

In Whose Interest?
Privatising Power in British Columbia, Canada
2001 – 2011

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B. A. (Hons), M.A.

Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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November 2017

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Abstract

This thesis analyses the introduction of radical neoliberal electricity policy changes in the Canadian province of British Columbia from 2001 to 2011. The thesis utilises the framework of ‘actually existing neoliberalism’ and applies a class perspective as a contribution to the existing body of scholarship that addresses the new electricity policy.

By employing the framework of ‘actually existing neoliberalism’, the thesis highlights the diverse nature, or the variegation, of neoliberalism. The distinctive character of the Liberal government’s neoliberal electricity policy reflects how privatisation and marketisation, although common features of the neoliberal approach, take on their own form in each jurisdiction. This project reveals key economic, social and political factors that played a crucial role in the formation and implementation of the new electricity policy including contestation, class and the role of the British Columbia state. It is shown how the unique character of the new British Columbia electricity policy reflected a ‘path-dependency’ of pre-existing factors in the British Columbia political-social-economic context that the provincial Liberal government needed to navigate in introducing its policy changes. One main outcome, different from other jurisdictions, was that the public utility, BC Hydro, was kept as a crown corporation, although a vastly reduced organisation due to the impact of privatisation and marketisation.

In addition, this case study reveals that there are often disparities between the theory and practice of neoliberalism, between what actually occurs with the introduction of neoliberal policy and the principles of neoliberal theory and ideology. Two main contradictions exposed in this case study are the substantial degree of reregulation that occurred, rather than deregulation, and the large extent of government intervention, rather

than 'small' government. The new private power sector in British Columbia was dependent on rigorous state intervention in order to be profitable, a situation of marketisation of the power system that led to heavy state subsidisation of the private power sector.

An important component of this regional case study is the inclusion of the micro-case, 'Ashlu Creek'. This smaller scale study enables a deeper analysis of the new regional-level neoliberal electricity policy by focusing on the impact of the policy at a local government and community level. 'Ashlu Creek' brings to light how resistance, an often over-looked part of neoliberalism in practice, exposed the coercive arm of the state, used to enforce a neoliberal policy regime. This local case study helps illuminate the economic and political forces that determined the Liberal government's successful enforcement of its new electricity policy and the class interests that were served.

Overall, the thesis uses a regional example of actually existing neoliberalism to show that neoliberalism is diverse in practice due to place-specific factors and cannot be fully understood without class power relations being exposed. The actions of the Liberal government demonstrate how a neoliberalised state changes the complexion of society, increasingly favouring capital interests at the expense of other classes and interests and at the expense of the public good.

Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

I give permission for the digital version of my thesis to be made available on the web, via the University's digital research repository, the Library Search and also through web search engines, unless permission has been granted by the University to restrict access for a period of time.

I acknowledge the support I have received for my research through the provision of an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship.

Anne Burger

28 February 2018

Date

Acknowledgements

Foremost, I wish to thank my principal supervisor, Dr Ray Broomhill, for his unswerving support of my project. When I first approached Ray about being interested in doing a PhD on regional development he immediately agreed to supervise. He has always provided me with rigorous, high quality academic guidance and has greatly facilitated my intellectual growth through this project. Also, Ray has supported me at a personal level as I've gone through significant life events in the course of my thesis.

My thesis would also have not been possible without the guiding hand of Dr Greg McCarthy. Greg, too, unhesitatingly agreed to be a supervisor when I was making initial enquiries about embarking on a PhD project. His input into my thesis has been invaluable and I have gained considerably from his theoretical ideas and feedback on my drafts.

Throughout my PhD project Dr Marjorie Cohen has always been available and generous in providing me with support. In particular, as my Canadian-based academic advisor during fieldwork in British Columbia in 2011, she arranged for office, computer and library resources at Simon Fraser University that allowed me to have a comfortable work base.

Certain friends have played key roles during the course of my thesis work. I received very generous, ongoing support and encouragement from Dee Michel in both practical and personal ways. Dee's caring friendship was most important to me in sustaining my energy, focus and motivation. Ruthie O'Reilly has also been very supportive, including spending hours assisting me with formatting my thesis. Her continuing generosity and empathy have helped me to the end.

The administrative staff of my department has always been responsive and helpful in any task I needed assistance with as part of my thesis. In particular, I would like to thank Ryan Cortazzo, Ryan Higgins, Sarah Hoggard and Shamira Barr for the number of times they unhesitatingly gave me their kind assistance.

To all the post-grad students on campus whom I've had conversations with over the years and shared PhD experiences with, for this community of shared support that enables us to keep going, I am extremely grateful. Also, I wish to recognise and express gratitude for the untold words of encouragement and interest I received from family members and friends over the years.

I am most grateful for financial assistance received during my candidature which enabled me to undertake and continue in the PhD program. This included an Australian Post-graduate Award, a Canadian government Doctoral Student Research Award and an Association of Canadian Studies in Australia and New Zealand (ACSANZ) award. In addition, my department

(Sociology, Criminology & Gender Studies) provided generous funds for me to attend and present my PhD research at two overseas academic conferences.

Finally, it is most important for me to acknowledge the unstinting, loving support I received from my son, Benjamin, who was himself engaged in a PhD project in Canada. We had many phone conversations and e-mails about the challenges of doing a PhD and were post-graduate student peers as much as mother and son. It was invaluable for me to be able to talk to someone who very much understood the trials of the PhD student.

Dedication

To Benjamin

And

My parents, Jean and Dijs