

Report on Canada
By Patricia Evans

Over a ten year period (1994-2004) and in the context of G-7 countries, Canada has moved from deficit laggard to the only country to post surpluses in seven straight years. The deep cuts that the federal government imposed on social programs that occurred in the mid 1990s have been halted. Now that the government has money to spend, examining recent Canadian directions may tell us something about signs along the road to redesigning the 'post-industrial' welfare state. As in a number of other countries, employment is on the rise, although the availability of permanent full-time work is declining and other, more precarious forms of employment are on the rise.

The federal government's presence in social programs, looked to be a thing of the past, during the period of the cuts. Now, with surpluses it seems eager to re-insert and assert its influence. How is the new minority Canadian government spending its extra funds*? Two trends are clear. First, the cuts that fell most heavily on the poorest Canadian--social assistance recipients and the unemployed--show no sign of abating. However, programs that are directed to those in employment have showed signs of expansion (child benefits for the working poor, paid family-related leave). So the distinction between those in paid work 'the deserving' and the undeserving remains clear and sharp.

The second trend is more positive. And it involves a certain measure of 'investment' in social 'infrastructure'—most particularly our health care system which Canadians care about a great deal. But also, and most recently, a very important announcement of federal funding to the provinces for a 'national' system of child care that aims to be: quality, universal, accessible, and oriented to early learning. We will have to see how this develops but, after three decades of reports and recommendations, it looks like the country is moving on child care.

*FYI: apart from what is not going paying off the debt and providing tax cuts!