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Offset Mirrors: Institutional Paths in Canadian and Australian Social Housing

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Abstract

Paired comparisons of liberal-welfare regimes are underrepresented in housing policy literature. This paper adopts historical institutionalist theory in comparing two such cases: Canada and Australia. Despite these countries' many similarities, social housing policy differences have been shaped by institutional differences in federal systems, welfare states and social housing itself. Australia's earlier welfare state supported much larger postwar production, but Canada caught up once it departed from the residual US model in the 1960s. Although the 1970s economic shocks challenged Australia's welfare state more than Canada's, the latter's centrifugal federalism became a bigger threat to social housing. In 1985–1995 Australia expanded its social programmes, including demand-side assistance, while Canada devolved and retrenched social programmes, including social housing. Although supply-side social housing is an orphaned legacy in each case, Australia has higher assistance to low-income tenants,

more active policy discourse and stronger recent signs of post-neoliberal re-engagement than Canada. These two cases illustrate the importance of institutional differences, including ‘‘institutional design’’, in creating different forces of change at key junctures, leading to divergences in policy paths. These findings suggest value in reinterpreting the existing secondary literature from the perspectives of welfare regime theory and historical institutionalism.

Key Words:

Social housing | welfare state | housing policy | federalism | Canada | Australia

Notes

1. Dollar values in this article are either Australian or Canadian dollars, depending on the context. Australia's dollar averaged 89 per cent of Canada's in 1998–2008 exchange value, but is virtually equal in terms of Purchasing Power Parity; by 2011 these currencies were at par with each other and with the US dollar.

2. Leone and Carroll (2010) provide an unreliable account of AHI, e.g. indicating that its projects are underrepresented in big cities and that it amounts to a federal re-engagement rather than a less-targeted reprise of meagre 1950s production levels. Their account of policy history also misses the transformative public housing ‘heyday’ described earlier.

3. Housing assistance outlays for circa 2006 are from Australia FACSIA (2007) and Pomeroy (2007). Value of Australian assistance from Wang et al. (2004), consistent with more recent sources such as Hulse (2007) and Australia FAHCSIA (2010). The value of Canadian assistance is estimated based on market rent at census median of $671, average RGI rent of $375, and RGI units comprising 70 per cent of the social housing stock of 680,000 to 700,000 units. The Canadian estimate is conservative insofar as social housing is skewed to higher-rent cities, and the RGI units (within the census stock) lower the census median vis-à-vis market rent levels. Thus the value of assistance is similar in each country.

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