

Book Reviews

CASHING IN ON PAY EQUITY? SUPERMARKET RESTRUCTURING AND GENDER EQUALITY

Jan Kainer
Toronto: Sumach Press, 2002

**REVIEWED BY ISLA
CARMICHAEL**

In this 280 page book, Kainer takes on the ambitious task of untangling the complex weave of the implementation of Ontario's pay equity law in several supermarkets with the history and economics of the supermarket industry and its unions, the role of collective bargaining between the retail union and the food industry, as well as the subsequent restructuring of the workforce. What was the impact on the women who worked as part-time cashiers, meat wrappers, and service clerks? Did pay equity work and, if not, as Kainer maintains, why not?

This work is an important addition to existing Canadian literature on gender and class analyses of wage hierarchies, a summary of which can be found in Kainer and Warskett's annotated bibliography. However, the significance of this work lies in its detailed, thoughtful, and balanced case study of the process of pay equity negotiations in three Ontario supermarket chains. It is one of few case studies of pay equity implementation in Canada. It stands on par with Creese's landmark case study of gender segregation of clerical work-

ers in a white-collar union at BC Hydro.

In the struggle for pay equity in Ontario in the 1980s, few feminists questioned the struggle faced by groups of women pursuing the pay equity struggle in their workplaces; the struggle to work with a complex law based on a concept of equal value that few understood; the struggle with a laborious, technical process of job evaluation used for decades by employers and consulting firms to replicate the hierarchy of work and the power of the employer; the struggle to articulate discriminatory bias in a supposedly neutral, technical procedure of job classification with the employer, the union and our co-workers.

Ultimately, many activists as well as legal theorists have questioned whether legislative reform can be a means of achieving pay equity goals. Making claims of equality assumes that fairness accounts for wage distribution and that the male standard is, in fact, fair. However, we more often than not claim that male white privilege is at the expense of other, more oppressed groups. Kainer unravels these arguments persuasively, arguing that pay equity provides a tool for women facing economic discrimination to organize collectively and challenge gendered power structures at work; further, that the job evaluation exercise gives women the forum to confront male standards of job worth with the union and the employer. This in spite of the fact that, as she points out, the law itself was seriously flawed, denying large groups of women coverage and exempting discriminatory wage practices like merit pay, seniority, and red-circling.

The law never could fulfill its promise of gender-neutrality.

Implementing pay equity was fraught with contradictions, conflict, and resistance. There were some successes where a labour-feminist politics could steer negotiations through on the union side and where, on the employer's side, sympathetic (and sometimes feminist) negotiators could play a constructive role with management staff (Hart 2002). However, there were many disappointments. Kainer describes a picture of business unionism, increased competition, distant managerial structures, rigid divisions between part-time and full-time workers, profit margins over people, and the intensification of women's work. Her case studies—at Loblaws, Miracle Food Mart, and A&P are painstaking in their detail of pay equity processes that neither yielded any significant wage increases for women, compared female work with higher paid male jobs, provided gains for part-timers nor ultimately challenged the hierarchical relationships in the supermarkets. While Kainer maintains that the pay equity process itself could have been successful had the right decisions been made, subsequent concessionary bargaining and restructuring revealed the true agenda—to expand the female part-time workforce and reduce their pay.

This is an excellent analysis that concludes with a call for a much broader political agenda to challenge neo-liberalism and tackle gender at work. Kainer could have considered in greater depth the impact of state feminism on women's grassroots organizing. To what extent did the driving force of key women in the Peterson's Liberal government

preempt the pay equity agenda and limit the ability of the women's movement to resist some of the weakest aspects of the pay equity law? Perhaps this is Kainer's next study!

References

- Gillian Creese. *Contracting Masculinity*. Toronto: Oxford University Press Canada, 1999.
- Hart, Susan. "The Pay Equity Bargaining Process in Newfoundland: Understanding Cooperation and Conflict by Incorporating Gender and Class." *Gender, Work and Organization* 9 (4) (2002) 355-371.
- Kainer, Jan and Rosemary Warskett.. *Pay Equity Resource Guide: Bibliography with Selected Annotations*. York University Centre for Research on Work and Society Working Paper 25. Toronto: Centre for Research on Work and Society, 2001.

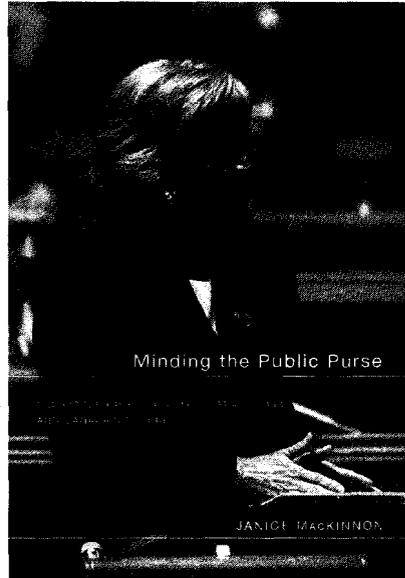
MINDING THE PUBLIC PURSE

Janice MacKinnon
Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003

REVIEWED BY ROBERT DRUMMOND

Janice MacKinnon was the first woman to serve as the finance minister of a government in Canada. She served from 1991 to 2001 (from 1993 to 1997 as finance minister) in the cabinet of Saskatchewan Premier Roy Romanow, and in this political memoir she addresses the challenges posed by globalization to the scope and scale of state activity in a small, relatively impecunious jurisdiction. As one might imagine, an NDP government was expected by its constituents and members not to be shy about using the power of the state to improve the quality of life of the province's citizens. One might also have imagined the government

would display a posture of resistance to the glorification of private markets that was the mantra of the nineties in so much of North America. However Ms MacKinnon seems not only to have been constrained by the external pressures she faced, but also to have become something of a convert to the budget-reducing strategies of her



federal counterpart—and now Prime Minister—Paul Martin.

Ms MacKinnon refers to the situation she faced in office as a "crisis" created in part by the previous Conservative government of Grant Devine, but fuelled as well in her judgment by the avoidance of "fiscal realities," encouraged by members of her own party. To be sure, she reserves much of her criticism for "megaprojects" in which public dollars were invested—even by governments who trumpeted the virtues of private enterprise—in risky ventures aimed at economic development. However, since her first portfolio in the new cabinet was as minister of social services, she came up against the difficulty of fulfilling traditional NDP promises to enhance social programs, in a climate of straitened fiscal conditions. She was also given responsibility for a government department the Devine government had not treated as a priority, and thus she found herself with a devas-

tated section of the public service, in which several positions were filled not with seasoned experts but political appointees of the previous administration. Forward planning in such an environment was a particular challenge. Her chapters on the early years in office provide a worthwhile addition to the literature on government transition. Caught between the desire to maintain a professional non-partisan civil service and the calls of her party colleagues to "get rid of the Tories" in its ranks, she found herself on the defensive when she wanted to keep people—career civil servants—in place. These were often people who had vital knowledge but who had loyally served the previous government. Distinguishing the Devine partisans from those who were willing now to serve the new government, while fending off attacks from both left and right, was not easy. Moreover there was feeling in some quarters that if the Devine government had been partisan in its choices, the appropriate response was to be equally partisan in the opposite direction.

Probably the most serious challenges MacKinnon reports however were those posed by external forces. Saskatchewan is a vast geographic area with a small, declining population. It is heavily dependent on world markets for agricultural produce and mineral resources, and as a consequence is perhaps more dependent than any Canadian government outside the Atlantic region on the judgments of the bond rating services. Her chapters on the fiscal crisis of the Saskatchewan government and the fiscal federalism of the Martin era of federal finance are fascinating reading, but very disheartening to any who retain a hope that Canada's social programs can be maintained even in the face of global pressures for restructuring.

At the end of the day, MacKinnon is persuaded by the argument that Canada has little choice but to pursue the policies of expenditure reduction and balanced budgets. Her