

Book Review

Eleanor D. Glor

Policy Innovation in Saskatchewan, 1971-1982

Toronto: Captus Press, 1997

Compte rendu de Howard A. Doughty

[\(Review of Policy Innovation in the Saskatchewan Public Sector\)](#)

A rather naive interviewer once asked the owner of a number of impressive mass media outlets including a large television station whether or not he ever used the news and public affairs departments of his broadcasting business to promulgate his own very firm political ideas. The mogul roared with laughter and told the young reporter: "Of course! Why else would you want to own a TV station?" So much for the much-touted idea of objectivity.

Personally, I have never had much interest in objectivity, preferring to strive for the less pretentious goal but ultimately more important goal of fairness, and one prerequisite of fairness is to declare conflicts of interest when they arise. I have known Eleanor Glor for almost 30 years. She is a good friend. I do not think, however, that I am thus disqualified from reviewing her most recent contribution to the study of public administration. It merely precludes me from gushing about her thoughts on what many people would prematurely dismiss as an awful yawner of a topic.

Policy Innovation in the Saskatchewan Public Sector, 1971-1982, would seem to strike out swinging on three pitches.

It is about the civil service, and very few people seem warmly disposed to civil servants these days.

It is about Saskatchewan, a flat, land-locked Canadian prairie province with a population of scarcely one million souls.

It is about things that happened as much as a quarter-century ago, antique by our historical standards. Were that not enough to cure insomnia, it is about an innovative bureaucracy - an oxymoron to almost any citizen and not a few bureaucrats anywhere.

But wait, Saskatchewan was the first jurisdiction in North America to introduce a universal, publicly-funded Medicare system. It pioneered government automobile insurance, student loan

programs, and the public funding of the arts. These and other innovations have become more-or-less standard practice in Canada, though no doubt they would be seen as dangerously socialistic by many Americans from William Jefferson Clinton to Jesse Helms. That is as it should be, for the unique historical legacy of Saskatchewan politics is its role as the centre of pragmatic Canadian democratic socialism. The innovations of its nominally socialist provincial governments (1944-1964, 1971-1982, and 1991 to the present) have been generally and predictably left-of-centre.

More interestingly, though, these same administrations have displayed a singularly Calvinistic frugality and have been more fiscally responsible than their unabashedly capitalistic competitors, for Saskatchewan has rarely run up a deficit during its numerous socialist administrations. So, in these times of fiscal restraint and the ubiquitous preoccupation with government debt, Saskatchewan's experience has lessons (even or, perhaps, especially) for people unsympathetic to so-called "big government" about how bureaucrats, politicians and an active citizenry can work together to redefine, rethink and resolve problems by coming up with imaginative and sometimes plainly experimental policies.

The contributors to this book are predominantly the senior civil servants who were responsible for devising and implementing plans for such things as Crown Corporations to administer natural resources, public Dental and Prescription Drug Plans, a Rights-Based Approach to Workplace Health and Safety, a system of Community Colleges "without walls", and an Employment Support program dedicated to getting people off welfare.

In addition, Eleanor Glor has added to the mix the sometimes provocative reflections of former politicians including pertinent Cabinet Ministers and the Premier of the day, Allan Blakeney. The result is a comprehensive and extraordinarily candid examination of a host of public policies by the people who oversaw them, who sometimes succeeded and who sometimes failed.

Readers need neither have even a passing interest in the peculiarities of Saskatchewan political life nor an enthusiasm for left-wing solutions to social problems to benefit from this series of nicely integrated case studies. At a time when governments of all political viewpoints are faced with financial difficulties and seem uniformly to embrace downsizing of personnel and budget cuts to programs, there is a need to investigate new-fashioned alternatives.

In this volume, Eleanor Glor and her colleagues do what no others, to my knowledge, have done. They speak openly and honestly about how innovative rather than conventional government officials can enliven public discourse, improve the quality of life, and occasionally become so enthusiastic about their own plans that they lose touch with the people, win a reputation for

arrogance, and face the inevitable political consequences. There are victories recorded here, and also lessons in the importance of modesty.

Eleanor Glor is one of Canada's important theorists and practitioners of innovation. She is President of the Innovation Salon, a large on-going discussion group on public policy innovation and Editor of *The Innovation Journal*, an electronic journal focused on the public sector. Her book will be of interest to teachers and graduates interested in the principle of innovation and to those whose careers touch various policy areas from agriculture to libraries, from environmental policy to labour relations.

What remains an open question is the question of context. Innovation, she says, "is the conception and implementation of significant new services, ideas or ways of doing things as government policy in order to improve or reform them."

The trouble is to decide what is and what is not an improvement. For example, some think that it would be an improvement to have increased regulation of business and direct government intervention in the economy because they are ideologically committed to ecological conservation and to the redistribution of income. Others insist - for equally dogmatic reasons - that deregulation and privatization are essential to progress and prosperity. No doubt proponents of each view can and do think up clever new ways to achieve their political aims. So, is "innovation" simply "methodology", a set of means, processes and strategies for change in the absence of commentary about the nature of that change? Can "right-wing", "centrist", and "left-wing" governments equally claim to being "innovative"? Or, is there some way to distinguish between what theorists of political and administrative development once called "tonic" and "toxic" change?

In short, is there a way to link the valuable exploration of creative techniques to a philosophical consideration of the nature of the good society such that we could reasonably distinguish between life-enhancing and pathological innovations? I would like to hope that such questions might be addressed more explicitly in Eleanor Glor's next major project?

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