

## Introduction

### How do feminists confront the "New Right"?

*June Corman and Marilyn Porter*

In the last decade or so, feminists, and many other Canadians, have watched with alarm and anger as the ideas, achievements, institutions and values that we thought we had secured in the nineteen seventies slithered frighteningly toward 'the right.' The expression, the 'New Right', is often used interchangeably with other terms--neo-conservative, economic restructuring, neo-liberalism--to name a few. There are technical nuances to the terms employed, but beneath all of them lies a gut level response to what many feel is a destructive force abroad in the land. There are many different kinds of responses to the New Right--political resistance, privatised withdrawal, and, increasingly, efforts to address the phenomenon at a serious intellectual level. For example, the particular impetus for this issue came from the Canadian Women's Studies Association sessions organised for the 1996 Learned Societies Congress in Brock, Ontario, which were entitled 'Resisting the neo-conservative agenda globally and locally'.

This Special Issue of *Atlantis, Feminism and the New Right in Canada*, is designed to provide an impetus for more research on the analytical usefulness of the concept 'New Right', on how to understand the 'New Right' in feminist terms and on how to confront the dangers we face. We desperately need a feminist analysis of the 'New Right' agenda, which takes account of the reality of women's lives and employs all the resources of feminist theory and accumulated research to understand and address the difficulties they face.

In some ways Margaret Thatcher did feminists a service. The fact that she was (biologically) a woman meant that feminists had to

confront and analyse just how much and in what ways they differed from her. She was so clear about her agenda, both politically and ideologically, that it was relatively easy to see the connections between the different aspects of what she was doing. The links between her monetary policy, the attacks on the welfare state, the 'pro-family'/anti-feminist pronouncements, the encouragement of little Englander nationalism and the concomitant strengthening of racism were made quite clear. What Stuart Hall called 'the Great Moving Right Show' encompassed all areas of public life and inexorably invaded private life as well. Stuart Hall also described accurately and eloquently the power of what he called the 'authoritarian populism' of Thatcherism, pointing out that "the ideology of the radical right is less an expression of economic recession than the recessions condition of existence" (Hall and Jacques, 1983:21). Thatcher's regime foreshadowed a process now underway in Canada.

If we treat the analysis of the New Right as central to our understanding of the social issues around us, it reveals the common roots to welfare cutbacks and the growth of 'hate politics'. From very different disciplines and perspectives, both Marge Cohen and Barbara Doran emphasise the role insecurity and fear play in the success of New Right policies and ideas. Doran is especially clear about the connection between the rise of fundamentalist religious sects and people's experience of recession and cutbacks. Leach provides us with a finely textured account of how steelworker families in Hamilton move to the right in their ideas and domestic practice as a direct result of economic policies and pressures.

Si Transken approaches the issue from a different standpoint. Her article describes how racism entered into the collapse of an ethnocultural minority women's centre. She documents not only how external New Right policies and the accompanying racism affected the centre's viability but also how they entered into the core of the centre, destroying it from the inside and making it all the more difficult for that group of women to fight back. The "Voices" of community activists show us how New Right policies and ideas have pushed people to the margins and left service agencies struggling to keep up to the needs of their clients. All these accounts demonstrate the connections between economic policy, cutbacks and a fiercely authoritarian and repressive ideology.

Several of the poems in this issue arise directly out of the pain and confusion that the New Right has caused. Carmelita McGrath writes out of her experience in Newfoundland--a province directly and drastically affected by federal and provincial economic policies that take no account and certainly do not value the long history of Newfoundland survival and the rich tradition that sustained Newfoundland people and their communities. Roberta Buchanan takes the 'creative argument' one step further in her vision of pervasive evil.

When New Right ideology and the economic policies that Thatcher pioneered appeared this side of the Atlantic, they took only slightly different forms in Reagan's United States and Mulroney's Canada. But in Canada the ideology was less explicit. Mulroney's government was more devious about what it wanted to do and in any case their agenda was obscured by a general Canadian 'niceness' and refusal to believe that what was intended was as radical as it was. In Canada it has been left to the Reform Party to formulate the ideology of the New Right and to spell out the logical policies to accomplish it (Sharpe and Braid, 1992). It is no accident that Reform is now the main opposition party within anglophone Canada. Nor is it an accident that the Liberal government (federally) and various provincial governments (notably Harris' Ontario and Klein's Alberta) actually practice much of what the Reform Party preaches. Barbara Neis and Susan Williams provide us with a detailed account of how this actually works in the context of the collapse of the Atlantic ground fishery. Ester Reiter, with

considerable detective skills, has uncovered the way in which the privatisation of the medical laboratories and the rise of companies such as MDS threaten the very core of our public health service. Sherilyn MacGregor contributes a careful analysis of the way in which one policy initiative, the promulgation of the "Tsubouchi Diet" (which purported to show how welfare recipients could feed themselves on \$90.00 a month), reveals a whole set of attitudes and ideological underpinnings held by the Harris government. Sue Skipton gives us a detailed examination of exactly how hurtful the new 'EI' regulations will be and the ideas that inform them.

Our references to Thatcherism points up the fact that the New Right is not new. It has certainly been with us in Canada since the late 1970s in both its economic and ideological forms, as both Cohen and Leach discuss. However, feminist attention to the New Right as such is relatively new. Cohen's article, in this issue, tries to de-mystify the economics of the New Right. Once de-mystified it is much easier to see the connections between macro economic policies and actual policies on ground, whether federal or provincial, and to expose the new Right ideologies behind them.

All the contributions in this issue understand the New Right as gendered, just as everything else is. All of them are at pains to show how women's experience of the New Right is different because of their different location in society. This experience is further differentiated by race, class, religion, sexual orientation and so on. But we still have not grasped the full multi layered ramifications of the New Right agenda. While we hope that this issue of *Atlantis* begins the work, there is too little here on the recent construction, legitimation and expression of racism, homophobia, what Levitas has called 'certain forms of repressive puritanism' and the many other 'hatreds' (see review of Eisenstien) that are polluting and savaging our world.

Analysis of the New Right is not a cheerful study, but feminists do not merely analyse: they organise, confront and resist. Many of the accounts in this issue show how feminists are resisting the cutbacks and ideological attacks. Community groups, especially, are in the front line. Our cover picture shows one small part of the huge March Against Poverty that women all across Canada organised in

the summer of 1996. The solidarity that develops around such action has its own effects in strengthening women's sense of identity and courage to resist. Micheline de Sève provides another call to action when she argues out of her experience as a Quebec feminist that feminists have to connect the economic and political issues and be active in both areas. She has a particular concern that feminists reclaim the political space and the debate about what kind of country Canada is. This entails understanding the issues that divide us by language and province, but it also entails understanding what feminists can bring to the re-structuring (in the positive sense) of our society so as to reflect the values, ideas and institutions we have fought so hard to establish.

## REFERENCES

- Hall, S. and Jacques, M. (eds) *The Politics of Thatcherism* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1983)
- Levitas, R. (ed) *The Ideology of the New Right*. (London: Polity Press, 1986)
- Sharpe, S. and Braid, D. *Storming Babylon* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1992)