

Andrew Armitage, *Comparing the Policy of Aboriginal Assimilation: Australia, Canada, and New Zealand*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 1995. Pp. 286, bibliography, index. US\$24.95 paper.

Reviewed by Ann Sullivan, University of Waikato

Comparing the Policy of Aboriginal Assimilation is a timely piece of work. Armitage is correct when he says that in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand "the aboriginal minority is challenging the fundamental assimilationist objectives of social policy--objectives which have been the cornerstone of government and popular thinking for 150 years" (p. 8). The aim of this book is to provide a comparative understanding of aboriginal child welfare policies to "assist in the search for new ways to conduct social policy" (p. 8). Understanding government objectives that have controlled aboriginal children is important because policies of the past have shaped, regulated, and attempted to assimilate future generations. Therefore, social policies used to carry out these objectives are partly responsible for the poor socioeconomic position of the indigenous peoples.

As director of the School of Social Work at the University of Victoria, Armitage is well qualified to write on aboriginal child welfare policies. A social worker in British Columbia in the 1960s, he worked with First Nations children who had been forcibly removed from their homes and tribal communities because the state deemed alternate parenting to be in their interests. In 1986 Armitage was appointed superintendent of family and child service in British Columbia. He saw firsthand the results of child welfare and adoption policies that undermined the collective identity of aboriginal peoples and promoted systematic assimilation. But by the late 1980s and into the 1990s Armitage claims that attitudes have been changing, wherein policies today are attempting to accommodate cultural values and the social organization of the indigenous minorities.

Aboriginal social policy objectives date back to the 1837 British House of Commons Select Committee on Aborigines. These objectives sought "to impose European civilization and Christianity upon other cultures" (p. 194) and "children offered the best means of ensuring that aboriginal peoples would be prepared for the responsibilities of Christianity, civilization, and British citizenship" (p. 204). Children were considered the most effective and efficient means to dominate, subjugate, and assimilate the "inferior" indigenous peoples.

Armitage sets the scene for contextualizing aboriginal child welfare policies with a good overview of the political environments that have determined policies from colonization until the present. He examines the Austra-

lian eras of protection, assimilation, and self-management; the Canadian periods of tribal sovereignty, assimilation, integration, and limited self-government; and the periods of assimilation, integration, and limited self-determination in New Zealand. He clearly describes an assimilative determination that denied the language, culture, traditions, and collective social organization of the indigenous peoples. Having provided the reader with a comprehensive background to the political and public policy arenas of aboriginal policy, he then goes on to discuss the assimilative nature of child welfare policies in each country.

Chapters 3 and 5 focus on child welfare policies in Canada and Australia. In these two countries until the 1960s “officials had the power to take aboriginal children away from their parents and confine them for most of their childhood to either dormitories or residential schools. The model of practice followed was, essentially, industrial (i.e., the workhouse). Aboriginal children were to be educated so that they would forget their origins and become European” (p. 236). “Children were removed from their parents without regard to differences of history, culture, or ethnicity because the assumption was that these factors were much less important than were physical health, diet, housing, absence of alcoholism” (p. 120). Such assimilative policies were of course failures, not least because an “institutionalized childhood is the least desirable basis for adulthood” (p. 237).

Unlike Aboriginal and First Nations peoples, the Maori were extended the rights and privileges of British subjects under Article Three of the Treaty of Waitangi from the time New Zealand was colonized in 1840. Therefore, child welfare measures did not seek to institutionalize the children. Government policies instead sought to assimilate them through a monocultural education system that used English as the compulsory medium of instruction and by denying Maori culture, its collective identity, and extended family support structures (chapter 7).

Using Michael Banton’s race relations model to identify patterns of domination, paternalism, and integration since colonization, within his general framework of assimilation (pp. 185-186), Armitage usefully assesses patterns of difference and similarity among the three countries. Part of the process of assimilation is to phase out separate strategies and policies as well as inequalities between indigenous and nonindigenous people. This took place in the 1960s era of “integration,” when social policies were designed to mainstream aboriginal peoples into the wider society (p. 172).

In 1962 Australian Aboriginal people were finally given the right to participate in the country’s “democratic” elections; in 1967 they were incorporated in the census. Specialized institutions of aboriginal government in all three countries were replaced by integrated institutions (p. 199), and there

was now no assumption that all aboriginal children should be removed from their parents. Accordingly, the proportion of aboriginal children being cared for by authorities fell sharply, although the numbers were still much higher than the proportion of nonaboriginal children (p. 208). The child welfare systems typically overlooked the fact that an increasing proportion of the children in the mainstream systems were aboriginal (p. 210).

This book is a start to understanding how policies of the past have shaped the future and why those policies have failed. In Australia, Canada, and New Zealand the indigenous minority peoples fare badly on most if not all socio-economic indicators. These peoples are disproportionately dependent upon the state for welfare support compared with any other sector or class of people in their own country. Much of this dependency has arisen because of the loss of tribal lands. Land alienation included forced removal, confiscations, broken treaty promises, wars, systematic individualization of land titles, and long-term land leasing.

Dependency has also been compounded by social policies towards aboriginals. If social policies are intended to reduce welfare dependency and the number of aboriginal people in state institutions such as hospitals, mental institutions, prisons and welfare homes, then that dependency mode into which so many have been forced has to be reversed. Governments must accommodate the needs of their indigenous peoples, and Armitage believes this is now possible. "I find myself standing with those who have faith in the steps which are now being taken towards accommodating, through dialogue and compromise, the self-determination of aboriginal peoples" (p. 242).

Two small points. The English language has been a powerful assimilative tool. It is irritating to find some Maori words incorrectly spelled in the book. In the Canadian section, I would like to have seen more discussion of the assimilative issues that surrounded the denial of "Indian status" to some First Nations women.

Nevertheless, this book provides a substantive contribution to the fields of indigenous social and public policy. If policy makers are serious in their efforts to support aboriginal self-determination, and to lessen the state dependency of their indigenous peoples, then Armitage's book should be essential reading.