

# The power of language:

## How we talk about welfare policy

The language we use to interpret issues shapes the construction and direction of policy. The change in the language of welfare in B.C. is an alarming example, writes **Kari Wolanski**.

POWER IS OFTEN UNDERSTOOD AS something that people possess. Some people have more power, represented by wealth, status, and their ability to exert influence ‘over’ other people. Others have less power, resulting in a reduced range of life choices.

Political philosopher Foucault suggests a completely different understanding of power, dismissing what he calls the “commodity metaphor” for power. Instead, he argues that power works through language and knowledge to shape our reality.<sup>1</sup> By this logic, which political party governs is less important than the received wisdom and laws regulating how they govern.

Policy is a particularly important intersection between language and power. Welfare policy, for example, exercises power over the lives of people living on social assistance by determining conditions and eligibility.

The language we use to understand the problem of poverty influences the type of solutions we consider. In 2002, B.C. overhauled its welfare policies, with *personal responsibility* as a guiding principle.<sup>2</sup> The language of personal responsibility leads to policies based on what individuals should do to prevent their own poverty.

Throughout the process of welfare reform, the B.C. government has suggested that people are choosing welfare as “a lifestyle.”<sup>3</sup> Economist Stiglitz pokes fun at the assumption that unemployment is caused simply people choosing not to work. “In this interpretation, unemployment in the Great Depression, when one out of four people was out of work, would be the result of a sudden increase in the desire for more leisure.”

The language we use to describe consequences also influences the types of policies we accept. Until recently, the policies in which people are ineligible for welfare even if they have no other source of income would not have been legal. Up until 1995, provinces were legally bound to provide welfare for persons “in need.”

Based on the assumption that people are

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1 Foucault, Michel. 2003. *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the College de France 1975-1976*. Edited by Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana. Translated by David Macey. New York: Picador. pp. 13, 14.

2 Ministry of Human Resources. *Service Plan Summary 2002/03 – 2004/05*. p. 2.  
<[http://www.mhr.gov.bc.ca/sp/2002-03\\_summary.pdf](http://www.mhr.gov.bc.ca/sp/2002-03_summary.pdf)>

3 Coell, Murray. March 5, 2003. *Income Assistance Changes Support People in Need*. <[www.mhr.gov.bc.ca](http://www.mhr.gov.bc.ca)>

choosing not to work, the new policies also assume that the only possible outcome of denying people access to welfare is that they will find work. Yet when the caseload decreased by 26% in the first year after the changes, only 67% of the adults who left social assistance left for employment. Also, more than a third of the 'decreased caseload' were children.<sup>4</sup>

Other consequences of ineligibility for welfare include early pregnancy, return to abusive relationships, homelessness, addiction, prostitution, and criminal activity.

Indeed, since the new welfare policies came into effect, the number of visible homeless people in Vancouver has doubled. Alarming, while only 15% of these B.C. residents were not receiving welfare in 2001, by 2004 this proportion had risen to 75%.<sup>5</sup>

It is a very short step from personal responsibility to blame. The language of personal responsibility makes poverty an individual issue to be solved through 'incentives' to work and short term re-training. The result is to depoliticize poverty, blaming it on individuals who choose not to work rather than changing economic conditions due to trade liberalization combined with a withdrawal by the state from programs that sought to enhance equality.

By contrast, the language of 'social responsibility' allows for policy-making that considers the context from which poverty arises. In this

language, citizens are interconnected and have a stake in a larger society. It is based on a sense of shared destiny. Increasing poverty in B.C. has an impact not just on those individuals living in poverty, but also on our collective health, safety,

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and well-being. As a result, we have a mutual investment in enhancing equality.

The language of social responsibility opens up a different range of policy options. Increasing poverty and the polarization of wealth are understood as consequences of changing economic structures and policy decisions, not increasing laziness. This leads to questions about the role we, as citizens, want our government to play in supporting equality through international trade negotiations, healthy labour standards, social programs, taxation policy, and income transfers.

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4 Stiglitz, Joseph E.. 2003. *Globalization and Its Discontents*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co. p. 35.

5 Ministry of Human Resources. "Year-at-a-Glance Highlights." In *2002/03 Annual Service Plan Report*. <[http://www.bcbudget.gov.bc.ca/annualreports/ar2003/hr/hr\\_highlights.htm](http://www.bcbudget.gov.bc.ca/annualreports/ar2003/hr/hr_highlights.htm)>

6 City of Vancouver. June 2005. *Homeless Action Plan*. p. 6.