On 9 October 1933, Mr. T. Frith of Pembroke, Ontario, wrote his fourth of six letters to Premier George Henry. Unemployed and supporting a family, he unsuccessfully petitioned Henry for a job: "I am getting fed up with everything. It looks strange to me that never did anything for the Government can be holding down permanent jobs and the likes of me face poverty ... I would just like too [sic] know how you would like it yourself if you fought 3½ years for your government ... do you think you would be getting a fair deal if they didn't give you a little work to keep your wife and family."¹

Unemployed citizens of Ontario wrote thousands of similar letters to Premiers George Henry and Mitchell Hepburn during the Great Depression. In 1931, 18 per cent of wage earners in the province were officially out of work, and by 1935 in some cities, such as Niagara Falls, Windsor, and the Toronto suburbs, 33–45 per cent of the population relied on relief.² At the beginning of the Depression, state-run social welfare programs were limited in scope, consisting of Mothers' Allowance, Workmen's Compensation, and a means-tested Old Age Pension. Unemployment relief, funded by the federal government and administered by the municipalities, was inadequate and stigmatizing, and was viewed by the federal and provincial governments as a temporary emergency measure. To qualify for relief, the unemployed had to be completely destitute, and were forced to forfeit cars, radios, phones, and liquor permits. Relief payments were often made in kind or by a voucher system, and were different in each community across Canada.³

In response to high unemployment and inadequate and stigmatizing relief policies, many Ontario citizens wrote directly to the premier of Ontario. Some of these letters consist of criticisms of government policy, complaints against those on relief, or proposed economic solutions to the Depression, but most are requests from unemployed, white, working-class men and women for jobs or financial aid. The only Canadian study looking at similar sources is The Wretched of Canada, a collection of letters to Prime Minister R.B. Bennett. The editors, Michael Bliss and L.M. Grayson, argue that these letters were written by the poorest of the population, those whose lives were "a single-minded struggle for survival, monotonous and dreary." They claim that "the Canadian people had too much discipline, too much individualism ... too little political sophistication to fight back in a radical protest against a whole economic and social system."⁴ While some of the letters to the prime minister and the premiers were indeed desperate pleas for help, many were clearly articulated demands based on notions of rights and entitlement. As citizens, letter writers believed that, in return for service and duty to the state, they and their families were entitled to economic security. Letters written by breadwinners, wives and mothers, homeowners, veterans, and Canadians of British background used the idea of a reciprocal relationship between citizen and state, and the language of respectability, service, and duty, to claim entitlement to jobs and financial aid. Rather than interpreting these letters as expressions of helplessness, this essay examines them as a fundamental part of the shift to the postwar welfare state.

The history of the welfare state has been well documented in Canada, but most historians have used a top-down approach to debate the development of policies, institutions, and the origins and objectives of welfare state programs. Historians have discussed the influence of government, business, religion, and party politics, the role of intellectuals and the social sciences, and the desire of the state to preserve the capitalist economic order and to avoid social disorder. Written mainly from an institutional approach, this history leaves little room in which to locate the agency of welfare recipients or to understand their role in the development of the postwar welfare state.⁵ Most people in the 1930s did not belong to an organized political party or protest group, but they voiced concerns and criticisms to friends and neighbours, and in letters written to politicians. Letters to the premiers demonstrate that popular pressure must not be overlooked as a major source of political influence. In Canada, the thousands of letters received by federal and provincial governments demanding that the state take moral responsibility to protect and nurture its citizens, along with relief protests, strikes, and other forms of unrest, helped to push the government towards a more interventionist rights-based welfare state.⁶ A broad consensus of public opinion began to develop around the belief that the stigma of charity-based relief was no longer acceptable for Canadian citizens.
The concept of ‘rights’ articulated by the letter writers was not one of universal entitlement to economic security. Although letter writers thought that every citizen was entitled to a set of rights, they also believed that citizenship itself had to be earned. One way that people attempted to influence the government and assert their fundamental sense of belonging and status as citizens was by making claims on the state, through which they defined the meaning and limits of citizenship. A proper citizen was understood as someone who had a strong work ethic, fulfilled proper gender roles, was married and raising a family, and was white and of British background. Meeting most or all of these requirements meant that one was a citizen and had a right to enter into a moral relationship with the state. In return, the state had a duty and a responsibility to protect its citizens from poverty and unemployment, both of which interfered with the ability to practise good citizenship. Letter writers explicitly used the language of citizenship, a powerful word connoting ‘respect, rights, and dignity,’ to argue that the government should take the problems of unemployment and poverty seriously. Writers understood themselves to be fully participating members of a larger community; as such, they were entitled to formulate demands and claim a central place in the social and economic order.

Linda Gordon and Nancy Fraser argue that social welfare policy is based on the dichotomous principles of contract or charity. They define charity as a stigmatizing handout symbolizing dependence, ‘a gift on which the recipient had no claim, and for which the donor had no obligation.’ Contract, however, is associated with rights and dignity; it is based on the free-market economy and the historic rights of free male citizens to own their property and their labour power. This opposition between charity and contract has formed the basis of the twentieth-century welfare state, and runs throughout most social welfare programs and policies in Canada. Whether social welfare should be temporary, minimal, and stigmatizing, or a ‘guarantee of a decent standard of living, economic security and honorable entitlement’ is still a topic of debate in late twentieth-century politics.

Feminist historians have argued that this contrast between contract and charity is gendered, creating a two-tiered welfare state intended to uphold the traditional family model of the male breadwinner and the dependent female homemaker. Programs that serve a mainly female constituency, such as Mothers’ Allowances or Family Benefits, are, they argue, charity-based programs that are low-paying, stigmatizing, intrusive, and based on the applicant meeting a particular moral standard of female propriety. Programs that develop in the tradition of contract and are based on male patterns of participation in the paid labour force, such as Workmen’s Com-

pensation and Unemployment Insurance, are less stigmatizing and more generous. However, it is important to remember that there is no neat division between charity and contract-based social welfare programs. Even in the contract-based model, concerns over upholding the work ethic and preserving the difference between the deserving and the undeserving are often incorporated into the programs.

A comparison of the principles of contract and charity is helpful in interpreting how specific welfare state programs were implemented and how claimants articulated their demands. By examining the grassroots level in the development of social welfare, such as letters written to the premiers, it is possible to develop a more complex and nuanced appreciation of the relationship between the citizen and the state. It is useful to think of charity and contract not as dichotomous categories, but as a continuum with a variety of positions in between. Where particular claimants fit themselves, or are situated by the state, is mediated by such characteristics as class, race, gender, and marital status. In the Depression years, both men and women attempted to incorporate the dignity and sense of entitlement associated with the language of citizenship and a rights-based discourse in order to negotiate a space of greater equality and security for themselves and their families. The language of charity and of entitlement co-exist in these letters, and historians should not assume that writers envisioned themselves solely as supplicants because some of the language is deferential.

The letters, read carefully and as a whole, clearly demonstrate that the Depression years were a meeting point between traditional values of character, duty, and charity and developing ideas of entitlement and state-sponsored welfare in opposition to government bureaucracy and charity. What emerged was both a desire to reform rather than completely eradicate the capitalist economic structure, and a discourse that never completely challenged deeply held inequities and hierarchies of gender, ethnicity and race, and marital status. While recognizing that the welfare state was limited in scope, and was never intended to create full social and economic equality, the postwar welfare state was still an important shift in policy that recognized a right to a certain minimum level of income. Programs such as unemployment insurance or family allowances, and, later, universal old age security and health insurance, were non–means-tested social programs that, at a minimum, ‘have been crucial breakthroughs in the fight against poverty and insecurity, and have helped to create a sense of social rights linked to national citizenship.’ The language and values of service, duty, and respectability framed writers’ demands for economic security and helped to shape the extent of government responsibility for social welfare.

To most letter writers, having a job was crucial to feeling fully human.
Unemployed men in particular claimed that working and earning a wage was central to maintaining responsible citizenship, pride, and self-worth. This ‘right’ to a job, however, was not unconditional. Unemployed people, either those on relief or those refusing to take it, were careful to point out their strong work ethic and willingness to perform any type of labour for good pay. Because the stereotype of the lazy, unemployed worker persisted into the 1930s, the jobless were careful to distance themselves from such images. There was little agreement on who, exactly, deserved employment or had the right to it. In the fight for limited jobs, forceful divisions based on gender and marital status existed among those who were unemployed. It is clear, however, that most men believed they had a right to work before women, and that both men and women thought that married men were the most entitled to jobs. Ideally, men were the breadwinners who would support their dependent wives and children. Men articulated their demands for jobs or financial aid through a discourse of independent breadwinner status, claiming they had never needed help and insisting they wanted work, not relief. Although it was usually considered humiliating to ask for relief, men did not feel it was shameful to remind the government of its responsibility to help them find work. They consistently reminded the government that they were ‘entitled, deserving and in dire need of work.’ This demand for work was based on a powerful sense of masculine entitlement, one that enabled a man to claim respectable status and avoid the shame of charity. The state, men declared, had an obligation to help them fulfill their manly duties, as it would ‘lift a man up to be given work instead off [sic] charity.’

Not surprisingly, letters clearly indicate that men’s status and self-esteem was intricately bound up with the ability to work. As one man pointed out, ‘I love to work ... But, if I work or run the race, I want to win some sort of prize.’ The ideal prize, for many, was a family wage and the opportunity to marry and raise new citizens. For married men, masculinity and self-respect were linked to the right to work and the ability to support a family. Even though the family wage was a reality for only a small minority of the population, the idea of the man as the main monetary contributor to the family economy was dominant in the 1930s. As one unemployed man stated: ‘I respectfully request that the Government will give me the opportunity to work ... and provide fully all that is needed for the support of my wife and child ... for whose welfare, both the Government and myself are legally and morally responsible.’

Indeed, while men argued for entitlement from the contract and rights-based position of employment, it is crucial to remember that they spoke of these rights within a familial context. Their rights as wage-earners drew additional strength from their role as providers and were inseparable from their position as husband and father within the family. Men continually referred to their obligations and duties as family providers, and to the emotional and psychological trauma of failing in these roles. By the interwar period, the representation of fatherhood had shifted slightly to accommodate the more involved roles expected of men in the ideal companionate family. The father’s main contribution to the family was still breadwinning, but he was also expected to take on a more active and involved role with his children. Cynthia Comacchio argues that breadwinning came to symbolize the emotional ideals of ‘fatherly devotion’ and ‘paternal protection’ as well as material provision. For fathers, seeing their children going hungry was a visible and painful reminder of their failure as providers, a challenge to the duties surrounding the societal definitions of respectable manhood.

Unemployment could lead not only to the loss of manhood and self-respect but to a serious threat to the social order, once men could no longer be rewarded for fulfilling the expected roles of husband, father, and provider. ‘You can readily understand [that] a hungry man,’ claimed Sam Harris, president of the Navy League, ‘especially if he has children, is dangerous. Holdups, robberies, purse-snatchings, pork-climbing, and other things, might easily happen.’ Men could use their role as father to remind the government that the stability of the state and the security of the family were intricately bound together. ‘It will be a strong man patriotically who this winter will drown out the cries of his children for bread with the strains of The Maple Leaf Forever,’ claimed one unemployed veteran. Another unemployed man told Hepburn: ‘We hear our little ones crying for many things that they cannot have under this wave of charity, they do not get enough to eat and they have to starve and suffer these evictions ... and see Bailiffs throwing their home on the street their toys and Belongings can you wonder why men are clamering [sic] for a Revolution.’

The argument that the state’s fundamental responsibility was to protect families from instability created a powerful demand for increased state support of welfare programs. As Ana Lee Goiz argues, by the postwar reconstruction period the state accepted a moral obligation to protect and ensure the stability and welfare of the Canadian family. This concern over the stability of the family did not exist only in social welfare or state discourse, however. Part of the powerful rhetoric of postwar welfare programs, such as the Family Allowance Act, was rooted in the demands of Depression-era families for their right to protection by the state.

Women wrote to the premiers as frequently as men, but the basis of their arguments for entitlement differed. While men consistently referred to their status as breadwinners, women were viewed as wives and mothers
who had no rightful claim to a position in the paid labour force, especially when male unemployment was so high. But women used the language of rights and entitlement even though these rights were not based on their position within the market economy. As wives and mothers, women demanded help on behalf of their husbands’ and families’ well-being and independence. Like men, women viewed the family as an independent and self-supporting unit that was, ideally, free from dependence on charity. They were careful to point out the respectable status of their families and their husbands’ strong work ethic. ‘We want work, not charity’ was the refrain from women on behalf of their families just as much as it was from unemployed men.  

Married women in particular were labelled as dependants of men and were located in the private sphere where domestic reproduction and caregiving work was unpaid and privatized. Women tended, therefore, to make indirect claims on the state, rooted in their position as wife, mother, and dependant. They asked for jobs for husbands and aid for children, so as to maintain the pride and security of the family. ‘My husband feels terrible he loves his family, is willing to work hard,’ wrote a mother of seven whose university-educated husband lost his job as a salesman. Her husband, and many other men, she claimed, were ‘people who have always paid their way people unaccustomed to hardship [and] are losing everything they ever worked for through no fault of theirs.’ Although the claims women made for their families’ right to economic security were not as strong as men’s, their requests for help should not be interpreted as a form of begging or charity. Certainly, male breadwinners claimed a more direct form of entitlement predicated on independent wage-earning status and a broad public consensus around their right to paid employment. But women still found room to argue for their right to economic security, even within a position of subordination and the framework of a familial status that defined them primarily as dependants.

Even though the idea of the family wage excluded women from the public sphere, women could draw on the rights associated with it to criticize government unemployment policy and the lack of adequate relief, and to argue for their families’ right to economic security. As one woman wrote: ‘It is almost winter and our men have had no work for ages and we have no winter clothes and no prospects of any my own children have no clothes... Its work we want not relief. We don’t our living [sic] for nothing we want work and lots of it.’ Women repeatedly insisted on their children’s need for adequate food and clothing as well as school books and medicine, reminding the premiers that their husbands required jobs to meet these necessities. Protesting on behalf of husbands and children by using the rhetoric of ‘militant mothering’ was one way that women could subvert assumptions of female domesticity to make claims on the state.

The Great Depression drove home the disparity between idealized prescriptions for womanhood and the reality of taking care of a family on a limited budget. As women’s ability to manage households and raise children grew increasingly constrained due to high male unemployment, women challenged the traditional roles in which they held a sense of pride and accomplishment. In doing so, they politicized the rhetoric associated with the family wage and with family duties and obligations. A letter signed by the ‘mothers of Sturgeon Falls’ illustrates women’s ability as wives and mothers to make collective demands on the state:

There are many fathers without work, some with only three days a week. Fathers have these young, unemployed men to care for. As a father, Hon. Sir, you will understand the situation, we mothers are up against, who have our young sons on our hands, who cannot get employment ... the people will need relief money, or some means given by the Government that the people may have a way of living to keep body and soul together.

Wives and mothers expected men to protest against the unemployment that robbed them of their ability to provide and made it difficult to manage the household. One woman from Welland observed: There are millions of men driven to being red. A man can stand a good deal but when his wife and children suffer if he is a man he becomes desperate. When men protested against low wages or inadequate relief, their wives clearly framed those actions within the proper duties and responsibilities of manhood. After the arrest of Stratford relief strikers in 1936, one of many wives wrote to Hepburn in protest: ‘Surely it is no crime to ask for more food that our children may not suffer from malnutrition.’ Another wife asked the premier, ‘Why should our children and I be denied having a good husband and father in our home just because he protested against the low standard of relief?’

The arguments made by women on behalf of their families may not have challenged traditional gender roles, but their actions demonstrate that they did not see themselves as passive victims. These letters were a form of political resistance, where women actively voiced opposition to the way the government handled unemployment, threatened to withhold their vote in the next election, and demanded political accountability. As one woman admonished Henry, after writing him three times in vain to request a farm loan and school books for her daughter, there was ‘one vote here the last time and will be three this time if i get no help i give none.’ Although
women were generally excluded from higher-paying administrative positions and policy making, and were labelled as dependants or excluded from the better-paying and less-stigmatizing welfare programs, they were still pivotal in 'shaping the broad outlines of the welfare state.' As Linda Gordon points out, when women made demands for relief, they were rejecting charity, 'inventing rights,' and claiming the status of rightful citizen. Married women were not accorded the same respect and status as men, but their demands for respectability and security should be recognized as a crucial factor in transforming state obligations for social welfare.

Women with husbands could make claims on the government based on the family wage, but women who were deserted or widowed also used the language of entitlement to claim the right to Mothers' Allowance. Mothers' Allowance may have been a form of moral regulation, yet these letters indicate that women understood it as a form of entitlement, not charity. They adopted the language of contract to clothe their claims in a discourse of rights that validated their needs as legitimate entitlements tied to marriage and motherhood. 'To raise a future Canadian in the way he should be raised,' claimed one widow, 'is an important and full time job, enough responsibility for any woman however strong, without the added burden of trying to find a job.' Women drew on the gendered expectations of womanhood to legitimate their requests and to demand recognition, arguing that the state owed them support in return for fulfilling their proper roles as wives and mothers. A deserted wife whose remarriage disqualified her from a veteran's pension drew on her status as a mother as well as the language of service and sacrifice used by veterans, claiming, 'at the same time after I have struggled to raise my boys up to manhood the Government would expect my boys to step out and do their share to protect the country should a war break out; that go [sic] to show how much respect the Government has for the citizens of the country.' Women protested when allowances were cut off or denied, contacted local Mothers' Allowance Boards, and wrote to politicians. 'Why do innocent children have to suffer the loss of a good home,' asked one woman, '... when we are Canadians, and our parents before us.' While not always successful, their determination indicates that women were serious in attempting to force the state to recognize their maternal concerns and duties.

Historians have argued that Mothers' Allowance acted as a form of state moral regulation by making women's eligibility dependent on their moral propriety and respectability, such as proper housekeeping standards and the cleanliness and behaviour of their children. Sexual standards were of particular concern to administrators, and many women were cut off from the allowance after being accused of immorality. But even those recipients who were accused of impropriety could draw on the rhetoric of some reformers who had originally envisioned the allowance as a form of entitlement that recognized that 'the reproductive work of women merited some degree of entitlement.' A woman accused of moral impropriety for keeping a male boarder in her home unsuccessfully protested the removal of her allowance by claiming, 'I am a member of the Church of England and a conservative and I am trying to bring my children up right.' In some cases, however, being a good mother was enough to maintain the allowance, even in the face of sexual scandal. A woman from Toronto, whose application for a mother's allowance was rejected because she had two children by a man who turned out to be a bigamist, appealed successfully, saying: 'I am a Canadian girl born and raised in Toronto and I am a Mother. I think I am deserving of that allowance.' Claiming entitlement based on fulfilling the gendered duties of wife and mother could be a source of power for women, who could use those accomplishments to demand financial aid from the state. Like most women who wrote to the premiers, single mothers believed they and their children were entitled to economic and family security.

Letter writers used the language of respectability to claim that the proper relationship between the citizen and the state was reciprocal, and they emphasized certain moral qualities as necessary preconditions of citizenship. One argument closely associated with respectability and the demand for work was the declaration by many letter writers that homes were in danger. To both men and women, owning their own home was a clear sign of moral worth within the community. In her study of male workers in Hanover, Joy Parr shows how home ownership gave families economic security and a sense of pride rooted in community respectability. Men and women took great satisfaction in the presentation of their homes, since a home was where a family could 'live in a sanitary condition,' and where a man could fulfill his obligation to his family and 'bring my wife, and children up right.' Suzanne Morton argues that workers in Halifax achieved respectability by establishing privacy and meeting common standards of good taste, reflected in consumer purchases and the decoration of the family home. While most of the people in her study were renters rather than owners, homeownership would have further increased the pride and self-worth of men and women within the community. Letter writers were determined to maintain their homes at great cost, and were worried about the possibility of foreclosure and eviction.

Homeowners placed themselves within the circle of respectability by emphasizing such values as thrift and economic responsibility. City councils and homeowners' associations worried that men were 'becoming ill in
mind and body for want of their regular employment, and the happiness
and peace of our homelife is almost destroyed through the enforced idleness
of the breadwinners.”
Councils passed resolutions that explicitly
linked homeownership to respectability, pride, and self-respect, and
demanded that unemployed homeowners be given special opportunities to
work off tax arrears and mortgage payments. Homeowners were praised
for thriftiness and savings ‘at a considerable sacrifice,’ for paying taxes and
taking ‘a pride in the Municipality,’ and for their ‘praiseworthy efforts [at]
maintaining themselves without recourse to relief.’ Homes were impor-
tant because they were a powerful symbol of a person’s position in the
social order and the most visible evidence of hard work and thrift, the very
moral qualities needed to be a good citizen. To be evicted from one’s home,
citizens claimed, destroyed the ‘family’s self-respect and morale.’ Women
could also appeal to the government as homeowners, since they were an
essential part of the family economy when buying and maintaining a home.
One woman told Henry: ‘I worked like a man on our place to help my
husband and saved every cent I could to help get along ... it is no fault of
ours that we cannot meet our way.’ For a married woman, the home was
the centre of domestic production and the heart of her responsibilities as a
wife and mother. ‘Making do’ was a skill many women perfected in order to
stretch a man’s low wage and to manage the household on limited
resources. Preventing foreclosure was a crucial job for women in the
Depression years, and letters indicate that women saved and spent money
carefully, took in sewing and boarders, sold their own produce and baking,
and performed domestic service to help save their homes.

While men and their wives made claims on the state based on fulfilling
proper gender roles, respectability, and home ownership, First World War
veterans and their families were also able to draw on the language of
sacrifice and service to the country. To veterans, service in the Great War set
their demands apart from all other claims on the state. The letters of unem-
ployed veterans carefully pointed out their years of service and duty,
claiming that patriotic loyalty was the duty of the soldier, but that the
government had a moral obligation to protect and support them in return.
Many unemployed veterans felt abandoned and ignored by a government that
was reluctant to offer them special status in recognition of their sacri-
fices. ‘It certainly does not make me feel very nice,’ explained one unem-
ployed man, ‘to think I helped to defend a country that will not help me in
times when I and my family need it badly.’ Veterans’ associations com-
plained to the government that veterans’ dismissals from jobs were con-
trary to ‘British justice,’ and that returned men should be given preference
for employment. One veterans’ group protested the arrests of Etobicoke

relief strikers because some of the men were vets ‘who at the country’s call
willingly went through hell, believing they were fighting for Justice, Peace
and Freedom and now when they dare Fight for even a miserable [sic]
existence for themselves and their wives and Families you have them
thrown into prison cells.’ Jobs and economic security, veterans claimed,
were basic rights that they had earned overseas while proving themselves
as worthy Canadian men and citizens.

Veterans’ criticisms of the government in the 1930s were rooted in their
collective protest against inadequate government compensation after First
World War, when they began to mobilize against poor training programs,
inadequate pensions for disabled soldiers, and unfair differentials in pen-
sions based on rank. They made their claims for compensation, Desmond
Morton argues, on the basis of ‘moral entitlement,’ not charity. By 1919
the Great War Veterans’ Association advocated state policies such as public
housing, minimum wage, nationalization of primary resources, profit con-
trols, and age, sickness, and unemployment insurance. Veterans insisted
that their wartime sacrifices of lost wages and family separations had yet to
be properly rewarded, and linked their status as soldiers to the respect-
ability associated with manly breadwinning and family duty. Their fulfil-
ment of the masculine call to sacrifice deserved special recognition, they
believed, particularly when high unemployment made it increasingly diffi-
cult to support their families. ‘When MEN were needed to save our nation,’
claimed the Canadian Legion, ‘the boys responded to the call unselfishly,
upholding the best traditions of our Empire. They gave their all. Promises
of Freedom and Security have been broken or forgotten.’ The discourse
of sacrifice and duty, combined with the privilege associated with the role of
breadwinner, was, for many veterans, a powerful argument for their right
to employment. One veteran with an ill wife and four children told Henry
to give the men who ‘wallowed in the mud of Flanders a chance to make
a few dollars and keep the Respectability of ourselves and our families.’

Veterans’ families also used the concepts of duty and sacrifice to make
claims on the government, often linking war service to the powerful image
of protecting the home. Some families were literally on the verge of fore-
closure, but, for others, the word home represented economic security. One
mother reminded Henry: ‘If this country ever has to fight again it can call
on my eight boys to protect it well you cannot expect them to protect homes
they haven’t got.’ Future soldiers were the same young men who were unem-
ployed and unable to fulfil the basic duties of citizenship. Their fami-
ilies reminded the government that its success in future international con-
flicts depended on the willingness of young men to serve, and, therefore,
they expected protection on the home front in times of economic crisis. As
one father reminded Henry, ‘We thought that when two of our boys went overseas, that they went to protect our home.’

Closely tied to values of duty and respectability were particular notions of ethnicity. It is not surprising that in a time of social and economic upheaval, an affirmation of Canadian national identity should appear in popular discourse. Although historians have discussed the rise of an independent Canadian cultural nationalism beginning in the 1920s, few have looked at how national identity was formed outside the intellectual elite. Yet, if a nation is an ‘imagined community,’ it is crucial to understand how conceptions of nationality were shaped and understood at the popular level. Letter writers used the discourse of national identity to place themselves, along with the politicians they were addressing, within a collective, although narrowly defined, Canadian identity. Anyone who was white and of British heritage was a true Canadian, and therefore worthy of financial aid and economic justice. Letter writers clearly indicated who was and was not included in a hierarchy of entitlement. Those who were ‘Canadian by Birth’ or of British heritage were seen as the only truly deserving citizens of Canada. For many, true Canadian identity was established through generations of Canadian ancestry. To letter writers, the United Empire Loyalists and the early pioneers symbolized the belief in an organic community where generations of Canadians were linked together in the creation of the nation. An unemployed man on the verge of foreclosure wrote to Henry to ask for help in saving his family’s home, saying: ‘My wife is a Canadian of three generations back and myself I am forty-five years in Canada a British subject at that.’

By drawing on the status of ethnicity, women could be true Canadians on an equal basis with men and could claim a crucial place for themselves within the national narrative. A woman’s status as a member of the Anglo-Canadian community could be used to argue for greater recognition and entitlement, and a stronger position on the continuum of charity and contract. The native-born, according to female letter writers, played a crucial role in building the nation, and should therefore receive recognition from the state. Genealogy became a calling card and signifier of special status. ‘I am no foreigner’ wrote a widow who was facing foreclosure. ‘I was born in Ontario from parents that [were] also born in Ontario. My grandfather was a U.E.L. my grandparents on my mothers side were Irish. My husband was also a good Canadian born in Canada from English blood.’ Another woman wrote: ‘Are we not true, loyal Canadians from the same descent as your wife Mrs. Henry. Her ancestry [sic] Laura Secord was mine also as well as Sir Allen McNab and the other faithful early settlers.’

Single mothers could also call on Canadian ethnicity to more forcefully argue their status of respectability. A woman who was turned down for Mothers’ Allowance wrote to say: ‘We are respectable citizens of Canada and have been for generations back. I am bringing up my family decent and respectable [sic] and educating them the best I can ... I feel I have been dealt out of my rights by some-one who thinks it there [sic] duty to save government money.’

This tendency to use ethnicity as a claim for entitlement can be seen as both a radical and a conservative impulse. Canadian identity became a way for the unemployed and poor to claim respectability and to make demands for economic and political justice. But the narrow definition of a true Canadian excluded the non-Canadian born and those ‘foreigners’ who were not of British background, and were therefore unable to demand the entitlements claimed by those considered full members of the Canadian state. ‘Is there a chance,’ asked one unemployed man, ‘for a good honest Canadian citizen to make an honest living for himself and Family ... Why do our Governments ... permit our own Canadians to be shut out and all classes of foreigners placed in their positions.’ Writers complained with bitterness and hostility that ‘foreigners’ were taking away Canadians’ rightful place in the labour force and stealing away potential opportunities. As one unemployed woman stated: ‘It is impossible for a single man, during the last five years, to have any hope of marriage ... It is the foreigner and the Jew who are taking our trades and work from us, who can afford to marry and start a home.’

In the public imagination, the fear of immigrants was also associated with the fear of communist protest against the capitalist system. The rhetoric of ‘British justice’ was commonly used to set criticism of the government and claims for entitlement apart from more radical critiques of the economic and political system, although the distinction between radical and ‘British justice’ could be ambiguous. ‘I don’t want any Czar of Russia methods in what I have always been taught was a free Canada for Canadians,’ claimed an unemployed miner from Cobalt: ‘But in my case it is far from being a free country ... I do not want you to think I am a Red or an agitator, but I do feel that I have been very unfairly dealt with.’ Many individuals wrote to say they were not communist agitators or radicals, just ordinary people who desired ‘British justice,’ which they defined variously as ‘the Right to work in a man’s own country,’ to receive a living wage and provide for a wife and family, to criticize government relief and policy measures freely, and to receive priority for jobs if a veteran or Canadian...
born. Using the threat of communism or 'turning red' within their letters was one way that writers expressed the depth of their concerns about the economic condition. An unemployed veteran told Henry in 1931, 'I am no extremist or radical,' but 'starvation breeds revolution,' particularly when 'my children are receiving less nourishment than I received while in a Soviet prison in Moscow.' A woman with an unemployed husband and a sick child, and who proudly claimed Loyalist descent, asked Henry, 'Do you wonder in the face of such suffering that people become radicals?'

As men and women wrote formal requests to the government, they were attempting to establish their needs as legitimate political concerns and participating in a debate to define how those needs should be properly met. Using the language of rights and entitlement, letter writers attempted to link their demands to the dignity associated with the principle of contract, claiming that economic security and stability should be provided in return for service to the state. This language of contract, rights, and entitlement was at once progressive and limiting. While it argued for greater government responsibility for the welfare of its citizens, expanded government obligation for social welfare was never intended to eradicate economic inequality completely, and many people were excluded from the status of a fully entitled and deserving citizen. The dignity associated with a rights-based discourse in this era still presumed the existence of the oppositional categories of charity and dependence. The assertions by letter writers that they were entitled citizens who had fulfilled certain duties implied that others had failed to meet the obligations required of citizenship, and were therefore not entitled to aid. The way that claimants understood state responsibility and individual obligation left little room for a conception of state welfare beyond contractual obligations based on individual duties.

Yet individuals did have some room to act and to manoeuvre. While some letters received a formulaic response, others obtained some form of help. After a direct appeal to the premier, some men were given temporary work on government public works projects in the early 1930s. Many others received answers to their questions on government policy and legislation, or promises of investigation into denial of, for example, relief payments or Old Age Pensions or Mothers’ Allowance Benefits. With a few notable exceptions, however, most people who wrote to the premiers did not offer a radical critique of the capitalist economic order or demand sweeping changes to the political system. Still, their actions should be seen as no less important than those of organized political parties or labour unions. They made their demands and criticisms on a basis of duties, obligations, and moral values, including a willingness to work, proper gender roles, and a moral character emphasizing thrift, sobriety, and honesty. Recommendations to Henry and Hepburn from Reeves, ministers, and prominent members of the community, remarking on workers' responsibility and honesty, demonstrated that good character was considered an essential component of good citizenship. Letter writers used traditional notions of hard work, good character, and duty to make claims on the state and to argue for increased state responsibility for its citizens. Within a limited discourse and range of possibilities, writers were attempting to create a positive vision of a society where citizens within an industrial capitalist order could expect protection from the economic insecurity and instability produced by unemployment. Ultimately, viewing these letters as political actions means re-evaluating the way historians have defined the meaning of the word political. Taken seriously, these letters suggest an active and politically aware population determined to write to politicians and government officials to keep them accountable, and to ensure that their claims were seriously acknowledged. In Depression-era Canada, the letters and appeals of unemployed men and women for a reciprocal relationship between citizen and state should be viewed as an important force in the transition to the postwar welfare state.

NOTES

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1 Archives of Ontario (AO), RG 3-8, G.S. Henry Papers, MS 1759, file Department of Public Works, Mr T.F. to Henry, 9 October 1933.
5 See, for example, Alvin Finkel, Business and Social Reform in the Thirties (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1979); Allan Moscovitch and J. Albert, The Benevolent State: The Growth of Welfare in Canada (Toronto: Garamond Press, 1987); Struthers, No Fault of Their Own and The Limits of Affluence; Doug Owram, The Government Generation: Canadian Intellectuals and the State (Toronto: University


7 Gordon, Pitted but Not Entitled, 274.


10 Gordon and Fraser, ‘Contract versus Charity,’ 59.

11 Ibid., 55, and Pateman, Disorder of Women, 185.


15 James Struthers argues that the principle of less eligibility was written into unemployment insurance by making benefits lower than market-based wage rates and by favouring those who had steady, full-time employment. See Struthers, No Fault of Their Own, 211–12; Pierson, ‘Gender and the Unemployment Insurance Debates’; Guest, Emergence of Social Security, 146–7.

16 See Tillotson, ‘Citizen Participation in the Welfare State,’ where she argues that a form of citizen participation can be found in the early years of Brantford’s recreation movement.

17 Struthers, Limits of Affluence, 4. Family Allowance benefits were never adequate, argues Dominique Jean, but they still ‘led parents to incorporate the idea of an adequate allowance into their concept of their rights as Canadians … [and] to enlarge their concepts of their rights as citizens.’ Jean, ‘Family Allowances and Family Autonomy,’ 430.

18 Struthers, Limits of Affluence, 94–5.


20 AO, RG 3–8, Henry Papers, MS 1759, file Department of Public Works, Mr G.D. to Henry, 20 July 1933.

21 Ibid., MS 1752, file Department of Public Works, Mr J.S. to Henry, 11 May 1932.

AO, RG 3-8, Henry Papers, MS 1755, file Legislation, mortgage, Mr R.H. to Henry, 7 January, 1932.

Ibid., MS 1759, file Department of Public Works, T.H.G. to Henry, 3 October 1933.

Morton, Ideal Surroundings, 72; Comacchio, 'Postscript for Father'; Parr, Gender of Breadwinners, 82.

Comacchio, 'Postscript for Father,' 395.

Michael Roper and John Tosh argue that male power is continually 'contested and transformed,' partly because the ideal of financial self-sufficiency has always been hard to achieve. Michael Roper and John Tosh, Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain since 1800 (London: Routledge, 1991), 18. See also the essays in Mark Carnes and Clyde Griffen, Meanings for Manhood: Constructions of Masculinity in Victorian America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); and Morton, Ideal Surroundings, 82.

AO, RG 3-8, Henry Papers, MS 1757, file Navy League, Sam Harris, president, Navy League of Canada, to Henry, 27 March 1933.

Ibid., MS 1747, file Unemployment Relief no. 3, Lt. W.I.O. to Henry, 8 October 1931.

AO, RG 3, Series 9, M.F. Hepburn Papers, no. 180, file Unemployment Relief, no. 2, L.W. to Hepburn, 24 June 1934.

Anace Goll, 'Family Matters.' 11.

AO, RG 3, Series 9, Hepburn Papers, no. 180, file Unemployment Relief no. 2, Mrs M.G. to Hepburn, 27 July 1934.

Piersen, 'Gender and the Unemployment Insurance Debates'; Pateman, Disorder of Women, 182-5, 192-5.

Evans, 'Divided Citizenship,' 91, 95.

AO, RG 3-8, Henry Papers, MS 1745, file Relief, asked for, Mrs W.A. Rowland to Henry, 1 October 1931.


AO, RG 3, Series 9, Hepburn Papers, no. 180, file: Unemployment Relief, Mrs W.H. to Hepburn, 1934.


AO, RG 3-8, MS 1747, Henry Papers, file Unemployment relief no. 3, Mrs W.G. on behalf of the mothers of Sturgeon Falls, 29 September 1931.

AO, RG 3-10, Hepburn Papers, no. 250, file Comments on unemployment relief, 29 July 1935.

Ibid., no. 203, file Provincial Secretary's Department, Mrs J.J. to Hepburn, 14 May 1936.

Ibid., Mrs L.M. to Hepburn, 10 May 1936.


AO, RG 3-8, Henry Papers, MS 1736, file Agricultural Development Board, Mrs A.S. to Henry, 26 August 1931.


Gordon, Pittied but Not Entitled, 627.


AO, RG 3-10, Hepburn Papers, no. 190, file Public Welfare Department, Mothers' Allowance, Mrs R.H. to Hepburn, 21 February 1935. Quoted in Struthers, Limits of Affluence, 99.

Recent literature has argued that the welfare state can provide a potential escape route for women from dependence on individual men by providing a direct relationship to the state. See Pateman, Disorder of Women, 196; Evans, 'Divided Citizenship,' 95; Gordon, 'What Does Welfare Regulate?' Social Research 55, 4 (1988): 609-30; Orloff, 'Gender and the Social Rights of Citizenship,' 305.

AO, RG 3, Series 9, Hepburn Papers, no. 180, file Unemployment Relief no. 2, Mrs J.W. to Hepburn, 6 September 1934.
52 AO, RG 3-8, Henry Papers, MS 1745, file Relief: asked for, Mrs C.G. to Henry, 9 June 1931. See also Mothers’ Allowances files, ibid., MS 1742, 1931, and MS 1757, 1933.


54 Little, ‘Blurring of Boundaries’; Struthers, Limits of Affluence, 43.

55 Struthers, Limits of Affluence, 48.

56 AO, RG 3-8, Henry Papers, MS 1742, 30 October 1931, file Mothers’ Allowances Commission, Mrs C.C. to Henry, 30 October 1931.

57 Ibid., MS 1757, file Mothers’ Allowances Commission, Mrs R.C. to Henry, 5 March 1933.

58 In a clipping from a 1934 Perth newspaper, the homes of seventeen people were listed for sale owing to tax arrears; seven of these homes belonged to women. AO, RG 3, Series 9, Hepburn Papers, no. 180, file Unemployment Relief no. 2, Mrs A.F. to Hepburn, 2 August 1934 (enclosure).

59 Parr, The Gender of Breadwinners.

60 AO, RG 3-10, Hepburn Papers, no. 225, file M.F. Hepburn, private no. 3, Mrs G.A. to Hepburn, July 1934; AO, RG 3-8, Henry Papers, MS 1759, file Department of Public Works, Mr V.G. to Hepburn, 19 September 1933.

61 Morton, Ideal Surroundings, 32-8.

62 AO, RG 3-8, Henry Papers, MS 1760, file Resolutions, Toronto Ward Two Property Owners Joint Executive to Henry, 24 April 1933.

63 Ibid., file Resolutions, Peterborough City Council to Henry, 7 February 1933; file Resolutions, Kitchener City Council, 14 June 1933; and file Resolutions, Hamilton City Council, 13 June 1933.

64 Ibid., MS 1755, file Legislation, mortgage, Mr W.F.P. to Henry, 9 January, 1933.

65 Ibid., MS 1760, file Relief, asked for, Mrs T.P. to Henry, 18 March 1933.


67 See, for example, AO, RG 3-8, Henry Papers, MS 1760, file Relief, asked for, Mrs T.P. to Henry, 18 March 1933; MS 1759, file Department of Public Works, Mr R.M. to Henry, 24 June 1933; RG 3-10, Hepburn Papers, no. 225, file Hepburn, private no. 3, Mrs G.W.A. to Hepburn, July 1934. For the role of women in the family economy, see Meg Luxton, More Than a Labour of Love: Three Generations of Women’s Work in the Home (Toronto: Women’s Press, 1980); and Bettina Bradbury, Working Families: Age, Gender and Daily Survival in Industrializing Montreal (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1993).

68 AO, RG 3, Series 9, Hepburn Papers, no. 180, file Unemployment Relief no. 1, Mr W.K. to Hepburn, 17 December 1934.

69 See letters in AO, RG 3-10, Hepburn Papers, no. 171, file B.E.S.L., 1934.

70 Ibid., no. 205, file Resolutions, Progressive Veterans in Canada to Hepburn, 27 July 1936.


72 Morton, ‘Canadian Veterans,’ 22.

73 Jeffrey A. Keshen, Propaganda and Censorship during Canada’s Great War (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1996), 204.

74 Morton, ‘Canadian Veterans,’ 23.

75 AO, RG 3, Series 9, Hepburn Papers, no. 180, file Unemployment Relief, Canadian Legion Unemployment Committee, B.E.S.L. Hamilton Branch to Hepburn, December 1934.

76 AO, RG 3-8, Henry Papers, MS 1759, file Department of Public Works, East Block, Mr F.K. to Henry, 24 May 1933.

77 Ibid., MS 1744, file Positions, general, Mrs A.B. to Henry, 27 June 1931.

78 Ibid., MS 1762, file Unemployment Relief, homeowners, Mr H.V.W. to Henry, 8 September 1933.


81 AO, RG 3-8, Henry Papers, MS 1761, file Soldiers’ Aid Commission, Mr E.L. to Henry, 14 January 1933.

82 Ibid., MS 1762, file Unemployment Relief no. 1, Mr T.H. to Henry, 7 August 1933.

83 AO, RG 3-10, Hepburn Papers, no. 225, file M.F. Hepburn, private no. 3, Miss M.E.M. to Hepburn, 3 July 1914.


85 AO, RG 3-8, Henry Papers, MS 1750, file Mothers’ Allowances Commission, Mrs S.B.S. to Henry, 24 February 1932.

86 Ibid., MS 1760, file Relief, asked for, Mrs C.R.C. to Henry, 2 August 1933.
87 Ibid., MS 1745, file Relief, asked for, Mrs A.H.M., 29 December, 1931.
88 Although it is difficult to assess the exact ethnic background of letter writers, a careful study of the letters reveals few non-British names.
89 AO, RG 3-8, Henry Papers, MS 1744, file Positions, general, Mr B.C. to Henry, 19 November 1931.
90 Ibid., MS 1750, file Mothers’ Allowances Commission, Miss A.M. to Henry, 26 August 1932.
91 Ibid., MS 1760, file Relief, asked for, Mr H.L.S. to Henry, 26 July 1933.
92 Ibid.
93 Ibid., MS 1747, file Unemployment Relief no. 7, Lt. W.J.O. to Henry, 8 October 1931.
94 Ibid., MS 1762, file Unemployment Relief: homeowners, Mrs K.H. to Henry, 21 July 1933.
96 Fraser and Gordon, ‘Contract versus Charity,’ 59.
97 Ibid., 64, 47.

Citizen Participation in the Welfare State: The Recreation Movement in Brantford, 1945–1957

SHIRLEY TILLOTSON

The goals of the 1990–1 Spicer Commission hearings on the Constitution and the 1965–71 community organization projects of the Company of Young Canadians could hardly have been more different. The more recent exercise was about forming public opinion, whereas the earlier one aspired to foment action for social change. Both exercises, however, aspired to encourage citizen participation in public life and were justified by concerns that some or most Canadians were marginalized, alienated, or apathetic. Each was inspired by hopes that involving more people in public decision making would make collective decisions more representative of people’s needs—that is to say, more democratic. Citizen participation would also help people feel that they, and not some far away ‘others,’ owned their society’s institutions.

Such aspirations for a democratic political culture have a long history. In their most far-reaching forms, they have been at the core of democratic socialism since the nineteenth century. In the confusing ideological clamour of the 1990s, new cries for more active citizenship have also been heard from the political right. For instance, conservative social commentator William Gairdner, deploiring the effect of welfare state programs on citizen responsibility, calls on Canadians to organize their own local, non-governmental services of care and relief, services that would reflect citizens’ own values. Gairdner’s cry comes in part from a concern strangely similar to one articulated by socialist political theorist John Keane: that welfare state bureaucracies have in effect tended ‘to encourage the passive consumption of state provision and seriously to undermine citizens’ confidence in their ability to direct their own lives.’ Both right and left, then, have suggested that the welfare state produces an alienation that citizen participation might correct.