

coming of age in a man's world



The life, times and wisdom of **Dorothea Crittenden**
Canada's first female deputy minister

introduction

It was October 1991. The recession that hit the United States, Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom was proving to be particularly hard on Ontario. Several factors — the economic impact of globalization, tighter integration into the North American market following the 1989 signing of the Free Trade Agreement, and high interest rates (in an attempt to dampen rising inflation) — conspired to make the recession in Ontario the worst since the Great Depression.

The recession, which translated into budget shortfalls for the Ontario government, was exacerbated by the federal government's decision in 1990 to limit Canada Assistance Plan (CAP) payments to the three "have" provinces — Alberta, British Columbia and Ontario. While the 'cap on CAP' was in place, the federal government cost-matched all increases to social assistance in most provinces on a dollar-for-dollar basis. But Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia were only eligible for federal cost matching for the first five per cent of annual growth in their respective programs. Theoretically, the change was intended to be fiscally neutral under the assumption that the economy would continue to grow and unemployment would not increase.

But the economy didn't grow. The opposite happened. By 1991, Ontario's real GDP had declined by more than 3.9 per cent. Roughly 200,000 jobs were lost. Of these, approximately 150,000 were in the manufacturing sector. In light of the cost increases Ontario experienced in welfare and other social assistance programs during the recession of the early 1990s, the cap on CAP proved to be a significant constraint.

In the face of ballooning social assistance caseloads, several Ontario ministries, led by the Ministry of Community and Social Services, collaborated to tackle the issues relating to rising poverty and social need. Part of the work involved ministry staff looking to the past to identify any parallels between the economic situation of the 1990s and that of the 1930s.

And that led them to Dr. Dorothea Crittenden. As Deputy Minister of Community and Social Services from 1974 – 1978 (in fact, Dr. Crittenden was the first female deputy minister in Canada), her remarkable career with the Ontario civil service began in 1937 at the height of the Great Depression. As a statistician, the figures she compiled summarized the grim social conditions of the time. In 1937, 320,000 Ontarians — one out of 10 — were on welfare.

During the post-war boom, which saw the dramatic expansion of Ontario's social programs, Dr. Crittenden worked hard and rose to positions of increasing responsibility, including Ontario's chief negotiator in the deliberations that resulted in the creation of the Canada Assistance Plan.

By 1991, Dr. Crittenden was 76 years old and long retired. But who better to talk about her years in the government and of the events that shaped government policy and spurred the development of Ontario's present-day system of social services?

Dr. Charles Pascal was the Deputy Minister of Community and Social Services in 1991. He granted permission to two ministry employees — Mary Ann Murphy and John Stapleton — to interview Dr. Dorothea Crittenden. During a two-hour interview, Dr. Crittenden reminisced, with her usual candour, about growing up in Toronto during the Depression, her years of service and achievement in the Ontario Government, and her post-retirement work as a consultant.

The original edited and annotated version of the 1991 interview was compiled as part of the 75th anniversary of the Ministry of Community and Social Services in 2005 and to coincide with Dorothy Crittenden's 90th birthday on April 30 of that year.

life & times

the Great Depression

Dr. Dorothea Crittenden was born in Toronto on April 30, 1915. She was an only child and spent her early years in Toronto. When she was 12 years old, her father lost his job. In this section, Dr. Crittenden talks about the Great Depression and its effects on her childhood and early working years.

When I was 12 — and I am only using this as an example of how people can adjust to difficult circumstances — my father, who was 62, lost his job. Up until then, he had never been unemployed a day in his life. My mother was already sick. So, I got a job. For blocks in every direction around my house — I babysat until midnight for 25 cents, 50 cents on Sunday. I negotiated the rates for Saturdays and Sundays. I was very resourceful.

I made more money than my father made when he even started to get a day or two of work. Then when I was 17 and a half years old, I got a chance to go to northern Ontario to make \$900 a year teaching in a bush school. Here I was, a child of very old parents — my mother was 40 and my father was 50 when I was born. And away I went.

If I had had children, I would never have let them go anywhere at 17 years of age. I didn't know a damn thing about living in the bush. I didn't know what it was like to live in a log cabin with no heat and I had never seen an outhouse in my life before. I had never lived anywhere where the temperatures went to 50 below in the winter.

And the students would say "Teacher, too bad you're sick but it's too cold to take the horses out." So, you just faced it and stayed sick. They couldn't get a doctor to come out. You know, all I'm saying is that you make this rapid adjustment. You come from a family that was totally self-supporting and suddenly it has no earning capacity. So a 12-year-old suddenly starts to roll into gear.

My family was never on welfare in my life. I sent the money home from the north and I saved enough to go to university the following year. Tuition was \$125 a year. And I also worked at Eaton's in the mail-order office during the summer. I managed to find jobs and it didn't matter where. I just want to say that people can adjust to things, not just me.

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If a depression or recession lasts, you will find that people adjust quickly. At first, it's the parents who say, "I'm not going to live like this." Then the kids say it. By and large, people don't look for illegal ways to earn money. They look for legal ways.

I think that the grinding effects of the current recession won't be felt for more than two or three years, because this new generation dreams of ways of making money — legal ways of making money.

From 1937 to 1940, I lived on Madison Avenue. I would walk to work around 8 or 8:15 a.m. and go through Queen's Park. There would be men, sometimes 15 and other times as many as 20 or 25, who were sleeping on or under the benches. Some slept on the ground with a rug over them.

But there were never any more than that. And that was in the Depression. Now, there would be beggars on the street, but they were selling pencils. You wouldn't take the pencil, but you'd put a dime in the cup. Between Queen's Park and downtown Eaton's, you might see five people sitting. Usually they were disabled people who were missing one or both legs. Some people were blind. Probably about half of the people who passed by would put money in their cups. But, even at the height of the Great Depression, I never saw a homeless woman.

During the Depression, we all focused on just getting through it. When I was hired at the province as a statistician in 1937, the cost of helping people during these years added up to as much as 80 per cent of the Ontario budget. It was a massive amount of money — to keep people alive.

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And the government reports! The Campbell report¹ came out around 1932 or 1933, I think — before I went to work for the government. But by 1937 when I started with the government, it was awful. Municipalities expressed the amount assistance they were providing in terms of the Campbell report — Campbell plus 5, Campbell plus 6, Campbell plus 10. Eventually it got to be Campbell plus 20 — even Campbell plus 40!

1 In the spring of 1932, the Ontario government under Premier George Henry embarked on a process towards developing some provincial standards and uniformity in relief administration. By Order-In-Council, the government appointed the Advisory Committee on Director Relief under the chair of Wallace Campbell, General Manager of the Ford Motor Company of Canada in East Windsor. The committee was instructed to make recommendations on the problem of unemployment and the provision of relief to the needy.

The Campbell report (as it came to be called) is a landmark in the development of social policy in Ontario. Its recommendations on maximum food allowances, clothing and footwear, shelter and fuel allowances, as well as medical services, were the first real attempt to convert the provision of goods into cash equivalents and to standardize welfare policy and practice at the provincial level. The report laid the foundation for welfare as we know it today — cash assistance to needy families and individuals.

So novel and symbolic was Campbell's invention that his name became synonymous with the relief table devised by his Commission. Like "Kleenex" and "Hoover", the invention took on the name of its brand rather than its subject. When rates were increased throughout the pre-war period, the amounts paid were known as "Campbell + 20" or "Campbell + 25".

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When did we know that the Depression was coming to an end? Well, mainly, it was the war, but things leveled off before that. We knew what our numbers were going to be (in the late 1930's). There was no increase (in the numbers of people on relief) at all from 1937 to 1939 — none. It had leveled off. For example, from a number of 300,000 in the winter or 320,000 — remember our population was only about 3 million. So what are we talking about — maybe a tenth of our population on welfare? In the early 1940s — January/February — 25,000, first to 40,000 then down to 25,000. And that was the whole province, numbers of 25,000.

We just let the municipalities carry the whole thing. Remember the (senior) governments were funding the war.

You see, I didn't take over as statistician until 1937. And in 1937, it was very flat. I mean, it was flat in the winter with a dip in the summer but it was flat — 1937, 1938, 1939 and then — boom! — the bottom fell out. It's hard to explain what it was like.

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the Second World War

During the interview with Dr. Crittenden, one theme in particular occurred repeatedly — human resourcefulness in the face of adversity. During her recollections of the war years, she spoke about an older woman that she knew when she herself was in her late twenties.

I was friends with a family who had inherited all of their money from England and they had a very beautiful home here in Toronto. They had an income that was coming from England all the time. When war broke out, England cancelled all the transactions. No money was allowed out of the country.

The woman, who was 84 at the time, decided that she would work in a war plant. She still had money in the bank here and she owned a beautiful home, but she decided she would rent out the house to some military personnel and she would live in a small private hotel on Bloor Street.

She went to work in a war factory from 7 in the morning until 6 at night, much to the stunned surprise of her family who was sure she was going to drop dead on the street. 'Momma' enjoyed the whole war living in a private hotel making her own money.

What I am trying to show is how people can suddenly readjust to change. Here's this elderly woman, who rented out her beautiful home on Poplar Plains. Yes, she lived in comfort in the hotel, but she but worked in a war plant war all day long — as a matter of fact, she became a supervisor for a whole floor. These were almost unbelievable things. It shows how people can suddenly change gears.

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the post-war years

During the years following the Second World War, Ontario's social programs and services expanded dramatically — from the development of innovative programs, such as homemaking and vocational rehabilitation services to new funding formulas among all levels of government. In this section, Dr. Crittenden recalls key milestones in the evolution of Ontario's social programs.

On implementing a social assistance rate increase in the 1940s and 1950s

We worked at night and on Saturdays and Sundays and hoped that everyone knew how to do arithmetic. There were no calculators. Are you kidding? There was no such thing as calculators.

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The British North America Act of 1867 (in 1981, it was renamed the Constitution Act) created the Canadian Confederation. The Act established the legal ground rules for Canada, and divided up the powers between the provinces and the federal government. Section 91 of the Act lists the responsibilities of the federal Parliament, while Section 92 lists the powers assigned to the provincial Legislatures. The Act gave responsibility for social welfare to the provinces.

It wasn't until 1927 with the enactment of the Old Age Pension Act that the federal government accepted some responsibility for the poor. The Act provided for a 50 percent federal contribution to provincial plans offering pensions to residents over 70 years of age with limited means. This marked the beginning of subsequent cost-shared arrangements through which the federal government sought to achieve national objectives in areas under provincial jurisdiction. During the Great Depression, when many communities and even some provinces found themselves unable to cope with the spiraling cost of relief, the federal government stepped in. In each year from 1930 to 1939, a federal Relief Act or Unemployment Relief Assistance Act was passed to enable the federal government to make payments to the provinces to help them provide relief to the unemployed.

From 1951 to 1954, three welfare programs were introduced — Old Age Assistance, Blind Persons' Allowances and Disabled Persons' Allowances. Under these programs, the federal government offered to share at least 50 per cent (75 per cent for blind persons) of provincial expenditures on allowances for eligible residents. With the rise of unemployment in the early to mid 1950s, the federal government in 1956 passed the Unemployment Assistance Act, whereby provinces with agreements were reimbursed for half their expenditures on assistance needy unemployed people.

In 1958, the Canadian Welfare Council in its policy statement called "Social Security for Canada", called for improvements in three areas of income maintenance: old age security, public assistance and unemployment insurances. It recommended incorporating the Old Age Assistance Act, the Blind Persons' Allowances Act and the Disabled Persons' Allowances Act as specific sections under the new legislation. In 1963, Canada's provincial Premiers established a Federal-Provincial Working Group consisting of the ten provincial deputy ministers responsible for welfare to review the operations and terms of all joint welfare programs and to report back on ways of improving them. Their proposals were reviewed at Ministerial Conferences in May 1964, April 1965 and

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January 1966. In February 1966, the Federal Cabinet agreed to proceed with the new legislation to be called “the Canada Assistance Plan” to complement the Canada Pension Plan which was then at third reading.

The bill enacting the Canada Assistance Plan received Royal Assent in July 1966, retroactive to April 1, 1966. By August 1967, all ten provinces had signed agreements under Part 1 of the Act.

Dr. Crittenden was Ontario’s chief negotiator during the development and implementation of the Canada Assistance Plan (CAP) in April 1966. In this section she talks about her experience.

On negotiating the Canada Assistance Plan in the early 1960s

When all this was being negotiated in boom times after the Second World War, no province or the federal government ever expected to be in a deficit position. Everybody had money.

In fact, we gave up a lot in Ontario to ensure that people across Canada were to have equal opportunities for social assistance and care. And we did it with the understanding that anybody who voluntarily signed the agreement and agreed to the agreement would, if they didn’t like the way it was working out, have one year to back out. They could say to Ottawa, “We want to re-negotiate.”

And Ottawa could notify the provinces or any one province and say, “Look, we want to re-negotiate the way it’s working” and that gave the Treasurer of the Province of Ontario (now the Minister of Finance) the knowledge of where the cash flow would be going because you can’t change laws and have them suddenly tonight change the law for tomorrow’s delivery.

You have to go through Cabinet. You have to go through the policy field. You have to get it to the Legislature. You have to change it and that takes time.

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So, everybody agreed that one year was a good lead time if any one of the ten provinces or the federal government felt that it wasn't working satisfactorily, they had time to say to that province, "Look, you're out of line, we want to renegotiate with you." And, of course, it was pretty well understood (though never said) that if one province such as a province like Ontario or Quebec absolutely refused to sign the agreement or decided they'd pull out, that everybody would take a fast look at why they were pulling out.

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What Ontario gave up for CAP

I'll give you a perfect example of what Ontario gave up. We gave up residency requirements and we're an 'in' immigration province. We take in thousands of people a year from either other countries or other parts of the country, like the Maritimes and the Prairies. Where provinces had (secondary) migration to Ontario, many of those people arrived here and some were subsidized by those provinces when they arrived here and applied for welfare or applied for Ontario housing.

We said, "Okay, we will not look at residency for the purposes of the Act and the distribution of social welfare across Canada. Canada is a country and residency rules do not apply. The only exception will be sponsored immigrants, in which case we expect the sponsor to be responsible for five years.

But refugees, people from other provinces; this is one country. Now, it has cost us millions across the years. I would venture in 25 years it cost a billion dollars, the immigration to Ontario. And now with the recession on, who is hit worse? We are. And we have more unemployed. But they're not going back to other provinces now, because they've lived here for 15 - 20 years and why should they? I mean, this is home now.

But that was a very, very costly thing to give up — to try to standardize social benefits to the whole country so that it doesn't matter where you live. Being a Canadian is more important than worrying about whether you live. So this is where, on a matter of principle, I felt very strongly because everybody has to be treated the same. It didn't matter whether you lived in the Yukon, or the Northwest Territories or in Metro Toronto, you were going to get the same treatment.

The next thing Ontario gave up and some of the other provinces paid too — was the differences between disabled persons allowances — and we were paying a higher amount for disabled persons than we were paying to the non-handicapped. We then had to build a budgetary system that would permit us to pay additional — for example, a wheelchair allowance or special allowance.

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But the basic allowance, all in all, was the same, even though they never had difficulty getting to the stores and shopping, but we knew that it wasn't going to be as fair as we had been previously but we gave it up so that the whole country would be alike.

And, of course, they always say that Ontario is rich — the other thing that we gave up was the special allowances and the assets for both the disabled and for the single mothers, because I think, in 1965, it was somewhere around \$40,000 to \$60,000 you could have in assets.

The mothers were able to have assets — there were the only two groups that were able to have assets, the disabled and blind were all lumped together and the single mothers and the idea was with both of those — they would through time have requirements that would — this was the previous thinking back in the fifties, you see — they would have needs. For instance, a single mother with children might, while the children were small, be able to go out and get a job, but if she has those assets behind her, she might also be able to help her children go to get a secondary education and a higher education. But if she didn't have any assets, she was just like a floundering fish.

And we didn't like the fact that we had to treat them the same way as we treated the general caseload. And yet we gave that up. Now those are three very, very large things that this province gave up to guarantee that people across Canada had equal access, equal access to the same kind of social service framework.

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On Project 500 in the 1970s

Dick Weiler, Dave McCoy and John Kelly were involved in a project way back in 1975. I think it has been one of the great success stories of anything that ever undertaken in this ministry.

If you are able to get 500 people off welfare — you have done a good job. It's also a mere drop in the bucket. I know that. And it wasn't that the overhead was so big, but what they did do was select — and this is the tricky part — they selected who they thought would succeed, within a two-year time limit, in getting into the market. Some would be on a three-year time limit but most were two years. If we had a girl who got straight A's, or A's and B's in high school, who had a baby or a two-year old, who said, "All I ever wanted to do was go to university", we paid them enough to go to university and gave them enough for transportation and their allowance and then stuck with them until they found a good enough job.

They were not only self supporting, they were contributing in a good way to the economy and the entire 500 people were made up of men, women, women who were widowed, 45-50 years old, young single mothers. That's what Project 500 was all about — where ministry staff took people who they thought would be able to get a very good job in the marketplace within a certain timeframe, anywhere from one to three years.

You know, I run into people on the street now (1991) and some say, "You won't remember me, but I was in Project 500. I now manage financial services, or I now own my own business." There is no doubt that staff had to make a judgment call when it came to identifying people who could succeed. But the money was a mere pittance compared to the fact that staff were able to get them off the (welfare) rolls — totally and forever — and they became very contributing members of society. Staff gave them child care and education — everything.

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And the ministry didn't spend as much as you think. The ministry provided them with an allowance, plus all of their transportation costs and the fees for university or community college and they had guidance counselors — except mostly they were volunteer guidance counselors provided through the YMCA and YWCA or people who had done a good deal of guidance work. And they didn't have to take the first job that was offered to them, none of that came up; it was a good job that would use their skills appropriately, where they would hopefully have a real future. And the success rate was 100 per cent, well you can't do better than that — it wasn't 90 per cent.

And you can't say that you are 'creaming off' the best. You can't. You have to say we are making judgments that we can help these people.

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On the 'cap on CAP'

On the day when we heard the speech at about 4 pm when Michael Wilson said he was going to cap payments for Ontario and British Columbia, I said, "You can't do that. It's illegal under the terms of the CAP agreement." As you know, I was the head of Ontario's negotiating team on the development of the policy papers.

So, when I heard Wilson¹ say that the Federal Government was going to cap the transfer to Ontario — knowing that our population expansion is greater than any other province in any year — I phoned (a colleague) Dick Splane. Early the following morning, I phoned Peterson's² office. By 8:30 a.m., he phoned the Premier's Office in Vancouver and that's why British Columbia leapt the following day with the challenge. Then Ontario joined and Manitoba decided to join, too. And Alberta, who was going to be affected (they thought) joined, too.

Now, the one thing that (Justice) Sopinka didn't look at, I'm sure, when he said the federal legislation acts within the Constitution allowing control of the expenditures of the Government of Canada. And I agree with that. But if you sign an agreement that says that you'll give a province one 12-month period to adjust. But he didn't make the statement that way. In fact, my own guess is that the staff never told him that there was a 12-month clause in there.

But Sopinka overlooked that in his ruling and when I read that ruling of his, he never quoted the fact that in making an agreement, they had no right to put that 12-month clause in the agreement in the first place.

Well, he says it wasn't in the agreement, it was just in the CAP Act. Well, the Act was considered to be the cover, the legislative cover of the agreement. And he was making a big distinction because they planned and set-up the agreement.

¹ Michael Wilson was Federal Minister of Finance from 1984 to 1991.

² David Peterson was Premier of Ontario from June 26, 1985 to October 1, 1990.

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On the delivery of social services and income maintenance and the 'cap on CAP'

I felt that any change in the rules without discussion with the provinces was going to hurt the delivery system and probably it would impact the social services part more than the income maintenance, because the income maintenance, you can't let people starve to death.

There is no law that says that you have to keep opening day nurseries and there is no law that says you have to keep opening family benefits, or family service agencies, so they felt that the real impact was on the social agencies. I agreed with them and I think that, and the people on that committee was the executive director of the Social Planning Council here, and the director of the Canadian Welfare Council, and a professor from York University ... there were a number of people. So the impact is not going to be on the income maintenance end of it. You may not get the increases through that you might otherwise.

Although the Middle East wanted to invest in Canada, sometimes they wanted to put (conditions) saying we'll loan it to you at three per cent for 20 years if you let us build something rather, or do something or other.

It was suddenly when the country, the Federal Government or Ontario started going into deficit that the situation was quite different.

If you've got money in the bank and you're in boom time, it's very good. From the time the Second World War ended until the 1970s, they really were boom times. And the real fallout occurred in 1981-82. And now we're back. And you know this is very frightening — because I lived through the Great Depression.

life & times

the retirement years

On her decision to do consulting work after retirement

It's a funny thing how once you start earning money and making money, you figure out other ways of making money. Your boss said to me "How come you're doing consulting?" I said that I was bored to tears. So I went to a lawyer and decided "Will I do consulting or not? What is the advantage of being incorporated versus not?" I made the wrong decision when I didn't incorporate, because my tax rate is higher but the point is, you make these decisions — you get into different patterns — and I think this happens.

the wisdom

On old age pensions

This is one of my hobby horses. I paid income tax from 1940-1951 with the deduction that came out of everyone's pay. I paid into the Old Age Pension. Now they take my old age pension back. They say, you're an old lady, you may be helpless and an idiot, but you have enough income. We're taking it back. It doesn't matter that you've paid for it as insurance for years. A lot of people don't even remember that they paid for it.

It's the fact that if you buy what you think or pay what you think is insurance — this is why I think the Federal Government does not care, they don't have compassion. Let's face it! I would say that half of the older population are living on \$50,000. With 50,000 that was a taxable base a year and half ago, it's now worth \$46,000 or \$47,000. In another year or so it would be worth \$45,000. And you know, you get very frightened by not having, say, an index to that \$50,000 base. In fact, they're taking advantage of the fact that a dollar is worth more every year. So, I don't think there's any feeling of compassion.

the wisdom

On the power of Ontario

If they (the Federal Government) is going to pull out, Ontario, of course, can always say, "Okay buster, we're the province with the money. We're going to follow Quebec's pattern. We're going to collect our own taxes and we'll give you back the amount of the tax that we think you're entitled to."

You know, Quebec has its own collection of tax. And they get, not a transfer payment, but they get points on the tax base. But, they don't come out short, believe me. And Ontario could pull the rug out because we have a bigger tax base than Quebec.

But again, that would go against my principles that everybody should be treated alike in access but on the other hand, if they are going to cost this province billions of dollars, this province is certainly in a position to say —certainly, to argue with them — that we're not taking it. We're just not going to take it anymore. We've supported the rest of Canada for years and we were glad to do it, but now you want to penalize us. Well, you had better watch out because we are in a position to fight back.

It's a lot of money and I'll tell you this: There is no question at all that Ontario could be in the driver's seat on this. If they (the federal government) want to play rough, Ontario has the tax base to play rough.

But we gave them a lot to assure that the rest of Canada was on an equal playing field, but they're going to take that away from Ontario. Ontario doesn't have to take it, they don't. We still look after our residents and we look after them well. We don't have to start looking after any other person, I don't believe.

In principle, I don't think that's the right thing to do. But the point is, I don't think Ottawa's doing the right thing either. But there are ways to fight fire with fire. You can say that you're going to bill the other provinces directly.

Suit yourselves, boys.



Undated photograph of Dorothea Crittenden with her father outside their home in Toronto.

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