a replacement for these separate structures; rather, it is premised on the existence of highly developed women's policy machineries including a strong presence at the center of government (the "hub") as well as within specific government departments (the "spokes") (Sawer, 1996). And yet there appear to be a growing number of cases in which gender mainstreaming has been advocated by governments seeking a pretext or a rationale for marginalizing women's policy machinery or eliminating it altogether (Woodward, 2003).

This review of existing scholarship suggests that there are potentially important relationships between the partisan complexion of government, a number of

specific features of women's policy agencies, and the manner in which attention to gender is incorporated into or marginalized in routine policy work within government. It has also identified various configurations of these variables that could serve, in any given context, to obstruct attempts to develop policies and programs supportive of the needs and interests of diverse groups of women. In the two case studies that follow, we explore the extent to which developments in BC and NSW are consistent with – or depart from – the trends and tendencies reviewed above. We follow our presentation of the case studies with an attempt to synthesize, within a comparative framework, our empirical findings with the insights and analysis presented above; we close with some concluding thoughts about the implications of our analysis.

Women's Policy Machinery and the Political Orientation of Government in British Columbia

1991–2001

Women's policy machinery in the government of BC has experienced dramatic shifts in structure since the beginning of the 1990s, in the wake of changes in the partisan composition of the provincial government. When the New Democratic Party was elected to office in 1991, after 16 years in opposition, it established the Ministry of Women's Equality as part of the new administration, headed by a minister with a seat in cabinet – the first such structure in Canadian history. This institutional innovation was accompanied by significant increases in staffing and financial resources compared with those allocated to "Women's Programs," which had been one of the responsibilities of a minor government minister under the previous Social Credit government. As the first Minister of Women's Equality later noted, the new ministry was expected to concern itself with a broad range of issues: "The Premier wanted to be sure that the ministry would work in real partnership with all the ministries across government so that fairness and equality for women would be part of the whole government's work" (MWE, 1995: i). This broad, cross-government mandate was supplemented with specific policy responsibilities, and budgetary resources, for child-care policy and transition houses (women's refuges) in 1993. Although none of the other political parties supported the continued existence of the ministry during the 1996 provincial election campaign, the NDP was returned to office and the ministry remained in place until the 2001 election.

In addition to its involvement with specific policy areas, the ministry developed a cross-government mainstreaming initiative during the mid-1990s. As with similar initiatives elsewhere, this undertaking involved the creation and dissemination of a document (the *Gender Lens*) that was designed to demonstrate to policy staff working in all departments across government the importance of incorporating attention to gender into their work, and to provide a set of tools for doing so (MWE, 1997). The *Gender Lens* emphasized the importance of consulting with, and attending to the needs and interests of, women in a broad range of social and economic locations in developing policy and programs, rather than trying to develop one-size-fits-all approaches for "women in general." This attention to differences among women as a part of the mainstreaming initiative was complemented by the appointment of a special diversity advisor within the ministry "to coordinate

actions to promote diversity objectives, both in internal corporate policy and in the ministry's provision of advice and assistance to other ministries and agencies" (MWE, 2001a: 25). The ministry thus provided institutional space within which the diverse needs and interests of various groups of women could be identified and addressed, and deployed practical resources in support of efforts to incorporate attention to gender – including differences among women – in policies and programs developed across all government departments.

In addition to establishing the Ministry of Women's Equality as a freestanding ministry, the NDP government also established a Women's Health Bureau within the health ministry and a Minister's Advisory Council on Women's Health. Complementing their work within government, these agencies supported research intended to improve the responsiveness of services to the needs of communities of women marginalized along a number of dimensions in addition to gender (Hudspith, 1999; Morrow and Varcoe, 2000). More generally, the NDP government adopted a broad range of policies that contributed positively to the well-being of different groups of women within the province. These included consistent raises to the minimum wage, core funding for women's centers located in communities throughout the province, funding for a range of services intended to support women and their children fleeing abusive partners, and financial support for out-of-home child-care services, among other initiatives (MWE, 2001b; Teghtsoonian, 2003, 2005).

At the same time, commentators have noted important limitations to the NDP's agenda while in office, and considerable tension in the party's attempt to reconcile the policy goals of various activist communities with the agenda of the business community and the mainstream media (Carroll and Ratner, 2005; Cohen, 1994). Thus, alongside initiatives reflecting social democratic and social justice commitments, the NDP also adopted several policy directions and decisions that reflected neoliberal orientations and priorities. For example, the government identified welfare fraud and "abuse" as key issues requiring serious attention, emphasized the need to "make work a better deal than welfare," and implemented reductions in the benefits available to some social assistance recipients (Teghtsoonian and Grace, 2001: 260–1). In addition, during the latter part of the 1990s discourses and practices of accountability and cost efficiency became pervasive in government documents and were reflected in the government's balanced budget legislation, adopted in 2000.

Among their many effects, these developments served to limit the extent to which policy arguments framed in feminist terms could be "heard," or would be taken seriously; indeed, explicit references to feminism disappeared from ministry documents after 1996. Perhaps unsurprisingly, ministry claims on behalf of women were increasingly couched in the terms of the prevailing discourse (cost-efficiency, accountability, and performance indicators). This approach was reflected in ministry-supported research into the economic costs of violence against women, research which was undoubtedly intended to strengthen support for ministry initiatives in this area. Nevertheless, this emphasis on the "bottom line" value of addressing violence against women served – however unintentionally – to detract from the idea that the impact of violence on women themselves constituted a sufficient warrant for government action. Moreover, although ministry publications continued to present violence against women as a significant barrier to women's equality, the feminist framings of violence against women in terms of unequal power relations between women and men that had been visible in ministry documents earlier in the decade were dropped (Teghtsoonian, 2000: 114–15, 2003: 39–43).

Furthermore, by 1997 (the year in which the *Gender Lens* was launched) there had been significant cuts to the ministry's budget and staffing complement. These flowed primarily from the transfer of responsibility for child-care policy and programs out of the ministry in 1996, which resulted in the budget for the Ministry of Women's Equality falling from $212.53 million to $40 million, and its full-time-equivalent staff positions (FTEs) from 277 to 96. Subsequent efforts by the provincial government to cut spending across the board led in 1996/97 to a further 8 percent cut in the ministry's budget and a reduction in its FTEs to 81 (Teghtsoonian, 2000: 108–10). In addition to these material losses, the ministry also experienced a significant decline in political resources during the second half of the 1990s. It had enjoyed an extended period of strong and consistent political leadership under its first minister, Penny Priddy, who served in that capacity throughout the NDP's first term in office. However, after the 1996 provincial election the Ministry of Women's Equality was led by a series of ministers who were at a greater distance from the centers of power within the party and government and, toward the end of the NDP's tenure in office, who rotated in and out of the office in rapid succession. As a result, the ministry's attempts to foster implementation of the *Gender Lens* and the approach to policy analysis that it advocated across government were hampered significantly. The prospects for the success of this mainstreaming initiative were further diminished by the downsizing of policy shops in other government departments, which left staff poorly positioned and likely disinclined to adopt new and politically charged ways of working such as those proposed by the *Gender Lens*.

Thus, while the ministry remained structurally intact over the course of the NDP's 10 years in office, its financial and political resources were eroded significantly during that time, particularly after the 1996 provincial election. Government policies with negative consequences for diverse groups of women overlapped with these developments, and neoliberal discourses and priorities increasingly informed government documents and policy directions. In this political and ideological context, the simple fact of the ministry's existence was insufficient to ensure positive policy outcomes for women in key policy areas, such as social assistance, or a political climate supportive of feminist analysis and initiatives.

2001–06

The election of the provincial Liberal Party to office with an overwhelming legislative majority in the 2001 election (77 of 79 seats and 57.6 percent of the popular vote) heralded a radical transformation of the ministry's structure and of the broader policy agenda. The ministry itself was rapidly dismantled and was replaced by Women's Services and Social Programs, a small subunit within the newly established Ministry of Community, Aboriginal and Women's Services (MCAWS). The 80 FTEs comprising this downsized replacement for the ministry constituted only 7 percent of MCAWS's 1184 FTEs, and its substantive focus on women was practically invisible amid the eclectic array of other responsibilities transferred to MCAWS from six other existing ministries (Teghtsoonian, 2003). Since 2001, both the administrative subunit responsible for women's issues and the ministry in which it is buried have been further transformed in ways that have continued to dilute and minimize the focus on women. All that now remains are two branches of the Seniors', Women's and Community Services Department housed in the Ministry of Community Services (the Seniors' and Women's Policy Branch and the Stopping the Violence Branch) (Teghtsoonian, 2005).

The mandate of these administrative heirs of the Ministry for Women's Equality has narrowed to a focus on programs addressing violence against women and mentoring initiatives aimed at facilitating women's labor force participation. While these programs offer important services and support to women, they constitute a tightly constrained, and politically problematic, framing of the issues to which a women's policy agency ought to address itself. The Ministry of Community Services (MCS) does include, as part of its mandate, "[w]orking with, and across government ministries [to] promote and foster effective linkages and working relationships to ensure that seniors' and women's issues are highlighted and considered in public policy and program design" (MCS, 2006: 1). Nevertheless, it is difficult to accept that this type of work can be accomplished effectively or systematically when "seniors', women's and community services" *combined* are resourced with a budget of only $52.4 million and 37 FTEs (MCS, 2006: 12). Nor does it appear to be in any way central to the ministry's activities: there is no mention of "women's issues" in any of the cross-ministry initiatives listed in the MCS 2006/07 *Service Plan*, or any evidence in the document that gender has been taken into account as a potentially important dimension of the ministry's other responsibilities.

Furthermore, the survival of the Stopping the Violence Branch under the Liberal government must be viewed in the context of other policies pursued by the government. For example, all provincial government funding for women's centers was eliminated at the end of March 2004 – despite the fact that they are often the principal resource in many communities for women seeking to leave abusive partners – on the grounds that the advocacy provided by these organizations does not constitute a "core service" that government is willing to fund (Teghtsoonian, 2005: 325). The Liberal government also instituted significant cuts to legal aid, social assistance, and other supports that are crucial to women seeking to leave violent partners (BC CEDAW Group, 2003; Creese and Strong-Boag, 2005). These measures, and many other policies adopted by the government since 2001, have undermined women's ability to create and maintain safe living circumstances. The Liberal government's overall approach, then, has been to depoliticize and decontextualize the presence of violence in women's lives and the manner in which the services and supports necessary to end it are framed.

While various communities of women have been active in drawing attention to the gendered impacts of these policies, within government the demise of the ministry was accompanied by the disappearance of the gender analysis mainstreaming initiative. This occurred quite literally: references to the *Gender Lens* document vanished from the section of the MCAWS website devoted to Women's Services and Programs. What emerged in its place was a pair of much shorter documents that have been hidden away on the MCS website: a five-page *Guide to Best Practices in Gender Analysis* (MCAWS, 2003) and a seven-item checklist identified as a *Quick Reference Guide to Best Practices in Gender Analysis* (MCAWS, n.d.).[2] Thus, in contrast to experiences in some other jurisdictions, gender mainstreaming has been *erased*, rather than *profiled*, as part of the downsizing of women's policy machinery.

Furthermore, insofar as something resembling an official version of gender mainstreaming persists, it departs significantly from feminist understandings of what this approach to policy development and analysis ought to involve. For example, unlike the *Gender Lens* document developed under the NDP, the *Quick Reference*

Guide to Best Practices in Gender Analysis makes no reference at all to the need to consider differences among women (or men) in reviewing policy or program options, and it presents consultation as an optional, rather than recommended, part of the policy-development process. Alongside this dilution of the feminist potential of gender mainstreaming, the *Guide to Best Practices in Gender Analysis* also signals the enhanced importance of neoliberal priorities: its introduction notes that, in addition to demonstrating how gender analysis can be incorporated into all phases of policy development, the *Guide* "will also help government meet its New Era commitments to accountability, sound fiscal management and openness and transparency in the public policy process" (MCAWS, 2003: 1).

A similar fate to that awaiting the Ministry for Women's Equality was in store for women's policy agencies in the Ministry of Health following the 2001 provincial election: just as the "hub" was dismantled, so too was this particular set of "spokes." Both the Women's Health Bureau and the Advisory Council on Women's Health were eliminated during the Liberals' first term in office; women's health is now taken up within the ministry by the Office of Healthy Children, Women and Seniors. While this office has supported the development and publication of a health strategy for women and girls in the province, attending to the gendered features of health and health services does not appear to be a priority of the ministry as a whole. For example, the ministry's *2006/07–2008/09 Service Plan* (Ministry of Health, 2006) makes no mention of women's particular health needs or issues and does not disaggregate the data it presents by gender.

Along with changes to the structure, resources, and mandate of women's policy agencies, the Liberal government has pursued a wider set of policy changes which have been antithetical to the well-being of diverse groups of women. Too extensive to take up in any detail here, these have included privatization and downsizing in the health-care sector, reversals to child-care policy initiatives adopted under the NDP, regressive tax policies, business-friendly changes to employment standards, and significant cuts to legal aid, human rights, and community-based organizations and services (BC CEDAW Group, 2003; Creese and Strong-Boag, 2005; Fuller et al., 2003; Morrow et al., 2004). These developments have created significant hardships for many different communities of women in the province. In addition, these policies and the ideological commitments underpinning them have served to undermine in important ways the (now narrowly focused) activities undertaken by women's policy agencies. For example, as Morrow et al. (2004: 364) have noted, women's ability to remain safe from violence – the principal focal point of the current government's framing of women's policy – is "affected by a variety of factors including safe housing, economic support, transportation and childcare." Women's access to all of these has been undermined by a broad range of policies pursued by the Liberal government in BC.

Women's Policy Machinery and the Political Orientation of Government in New South Wales

1976–88

Women's issues were first placed on the policy agenda in NSW in the late 1970s. The election of the ALP to office in 1976 under Premier Wran ended 11 years of conservative government and ushered in a new period in NSW politics. Wran

was committed to a program of social reform and was the first state premier to take women's issues seriously. After mandating a review of the NSW public service, he agreed to a range of measures to improve women's position as state employees, including sponsoring the Anti-Discrimination (Amendment) Act (1980) and establishing the Office of the Director of Equal Opportunity in Public Employment (ODEOPE) to oversee the implementation of the Act across the service. Wran was concerned to address women's experience of discrimination both in the public service and in the community at large. To achieve this aim, he created the state's first Women's Policy Unit, soon renamed the Women's Co-ordination Unit (WCU). The WCU was located in the Premier's Department, under Wran's direct responsibility. The placement of the office in this central coordinating agency was no coincidence, having been directly influenced by the lobbying and advice of two female staffers and their external colleagues who were all members of the Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL) – the most prominent feminist lobby organization of the time (Niland, 2006: 184). The first head of the WCU, Carmel Niland, recruited because of her feminist expertise, also had strong ties with WEL.

In 1980, when Niland left the WCU, another WEL member, Helen L'Orange, took over as director and for the next eight years presided over women's policy developments. Like Niland, L'Orange found Wran very supportive of keeping the women's unit under his portfolio. This suited the WCU staff, who from their position in the Premier's Department were able to play an active role in devising women's policies and scrutinizing the full range of cabinet decisions for their implications for women. Wran also sanctioned the broad-based equality agenda of the WCU and was particularly interested in furthering the scope of women's policy in the areas of rape, domestic violence, and child sexual assault (Niland, 2006: 189).

The WCU acted as the "hub" of the wheel of women's policy machinery, while the ODEOPE, the Women's Housing Unit, the Women's Directorate in the Department of Industrial Relations (both created in 1984), and women's divisions in Training and Further Education and the Department of Education acted as the "spokes" of the women's policy wheel. Key feminists were recruited into positions in these line agencies and worked to develop a women's policy agenda from within the public service while maintaining contact with external activist networks. By 1988, when the ALP lost office, these agencies had successfully implemented a number of programs specifically designed to address the social and economic position of women. In 1981, the Crimes Act was amended to recognize better women's experiences of sexual assault. By 1988 a total of 53 refuges, many of them fully state funded, were in operation, as well as 28 sexual assault services and 17 women's health centers (Sawer, 1990: 158). Equal employment opportunity measures had been implemented in most departments. The creation of women's policy machinery did not escape criticism, including from some feminists: these agencies were seen by some as "elitist" in approach and by others as marginalizing indigenous women and those from other minority groups (Parella, 1993). Nevertheless, having a government that was supportive of the principles of social equality and bureaucratic representativeness did open up new spaces at the center of the bureaucracy through which women could pursue equality goals. Such openness had never been experienced before, nor has it been seen since.

1988–95

The achievements of those advancing a women's policy agenda under the ALP were brought into stark relief in 1988 with the election of the Greiner Liberal/National coalition government.[3] Entering office with a strong commitment to neoliberal principles, Greiner and his ministers radically reshaped the discourse, norms, and structures of the NSW bureaucracy in a way that closed off opportunities for women to advance a gender-equality agenda. As part of its "managerialist" reform agenda, the government set about separating "core" and "non-core" bureaucratic functions, the latter being devolved within the service, corporatized, or contracted out to the private sector (Laffin and Painter, 1995). This agenda also involved extracting public sector agencies from what the incoming government perceived to be their capture by special interest groups – including those representing women, unions, and environmentalists.

In applying the reform agenda to his department, Premier Greiner transferred to line agencies all "non-core" functions. Although the WCU primarily undertook the core functions of policy development and coordination, its "outputs" – which were equity rather than efficiency based – made a poor fit in the new management environment. Shortly after coming to office, Greiner transferred the unit to the Department of Family and Community Services, the latter becoming the responsibility of the only female cabinet minister, Virginia Chadwick. Chadwick quickly demonstrated her impatience with what she deemed "some of the more political aspects of the unit" (Garcia, 1988: 9) and, despite her feminist background (Chadwick had been a WEL member), worked to remove its overtly "feminist" influences, including long-term Director Helen L'Orange. In 1992, the unit was demoted further to the most junior female minister, who held the Chief Secretary's portfolio, ranked number 18 in the 20-member cabinet, and who lacked credentials in the area of women's policy. Meanwhile, between 1988 and 1990 most specialist women's policy agencies were abolished, including those in Education and Training, Corrective Services, Housing, and Industrial Relations. Throughout this period women's organizations held protests to rally against the government's attacks on women and girls with little effect (Susskind, 1988: 11).

The weakening of the structure of women's policy machinery during the Greiner period was matched by a narrowing of the scope of the WCU's policy work. No longer within a central agency, it was difficult for the WCU to have input across the gamut of government policy areas. Instead, the unit came to focus its attention on the issue of domestic violence. While undoubtedly an important issue, the concentration on domestic violence came at a cost, for it meant that it became a synonym for "women's interests," with other issues receiving only cursory attention. In justifying this focus and the move away from specialized women's units, the Greiner government used the language of "mainstreaming," suggesting that all policy should take women's (and men's) concerns into consideration. Mainstreaming made a neat fit with the prevailing philosophy that "management is management" no matter what the context or policy area. However, because the requisite training in gender policy analysis was not provided to staff within line agencies, mainstreaming was seen by critics to be little more than a cover for ministers' attempts to achieve the savings and downsizing demanded by the increasingly important central agencies of the Premier's Department and Treasury (see Chappell, 1995: 162–4).

When in 1992 Greiner unexpectedly resigned as Premier he was replaced by the new Liberal Party leader, John Fahey. Fahey was not as committed to the neoliberal reform agenda as his predecessor: he preferred to concentrate on state service provision (Laffin and Painter, 1995: 17), an orientation that opened up new opportunities for addressing women's interests within the public service. In May 1993, the Premier announced the creation of the Ministry for the Status and Advancement of Women (MSAW) and appointed Kerry Chikarovski as Minister. At the time Chikarovski held the Industrial Relations portfolio and was later elevated to the position of Deputy Premier. The stand-alone ministry, the first of its kind in Australia, was given an initial budget of $3.5 million, a 65 percent increase on that provided to the WCU. Its main functions, outlined in its annual *Working for Women* document, fell into four categories: to provide advice to government; to undertake and commission research and consultations; to educate the community on issues relating to women; and to provide a referral and database service for women (MSAW, 1994: 7–8).

The creation of the ministry raised the profile of women's issues on the NSW political agenda, albeit in a less expansive guise than during the Wran years. It had a number of advantages over the WCU: it had a more senior minister in cabinet, a strong chief executive officer, increased resources, and a broader policy mandate. Within the first two years, the expanded focus of the MSAW was obvious with the upgrading of the Women and Work Unit in the Department of Industrial Relations and the introduction of a Women's Information and Referral Service, an initiative long sought by women's groups. Nevertheless, the ministry had its critics, including those who feared that domestic violence was no longer a policy priority and who believed that it was too focused on elite women. Some WCU staff feared that as a stand-alone agency, without central agency clout, MSAW would become what Sawer (1999: 92) describes as a "wastepaper basket for women's problems." They were also concerned that the shift away from the "femocrat" model toward the appointment of insiders (professional female public servants, often with a strong commitment to equity principles) would lead to a gradual erosion of links with the external feminist activists and a de-radicalization of women's policy in general.

1995–2005

If women's activists expected that the return of the ALP to office under Bob Carr in 1995 would mark a promising new era for the women's equality agenda, they were to be largely disappointed. Resigning after a decade as Premier, Carr's legacy in the area of women's policy was an unimpressive one. Indeed, it can be argued that, by the end of his term, Carr had gone further than even his conservative counterpart, Nick Greiner, in dismantling the structures and narrowing the substance of women's policy in the state.

Initially, there were encouraging signs of support from the ALP for women's policy initiatives. On coming to office the government announced that the ministry would be upgraded to the Department for Women (DFW), which would have higher status in cabinet. However, this upgrade was in name only, with no significant increase in the department's $5.9 million budget or 43 full-time staff. Faye Lo Po' was appointed the Minister for Women: a logical choice given her previous position as chair of the NSW Women's Advisory Council (see Goodwin, 2006). However, Lo Po's enthusiasm for and long-term commitment to the portfolio,

especially in the areas of violence against women and child-care, could never compensate for her low ranking in the cabinet pecking order, or for a premier with no obvious commitment to advancing gender equality.

Throughout the Carr decade staff in the DFW worked hard to expand its scope. An interesting aspect of their approach was the introduction of a series of State Action Plans for Women, which relied on Australia's commitment under the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) to develop policy initiatives in areas such as families and communities, violence and safety, work, access to justice, power and decision-making, education and training, and health. Internationalizing NSW gender policy development was an innovative strategy and helped to cement what appeared to be a genuine effort to introduce a form of gender mainstreaming – what the Premier deemed a "whole-of-government" approach to policy-making – across the NSW public sector. According to DFW documents, it was "the Government's belief that issues of concern to women are issues for the whole community and need to be incorporated into mainstream service provision" (DFW, 1996). As the DFW Director-General at the time noted, "Instead of the Department for Women attempting to be all things to all women, we want government departments and agencies to take women's issues on board themselves" (Bloch in DFW, 1996). Violence against women was one area where the whole-of-government approach was successfully implemented. While the DFW maintained the coordinating role, it worked closely with the Attorney-General's Department, Police, and the Departments of Community Services and Health to develop a strategy to combat the problem across agencies (DFW, 1998). However, over time it became obvious that without central leadership from the Premier on women's issues, the "whole-of-government" strategy would not bring about the institutionalization of gender issues that supporters had hoped for. As with earlier mainstreaming efforts, line agencies were reluctant to commit resources to training gender policy analysts and were focused on prioritizing other issues.

The DFW also made an effort to reach out to women long overlooked in the policy-making process, including Indigenous women and those living in rural and disadvantaged areas. In 1996, the department created five positions under its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Employment and Career Development Strategy, and established the Aboriginal Women's Communication and Consultation Project (DFW, 1996, 1998). Similar strategies were developed for women of non-English-speaking backgrounds (NESB). An important feature of the work of the DFW was the annual Women's Grants Program. While the program's funding remained around $1 million per annum for most of the period of the Carr government, the program enabled the DFW to engage the nongovernment sector in projects deemed to benefit women in the state and boosted efforts to address the needs of Indigenous and NESB women.

When Lo Po' left the portfolio in 2002, she had been the longest-serving women's minister in NSW. Under her direction the DFW worked across a range of policy areas and had begun to demonstrate greater sensitivity to women from diverse backgrounds. However, its resources were static, it held a marginal position in government, and had a low profile with outside activists. Under the next minister, Sandra Nori, the position of the DFW deteriorated further. Between 2002 and 2004 international and broad-based policy objectives were sidelined in favor of a very narrow range of issues. Programs such as developing girls' financial

independence and IT skills and providing mentors to young university women were now the focus of DFW's work.

In January 2004, tensions between Minister Nori and the Director-General of the DFW became public when the latter departed after a leave of absence and a review of the department was instituted. Despite these developments, staff of the agency appeared genuinely shocked when the Treasurer announced in a "mini-budget" speech on April 6, 2004 that the Department for Women would be replaced with the Office for Women (OFW) and "elevated to the Premier's Department" (New South Wales Parliamentary Debates, 2004: 8083). This "elevation" saw the budget for women's policy reduced from $5.7 million to $3.2 million in 2004/05 and to $1.7 million in 2005/06. Staff numbers dropped from 31 to 14, and the Women's Grants Program was abolished. Nori defended the changes, arguing "the move to be part of a larger agency will provide synergies that are currently not available to the Department as a small stand-alone agency" (Nori, 2004: 1).

Feminist activists may well have agreed with the Minister, especially had the return of the office to a central agency been coupled with an institutionalized gender mainstreaming approach to policy across government. However, the reality is that with the demise of the DFW, NSW has lost many of its gender experts while line agencies lack the capacity to undertake gender policy analysis. The obstacles to advancing women's policy in the current NSW political environment now look greater than ever. The new ALP Premier, Morris Iemma, shows no sign of supporting a broad equality agenda, or any interest in reinstating the core policy functions or grants program within the OFW (Wainwright, 2005: 3). In addition, unlike in earlier periods, there has been little noise from external women's activists, suggesting a lack of interest in, or ongoing support for, an "insider" strategy.

Comparative Insights

There is some evidence in these two case studies that supports conventional understandings of the relationship between the partisan complexion of government and women's political interests. Such analyses identify governments formed by parties of the left as more reliable allies of the women's movement, and as more supportive of politically robust and well-resourced women's policy agencies within government, than parties of the right. In NSW, a variety of institutional innovations and policy decisions under the Wran government during the 1970s and 1980s and early policy initiatives under Carr are consistent with these views, as was the establishment of the Ministry of Women's Equality with significant political and financial resources by the NDP in BC in 1991. The radical downsizing and marginalization of women's policy agencies during Greiner's premiership in NSW between 1988 and 1992, and following the Liberal Party's election to office in 2001 in BC, appear to support these linkages further by providing stark evidence of the hostility of parties of the right to both feminist activism and women's policy agencies within government.

However, the two cases presented above have revealed several significant departures from this neat set of associations (that left equals "good for women" and right equals "bad for women". The first of these unsettles the assumption that parties of the right will always marginalize women's policy machinery. Unlike the Liberal government in BC, which dismantled the freestanding Ministry of Women's

Equality and narrowed the institutional spaces for a gendered analysis of public policy, the Fahey coalition government in NSW (1992–95) *created* a freestanding Ministry for the Status of Women with a broad mandate where none had previously existed, *improved* the presence and standing of women's policy agencies elsewhere in government, and *expanded* the financial and political resources available to these agencies to support their work. Significantly, the Fahey government did not share either the strong antipathy to government or the enthusiastic embrace of market liberalism that characterized both the previous Greiner administration and the provincial Liberal government in BC. This suggests the importance of considering variability among parties of the right, as well as the particular political and ideological commitments of individual leaders, in assessing the prospects for progressing women's interests on the terrain of the state. At the same time, it is important to take note of the limitations reflected in developments under Fahey. Although women's institutional presence within the state was enhanced, there were simultaneous processes that served to depoliticize that presence, for example through the privileging of professional "gender experts" at the expense of opportunities for input and participation by activists within the women's community.

The case studies presented above also reveal policy directions and decisions that complicate our understandings of the relationship between social democratic parties, progressive policies, and women's policy machinery. In the BC case, neoliberal policy orientations and discourses were increasingly present during the NDP's tenure in office, reflected in specific policy areas (for example, social assistance regulations and balanced budget legislation) as well as broader discursive trends and practices. Thus discourses of accountability, performance management, and efficiency increasingly displaced those of feminism and social justice, and some policy and program decisions undermined the economic and social well-being of women. In NSW, a period of static funding and marginal political status for the DFW was brought to a crashing halt by the Carr government in 2004, when its financial and staffing resources were significantly cut and funding available through the Women's Grants Program was eliminated altogether. With the exception of the "elevation" of the DFW's successor, the Office for Women, to the Premier's Department, these institutional shifts mirror those adopted by the Liberal government in BC. In addition, moving the OFW into the Premier's Department arguably constitutes a functional analogue to the Liberals' decision to locate Women's Services and its successors in a peripheral part of government: both initiatives served to limit the capacity of women's policy agencies to operate as effective institutional actors within government.

Several of these developments are consistent with findings from other jurisdictions where social democratic parties, or parties of the center-left, have pursued a policy agenda informed by neoliberal priorities and orientations, including an emphasis on cost-efficiency, a reduced role for the state, and a marginalizing of both feminist analysis and women's policy agencies. They confirm the problematic nature of Third Way projects in terms of the manner in which women's needs and interests are taken up within them. It is interesting, in this context, to consider the more muted, less fully developed, displacement of feminist policy orientations and women's policy agencies under the NDP government in BC during the latter half of the 1990s, as compared with the decisive policy shifts pursued by the Carr government in NSW in 2002 and after. These differences across the two cases

may simply highlight the need to remain attentive to the likelihood that there will be potentially important variations among Third Way governments, just as there are among governments of the right. Alternatively, we might view Carr's vigorous attacks on women's policy machinery in NSW as a signal that the tensions between Third Way rule and women's interests have intensified, constituting (perhaps) a harbinger of the future course of gendered politics under Third Way governments. Further research in other jurisdictions would be needed to assess this possibility.

The shifting form and fate of women's policy agencies in these two cases also sheds some light on the relative importance of their structure and location – as compared with other sorts of variables – in shaping their potential to operate effectively on behalf of diverse communities of women. Experiences under the Liberal government in BC and under Greiner in NSW reinforce the point that when women's policy agencies are stripped of resources and consigned to the peripheral regions of government it is difficult for their staff to accomplish much. At the same time, the uneven track record of the Ministry of Women's Equality in BC over the course of the 1990s as well as developments in NSW after Carr's "elevation" of the OFW to the Premier's Department suggest that, as Squires and Wickham-Jones (2002) have argued, a central location within government cannot compensate for the absence of political allies and ideological support for feminist policies and analysis. The importance of the government leadership's ideological commitments and priorities is further underlined by the Fahey period in NSW: these were the source of both the possibilities and constraints shaping what MSAW was able to achieve. Finally, a comparison between the early period under the NDP in BC and the Wran period in NSW suggests that where there is reasonably good correspondence between a feminist policy agenda expressed in and through the principal women's policy agency and the ideological orientation of the government more generally, it may not much matter whether there is a freestanding ministry or an office in the Premier's Department in place. What may be more important than these institutional particulars is the *combination* of ideological alignment or commitment and the central location of a women's policy agency, whatever form the latter may take.

Just as it cannot be taken for granted that parties of the left will create and resource the institutional structures that facilitate the successful implementation of a feminist policy agenda, neither can it be assumed that such parties will always enable women's policy machinery to pursue a broad policy mandate. Both in the early years of the NDP government in BC and under the Wran ALP government in NSW it was possible for women's policy "hubs" to expand their activities in a range of specific policy areas of considerable importance to women – such as in relation to violence against women and child-care. There was also an effort to link and coordinate attention to a broad range of issues related to women's needs and to do so in ways which acknowledged their diversity. However, experience in both BC and NSW also shows that these initiatives are not necessarily sustained over time or by governments of the same political persuasion. For example, although the Ministry of Women's Equality was able to develop the *Gender Lens* strategy during the NDP's second term in office in BC, the impact of this initiative was limited by the government's implementation of budget and staff cuts across departments, and weaker political leadership within the ministry. Even more dramatically in NSW during the past decade of ALP government, the initial support for a broad-based

women's policy agenda has been severely curtailed over time, to the extent where the current OFW website provides no specific details about any policy area.

An interesting aspect of the policy mandate of the "hubs" of women's machinery in both cases, and under both left- and right-wing governments, is that the issue of violence against women has remained a consistent focus of attention. For some, the continued presence of violence as an issue on the policy agenda could be taken as a positive sign – an indication of the ongoing influence of feminists on policy-making (Ball and Charles, 2006: 179; Rankin and Vickers, 2001; Weldon, 2002: 1162). However, in both BC and NSW such a view would be overly optimistic. A feminist conceptualization of the issue, which treats the problem as a manifestation of the historically unequal power relations between men and women, has disappeared from policy documents and discussions. Instead, violence against women has been reframed in ways which are more congruent with the prevailing neoliberal discourse. As we have seen in both cases, policy addressing violence against women has increasingly been justified in terms of the heavy cost burden the problem imposes on the state. Spending in this area is presented as worthwhile because it saves money in others. Further, the problem has become depoliticized and individualized within the context of families (for NSW, see Earle et al., 1990: 4; McFerren, 1989). These trends serve to maintain the status quo in terms of the gendered relationship between men and women and do little to encourage governments to come to terms with the multilayered needs of the many women who experience this reality on a daily basis.

In both BC and NSW, those working in women's policy hubs have recognized the difficulties involved in being the sole agency to set and maintain the agenda on women's policy issues. As a result, they have attempted to find ways to share responsibility for gender-based analysis across government. This has involved the creation of "spokes" in line agencies and efforts to "mainstream" responsibility for gender issues, such as in BC through the development of the *Gender Lens* and in NSW through "whole-of-government" initiatives. These efforts highlight the need for *both* a separate women's agency to set key policy priorities *as well as* a commitment by all government agencies to implement and initiate gender-based analyses within their mandated areas in order to ensure that all policies are scrutinized for their effects on women and men. However, just as it has been difficult for women's agencies to maintain a broad policy mandate, so too has it been a challenge to institutionalize these mainstreaming efforts. In BC under the NDP, as noted above, budget cuts to the ministry implementing the *Gender Lens*, along with relatively weak – and rapidly changing – ministerial leadership, worked against mainstreaming efforts, while under the Liberals mainstreaming was erased altogether from the agenda. In NSW, especially during the Greiner period, it could be argued that such efforts were never taken seriously in the first instance, but, rather the language of gender mainstreaming was employed as a cover for the downgrading of the specialist hubs and spokes of the women's policy machinery. Although under the Carr government gender mainstreaming was successful in some limited policy areas, the strategy suffered from a lack of the political and financial resources necessary to make mainstreaming a viable strategy in the long term. Encouraging governments to take seriously the claim that *all* policies may have differential effects on particular groups of women and men, and convincing them that women's policy involves more than just addressing issues of violence, have been challenges for women's policy advocates in both BC and

NSW. So too has institutionalizing women's policy machinery that is structured and resourced in ways that allow it to address the full scope of issues which influence women's lives, not only under governments of the right, but also the left.

Concluding Remarks

In their discussion of the Howard government's "reduction and restructuring" of women's policy machinery in Australia in the early 2000s, Pauline Rankin and Jill Vickers note that "[f]eminist activists ... assume that the return of a Labor government [at the federal level] will result in a restoration of the status quo" (2001: 23). Our analysis, considered against the backdrop of experiences in jurisdictions with Third Way administrations, suggests that this may not prove to be the case. This is a matter of some concern, and not simply because women's policy machinery constitutes a "good" in and of itself. As many of the developments that have unfolded in both BC and NSW suggest, the fate of women's policy machinery is frequently linked with the extent to which policies and programs reflect a feminist commitment to equity for all groups of women. Evidence from these two cases suggests that although a central location within government offers no guarantee that women's policy machinery will be able to operate effectively, a peripheral location, limited mandate, and inadequate resources appear sufficient to ensure that it will not. In BC since 2001 under the Liberal government, and in NSW under both Greiner and Carr, the marginalization of women's policy agencies has been accompanied by a policy agenda that has had negative impacts for many groups of women. The fact that this has recently occurred under an ALP government constitutes an important signal about the dangers of assuming that equity-seeking women will find allies on the "left." The mixed track record for women under the NDP in BC, particularly during its second term, further underscores the need to scrutinize carefully, and on a case-by-case basis, how social democratic or center-left parties are proposing to address issues of concern to diverse groups of women.

These experiences appear to confirm the wisdom of those feminists who have argued that seeking progressive change for women on the terrain of the bureaucratic state is not a promising strategy. And yet, it is unclear whether more positive outcomes will be achieved by abandoning the levers and resources of government to those disinterested in or hostile to a feminist policy agenda. As Jill Vickers has noted, "If some women do not aggregate and articulate accounts of women's collective interests to decision-makers ... the men who still dominate all major institutions will do so for them" (2006: 6). Arguably, this remains the case – perhaps even more so – when parties unsympathetic to feminist policy goals are in office and "[t]he achievements of women's policy machinery may be limited to ensuring 'least worst outcomes' or damage control" (Sawer, 1996: 23). Furthermore, experiences under the Fahey coalition suggest that an ongoing willingness to engage with the state may yield unanticipated opportunities to move forward on a broader set of issues of interest to various communities of women.

Further research would be necessary to assess the extent to which the responsiveness of the Fahey coalition government to at least some elements of a feminist policy agenda, or the absence of such responsiveness under Greiner in NSW and the Liberals in BC, has been reflected in the policy track record of governments of the right in other jurisdictions in the industrialized West. Such research could usefully

explore the relative importance of a number of variables in shaping the progressive potential of such governments: the political commitments and resources of party leaders; the extent to which a right-wing government's ideological orientation reflects an openness to some role for the state in responding to economic and social inequities, and an acceptance of group identity as a legitimate basis for political engagement; and the extent to which the women's movement is well resourced and mobilized. Comparative analysis, across cases and over time, of the influence of these variables on the policy choices of governments – whatever their partisan complexion – would contribute to a more nuanced account of the relationship between particular ideological orientations (of leaders and of parties), the profile of women's policy agencies, the strength and vitality of the women's movement, and feminist policy goals.

Looking to the future, it is important to consider the strategic implications of what appears to be the current political reality: that "least worst outcomes" may be all that can be hoped for from governments of *either* the left *or* the right. It may therefore be timely for feminist activists working both within and outside the state to re-engage in a dialogue about strategies for articulating and promoting women's diverse interests. Given the shifts in the political landscape since the period when women's policy agencies first appeared, and not least in the political resources available to feminist activists, advancing this agenda is likely to face significant challenges and to require new and imaginative strategies. Under such circumstances, feminists would be well advised to avoid putting *all* their eggs in the basket of the bureaucracy. While such work continues to be important, it must be supplemented by action in multiple locations outside the state, for example in communities, political parties, and workplaces. These are important sites for those seeking to challenge currently dominant neoliberal discourses and practices, and to move them in more equity-positive directions. Such a shift is essential if we hope to achieve something better than "least worst outcomes" for women.

Notes

1. The NDP is the main party of the left in provincial politics in BC. The Liberal Party eventually displaced the Social Credit Party as the main party of the right at the provincial level during the latter half of the 1990s, following a period of considerable political and organizational turbulence at the conservative/neoliberal end of the political spectrum.
2. There is no direct link to these documents from the Women's Services section of the ministry's website; the only access to them is by following the link to "Division Site Map" on that page and then selecting from an alphabetically organized list the link to "Best Practices: Reference Card and Guide." There is no indication of what the "Best Practices" might pertain to, and no mention of gender analysis anywhere else on the website.
3. The Liberal Party of Australia sits at the conservative end of the political spectrum. When in office at the federal or state level it usually governs in coalition with the National Party, a conservative rural-based party.

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