

Canada Weighs Political, Financial

Costs of Welfare Reform

By Arne Swardson
Washington Post Foreign Service

TORONTO, Oct. 26—Soon after taking office, Prime Minister Jean Chretien set out to reshape Canada's welfare system because the country no longer can afford the cost of the generous assistance it has provided its citizens for 30 years.

Nearly a year later, however, reaction to the first phase of the proposed reforms indicates that Chretien may not be able to afford the political cost of scaling back that assistance.

A watered-down set of options released by the government earlier this month—seven months behind schedule—has met with sharp criticism not just from Chretien's political opposition, but from provincial leaders across Canada. Their cooperation is needed to reform the social safety net because the provinces administer and help pay for some of those programs.

Lucien Bouchard, opposition leader in the federal parliament, said the paper was "stillborn," "imperialistic" and "centralizing." Bob Rae, premier of Ontario, Canada's most populous province, called the paper an "insult" and an "utter disappointment." In Quebec, where separatists lead the French-speaking province, officials called the document an unacceptable power grab. Interest groups representing labor and other beneficiaries of the programs up for review also declared the paper a non-starter. And the big automakers said if unemployment benefits did not cover their workers while plants were being retooled, Canada would become less competitive.

All this fuss for 89-pages of ideas that the government is selling as only a first step of reforms. Its most radical options: making people work at least 12 weeks before they can collect unemployment benefits rather than the current minimum of 10, targeting welfare to families with children, and offering employment training to welfare recipients.

Canadians long have been proud that their social benefits—more generous in eligibility, duration and amount than in the United States—help define their national identity. They point out that poverty and homelessness are lower here, while income is more evenly distributed be-

tween rich and poor.

But at the same time, Canadians are becoming irritated that much of their high taxes seem to be spent on supporting welfare cheats, and polls have shown that a majority of respondents favor reform.

A shooting incident here last week provided a case in point when Ta Phu Cuong, an adult student at a Toronto high school, shot and wounded two guidance counselors, allegedly because the counselors were about to revoke his student status and thereby his welfare payments.

Many people asked why it was that an apparently single, 27-year-old man was eligible for welfare benefits in the first place.

"The time has come to drive home the lesson that there is no shame in earning an honest dollar," reader Gaston Giampini wrote to the Montreal Gazette last week. "Too many greedy people can, but won't, work."

Many more people are eligible for welfare or unemployment benefits in Canada than in the United States. In 1986, according to one study, 6 percent of the income received by Canadians overall came from government transfer payments; for Americans the comparable figure was 2.4 percent. The number of Canadians on social assistance has doubled since 1981; this year, Canada will spend \$12.6 billion on unemployment payments alone. The United States, by contrast, spends about \$35 billion for a population 10 times that of Canada.

In the United States, the principal welfare program, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, is restricted to single parents. Rules vary widely in Canada, but welfare is more readily available nearly everywhere.

In the province of Ontario, where more than 12 percent of the population received welfare payments in 1992, single individuals can qualify if their income is low enough. Families in which one member works can receive a "top-up" if salary income is minimum-wage. A recipient also can retain some assets: in Toronto, someone can own a car and two houses and still be eligible. The second house,

however, must be up for sale.

High-school students over the age of 16 can receive welfare if they live away from home, although they must show reasons why they cannot live with their families. After the age of 18, any high school student living away from home can receive welfare; about 12,000 students in the Toronto area, many of them adult students like Cuong, were on the dole.

"A lot of these people have no intention of going to school," David Moll, chairman of the Toronto Board of Education, told the Globe and Mail newspaper. "They're enrolling to get a welfare check. It's like they've won the lottery."

Unemployment benefits also are more widely available in Canada than they are in the United States, particularly in such high-unemployment areas as the Atlantic provinces of Newfoundland and Nova Scotia. There, working for 10 weeks can qualify someone for 42 weeks of unemployment payments. Over the years, the local economies have shaped themselves around that schedule.

"You hire someone for 10 weeks, lay them off, hire their mother for 10 weeks, lay her off, hire her cousin, and so on," said Arthur Kroeger, a think-tank-head who formerly was a high-level official in the Labor Ministry. "The generous system . . . has caused all kinds of trouble and has caused people to continue to live in high-unemployment regions." Without the benefits, they might have moved to more prosperous areas.

The reform effort now is before a parliamentary committee, which will hold public hearings around the country. Even if those hearings reveal further opposition to change, however, the Chretien government probably will press ahead. It can't afford not to: Canada's budget deficit is proportionately one of the highest in the industrialized world, and last week officials said spending was running ahead of projections and would have to be cut more than expected.

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FDA Hopes to Work Faster—Electronically

Associated Press

Carts rumble through the halls with mounds of lab notes, chemical breakdowns and patient records. Scientists scribble questions on yellow sticky notes and slap them on thousands of documents.

The makers and regulators of medicine haven't yet hopped on the information superhighway—but the Food and Drug Administration is about to take the plunge, hoping computer savvy will speed new drugs to market.

A company now spends about 10 years developing a new drug. The resulting FDA application is at least 200,000 pages long, data that take another two years to be scrutinized by agency scientists.

Under the five-year, \$15 million "Smart Initiative," FDA is moving to accept all this data via computer. The goal is to cut agency review time by 30 percent and speed drug companies' work by forcing them into the electronic age.

"We're trying to not only move the agency to be more paperless, but to facilitate all the companies we regulate to be more paperless," said FDA Deputy Commissioner Mary Jo Veverka.

"We are working very feverishly toward that," agreed Richard Reidenbach of Eli Lilly & Co. The pharmaceuti-

cal giant hopes the changes will help it cut in half the 5,000 days spent getting each new drug to market.

Computers once couldn't handle everything from patient lists to complex X-ray images with one program. The software to do that is now emerging, allowing drug makers to quickly analyze and update medical data and even guiding them through the myriad drug applications required by governments worldwide. But FDA has to ensure that turning to software, where the flick of a switch can change data, won't compromise patient safety.

The Smart Initiative, funded by the user fees drug companies pay FDA, is establishing safety regulations for drug software and adapting FDA's equipment. Ultimately, standard FDA computers will read data submitted electronically from any company, on any software—data that have an audit trail similar to today's paper trail.

"When industry is done and pushes a button, we can start our review instantaneously," said FDA policy officer Edwin Dutra. "If five people have to look at it at the same time, we won't have to make five copies."

A pilot program, in which companies copied their paper applications onto computer disks, found that FDA approved the electronic submissions 11 months faster than the paper counterparts.

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Issues Tighter Rules On Lead Paint in Homes

Hazards Must Be Disclosed to Buyers, Tenants

By Gary Lee
Washington Post Staffer

Property owners seeking to sell or lease dwellings built before 1978 will be required to inform prospective buyers or tenants about lead hazards in a house or building, according to a regulation proposed yesterday by the Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

The new rule would require property owners to complete disclosure forms about lead-based paint or other lead-related hazards in dwellings to be sold or rented and to keep the forms for three years after the sale.

The rule buttresses other federal efforts to combat the lead exposure problem, including a 1978 ban on the use of lead in household paint and the phaseout of lead used in food cans. Since those measures took effect, lead blood levels in the United States have fallen by 80 percent, according to the EPA.

The rule is designed to reduce the risks in homes. Lead in paint, for example, is a health hazard, particularly for young children and women of childbearing age. Constant exposure to even low levels of lead-based paint, dust or dirt can damage the brain, kidneys and nervous system.

HUD estimates that the paint used in 57 million homes and apartment units—or about three quarters of the nation's pre-1978 housing stock—contains lead. Almost 4 million American children still live in homes classified as priority hazards, the department said.

For some children, the effects of lead exposure are glaring. One out of every five minority or low-income children have elevated levels of lead in their blood, EPA figures show.

Under the proposed rules, homeowners would be required to provide prospective tenants or purchasers with an EPA booklet about lead hazards. The booklets are currently available from real estate agents or the EPA.

In cases where no information about the lead content in dwellings is available, homeowners will be required to say so, according to the proposed regulation.

In such cases, the prospective buyer would be given a 10-day period before a home is sold to conduct a lead paint inspection. The purchaser would cover the inspection costs.

HUD Secretary Henry Cisneros said the rule was crafted with the interests of the home industry and public health in mind. The requirement would add about \$6 to average closing costs or about \$75 million per year nationally, HUD estimates. The agency estimated that lead inspections would range from \$50 to \$400.

"The idea is to not overly burden the housing industry, yet take action to protect our children from the dangers threat inherent in lead-based paint," Cisneros said in a statement.

Lynn Goldman, an assistant EPA administrator, concurred with Cisneros. The proposal would not require sellers or lessors to have their homes tested or require lead-based paint to be removed where it was found, she said in a news conference.

The proposed rule was outlined yesterday in a joint news conference held by Goldman and Nicholas Retinas, an assistant secretary at HUD. The rule will become effective after a 60-day comment period.

Female Combat Pilot Is Believed Dead

F-14 Crashed Into Pacific After Takeoff From Aircraft Carrier

Associated Press

SAN DIEGO, Oct. 26—One of the nation's first female combat pilots—a 29-year-old who loved flying "above everything"—was believed to have been killed when her Navy F-14 fighter jet crashed in the ocean.

Lt. Kara S. Hultgreen's plane went down Tuesday off the Southern California coast after taking off from the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln on a training exercise.

Helicopters searched for the body today. Her crew mate was quickly rescued with minor injuries.

The cause of the crash was under investigation.

The San Antonio native had recently completed training on the F-14.

The Pentagon lifted combat restrictions on female pilots in April 1993. Hultgreen is the first female F-14 pilot to qualify for combat duty with the Navy. Eighteen other women also are qualified for naval combat aviation and 32 more are in training, a Navy spokesman at the Pentagon said.

The Air Force has six female combat pilots and seven more who have completed training. The Army has 18 female combat pilots. One fe-

male combat pilot is now in training with the Marines.

Pentagon officials said there were 10 fatal accidents in naval aviation in the fiscal year that ended Sept. 30 and 30 fatalities the year before.

Hultgreen's family had tried not to worry about her involvement in combat flight training, said Hultgreen's grandmother, Elizabeth Spears.

"I think we tried not to dwell on that," she said. "Kara was very beautiful and very outgoing and very happy and loved flying. That was the thing that she loved above everything."

Improved Weather Alert System Urged

Associated Press

Advance warnings of this year's Palm Sunday tornadoes failed to reach many of those in danger from the storms that killed 42 people, according to a new report that calls for an improved weather radio system.

More than 75 tornado warnings were issued during the storm, including one from Birmingham, Ala., sent out 12 minutes before the deadliest tornado touched down. Yet many people in threatened parts of Alabama and nearby states never got the word, the National Weather Service's disaster analysis said yesterday.

The report echoed statements by Vice President Gore, who toured the region a day after the March 27

storms and called for a rapid upgrading of the current National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Weather Radio system.

The storms killed 42 people in three states. Twenty were killed and 90 injured when the roof collapsed at Goshen United Methodist Church near Piedmont, Ala.

A tornado with winds estimated at 158 mph to 206 mph passed near the church, causing the collapse at 11:39 a.m. The church did not have a weather radio or any other means of receiving the warning.

The storm killed 22 people in Alabama, 18 in Georgia and two in North Carolina. It also caused \$107 million in property damage.

Gore's focus on improving weather radio led to a recent conference

here on ways to upgrade the current system so that 95 percent of Americans will have emergency warnings available, with automatic equipment in hospitals, churches, community centers, shopping centers and other gathering places.

The National Weather Service operates a system of several hundred local radio stations called NOAA Weather Radio, reaching about 75 percent of the nation. Test programs to improve the system have been launched in Alabama and Florida.

The weather service's new Doppler radars performed well in the Palm Sunday storms, even though they were more than 100 miles away, according to the disaster survey report.

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