NGOs and the Discourses of Privatization in Canada: 
Silences on the Rise of Private Security and Erosion of Public Policing

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In recent years an emphasis on deficit reduction has led local, provincial and federal governments to consider increased privatization of services once considered the exclusive domain of government. In Canada, privatization of health care and education has provoked intense public debate among a wide range of stakeholders (politicians, health/education workers and managers, academics, private sector organizations, the media, NGOs and civil society). In contrast, the growing reliance on private sector security companies to provide services previously offered by the police has not, in general, attracted the same level of attention nor has it engaged a broad range of stakeholders. This is in marked contrast to the situation in other jurisdictions, such as South Africa or Latin America, where the proliferation of private security has been identified as a major threat to human rights and democratic governance.

Privatization of services such as health, education and policing, entails the shift of responsibilities from government to the private sector and has caused significant concern in some segments of society. It is viewed as regressive by many commentators, who challenge the notion that it is more cost effective. It is a myth that privatization, with its competition, will deliver these services at lower cost than government” (Borely, 2001). Scholars have also situated the issue of privatization or corporatization as part of a large scale shift from state/community responsibility to individual responsibility (Lasch, 1995; Reich, 1991 and Taube, 1995). Some Canadian commentators draw explicit links between the privatization of health, education and policing, often contrasting the American situation to the Canadian (Taube, 1995).

In Canada, the debate over privatization has proceeded on two largely parallel tracks: On the one hand it has been framed as a pragmatic question of markets, costs and quality of services. On the other it has been discussed as a fundamental question of values, equity and human rights. For the most part Canadian academics cited on the issue appear dominated by post-modern relativist perspectives. They focus entirely on market issues around the commodification of security (Rigakos, 2002). They argue that resistance to the privatization of traditional police functions is shaped by the self-interest of police unions (Freedman & Stenning, 1977 and Swanton, 1993), "The provision of policing should be a competitive business in which you look around for the best provider" (Top Paracops, 1995: 53-58). They maintain that "Policing" can be redefined in terms of a service, to refer to "any individual or organization acting legally on behalf of public or private organizations to maintain security or social order while empowered by either public or private contract, regulations or policies, written or verbal" (Top Paracops, 1995: 53-58). In contrast there is another track, which dominates the international literature.

[private security's] rapid expansion exemplified the prevailing neo-liberal ideology and in particular, its twin disciplines of privatization and deregulation. Formerly public services are sold off to private owners supposedly to be run more efficiently under competitive market conditions while governments reduce public spending and regulation. Yet the turn of the century has also seen increased resistance to these developments as popular movements have opposed the
privatization of what are perceived to be essentially public services demanding that government maintain its role as a service provider in the public interest. Within this debate, therefore, private security represents a challenge to the Weberian construct of a monopoly over the use of legitimate force as an essential attribute of the State… In obfuscating public-private distinctions, private security raises issues of State responsibility and human rights protection at international law [emphasis added] (Kontos, 2001).

This perspective has been echoed by international NGOs such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. In many developing countries, private security forces, which serve the interests of particular stakeholders, are considered a threat to the development of democratic governance (Amnesty International, 2002), but is muted in Canadian discourses.

This paper analyses the discourses of privatization in health care, education and policing in Canada situated in the international context. It will examine the framing, arguments and stakeholders participating in the debate. While there are similarities in the ways in which the debates on privatization of education, health and policing are constructed in the media there are also differences. There are significant differences in the volume of media coverage. Although there are obvious conceptual parallels, there are significant differences in the argumentation that dominates the media. There is much more evidence of value laden language in discussions of health and education than in policing. The diversity of stakeholders who participate in the discourse is also quite different and less pronounced in policing.

While in other countries, such as South Africa, the privatization of security has been a major concern of NGOs such as Amnesty International, there has been silence on the issue in Canada, with the exception of the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty. This is in marked contrast to the wide range of diverse NGOs that are engaged vocally in the debate on privatization of health care and education. This paper will discuss 1) trends towards privatization in policing, health and education 2) compare and contrast the discourses of privatization in the three sectors and 3) explore the engagement of NGOs on the issue in Canada and the international context. It will examine potential explanations for the differences in public and NGO responses to the rise of private security and erosion of public policing.