

NEW PUBLICATIONS

The Evolution of Aging Organizations

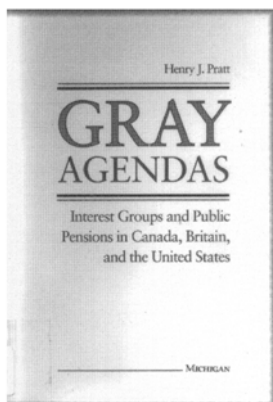
Gray Agendas: Interest Groups and Public Pensions in Canada, Britain and the United States

Henry J. Pratt.

1993. University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor.
241 pages. US\$34.50.

by John Rother

One of the questions I have been asked frequently by visitors from other countries concerns the growth of organizations representing older Americans that is without counterpart in their country. Henry Pratt takes an historical look at this question by comparing the evolution of the "gray lobby" in Canada, Britain and the United States. The book will be interesting reading to anyone wanting to know more about the interplay between the development of public policies concerning older persons in these countries with the voluntary organizational structures that have in turn grown to protect those policies. *Gray Agendas* is also a useful review of the different choices each country has made respecting pensions, health care, age discrimination, and so on.



Pratt's organizing thesis is that, contrary to current interest-group political reporting in the news media, government policies have usually *preceded* the formation and growth of the political lobbies that support and defend those policies and programs. This dialogue between public policy and the structure of voluntary organizations rings true to me, and it poses some provocative questions about the future abilities of the organizations representing older persons to continue to play a constructive role in public life.

Pratt also identifies four phases of organizational development common to the three countries. In Phase I there is yet no significant old age security program, nor is there in existence any significant membership organization speaking for older persons. Yet political elites, aware of more advanced social policies in other countries, are able to propose and sometimes enact the beginning steps toward a universal pension system.

Phase II, surprisingly, finds the enactment of old age security legislation to be a negative factor in the growth of the budding voluntary organizations. In the U.S., for example, the enactment of the Social Security Act in 1935 effectively undermined

the Townsend movement, in part because the government symbolically reassured the public that the goals had been met. So again, the agenda-setting function that we typically associate with interest groups was in fact largely assumed by career civil servants and elected officials.

Phase III is marked by the arrival of voluntary organization on the political field capable of functioning as interest groups. These organizations in each country reflected the public pension scheme then in existence. Common economic interests motivated the growth of these organizations, but those interests were defined by the character of the public programs that were perceived as inadequate.

Finally, in Phase IV, a new expansion of age-related social policy goes hand-in-hand with the growth in size and diversity of the organizations representing seniors. In effect, this phase represents the "maturation" in the politics of aging policy in that there is political competition for the support of older voters on the basis of a much broader policy agenda. In this phase, the organizations themselves are no longer preoccupied by mere survival and, instead, turn their attention to issues of boundaries and internal diversity issues.

Pratt points out that the extraordinary growth in each country of organizations representing seniors is not well explained by demographic or

economic factors. In my view, the author is clearly correct in noting public policy outputs as the necessary, if not sufficient, explanation for the growth of senior advocacy organizations.

In his conclusion, Pratt raises an extremely timely issue as follows: "what consequences might ensure for the gray lobbies of Britain, Canada and the United States, if their national governments at some future point were to substantially scale back . . . their present heavy involvement in aging?" Given all the success and achievements in old age policy to date, is it possible that these very successes might undermine the perceived claim of older persons to continuing high levels of public support?

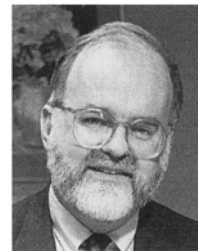
Pratt's own answer to this question is mixed. In his view, increased political support for fiscal constraint would likely hurt the more narrowly focused elderly interest groups—those serving primarily minority populations, for example. But he predicts a "renewed sense of collective consciousness and political commitment" naming the larger, more broadly based seniors organizations, many of them not heavily government dependent. Adversity obviously can be a breeder of renewed strength.

I found the book's historical and comparative perspective invigorating. It is always helpful to bring a larger context to current issues, and this book does that well. I am less impressed with the social science theory that the author brings to this discussion, but the reader can easily skip those paragraphs. I have always found history a more reliable guide than theory, and as Pratt notes, the history he recounts here is often

contrary to accepted interest group theory.

As a sometimes student of aging interest groups myself, I wish Pratt had gotten more personally involved in his examination of some of the leading interest groups. His reliance on secondary sources weakens what otherwise could have been more direct reporting. Nonetheless, the major themes and conclusions hold up pretty well to the real-life experience of this reviewer. I recommend the book to those looking to put the current political struggle over aging

policy into a broader international and historical context. The past may not predict the future, but it certainly can inform the present. ■



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PUBLICATION ANNOUNCEMENTS

Private Pension Policies in Industrialized Countries: A Comparative Analysis

John Turner and Noriyasu Watanabe

1995. *W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, 300 S. Westnedge Avenue, Kalamazoo, Michigan 49007-4686, USA. 171 pages.*

As nation's search for ways to deal simultaneously with the pressure of market forces and the cost of income security for older people, private pensions are generating intense interest. This book draws on the experiences of countries around the world in analyzing major issues involved in developing and managing private pension systems. Highly readable and instructive, the book identifies the most important issues of concern to policy makers and others involved in the income security debate. (See article page 38.)

Humanity Comes of Age: The New Context for Ministry with the Elderly

Susanne S. Paul and James A. Paul

1994. *WCC Publications, World Council of Churches, 150 route de Ferney, 1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland. 160 pages. Sfr 15, US\$ 11.50, £7.25.*

The global reality of population aging has not gone unnoticed by the world's churches. This short book was written specifically to provide congregations with an understanding of the issues faced by older people in both rich and poor countries. The authors offers a clear, easily comprehended account of the demographic transition and the demands it places on individuals and institutions within a society. They cover the special concerns of developing nations and the vulnerability of older women along with family care, income security, health care, and housing issues. Ultimately, the intent of the book is to encourage congregations to extend their work on behalf of older people.