

Persistent Voices: Twenty-Five Years With Voice Of Women

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ABSTRACT

One woman's overview of twenty-five years of the Voice of Women/La Voix des Femmes (VOW/VDF), whose members have been active in working for peace and disarmament and in searching for new ways of solving the world's problems. It includes anecdotes and incidents in which women across Canada took part. Many of these actions connected with similar efforts on the part of women from all over the world. VOW/VDF's many appearances before government bodies, its organizing of conferences and the exchanges of visits with women from overseas have demonstrated its commitment to national and international understanding and peace.

Foreword

In the past twenty-five years Voice of Women (VOW) has attracted many women: saints, eccentrics, individualists, "groupies," prima donnas, "retiring violets," old revolutionaries and young idealists (and young revolutionaries and *old* idealists). I wish all their names and achievements could be included here, because every one is a part of the patchwork of VOW. As it is, names have only been mentioned when they are part of one piece of the story. Please, VOW members, consider you are there, very much a part of the whole, and join hands to salute the next twenty-five years of Voice of Women.

During the fall of 1960 our family returned from a sabbatical year in England. We had heard Bertrand Russell speaking in Trafalgar Square, and seen for the first time those black and white antinuclear buttons. "Ban the Bomb" was the slogan and the Aldermaston March was an annual event. Soon after we were home, one of my friends called up. "There's a new women's peace group which might interest you. It's called the Voice of Women." I was not very inspired by this information. It conjured up a vision of ladies in hats holding tea cups and calling for peace around the world. I forgot about it. After all, by going to England for a year, I had managed to get *out* of two organizations. Why join another?

Later on in the winter, another friend phoned me. "I've been asked to get a few women together who might help organize a conference," she said. "It's for the Voice of Women and they said they know that Women Electors are good organizers." (We both belonged to that association which monitored the goings-on at City Hall and the Board of Education.) So down we went to meet the National President of the Voice of Women: Helen Tucker herself. A small group of us squeezed into the tiny office and I learned about the plans for international meetings and conferences, worldwide contacts

with people whose names we only knew from headlines. Thérèse Casgrain, Margaret Mead, Nehru, Philip Noel-Baker, Mrs. Bandaranike (Prime Minister of Ceylon) and others. Helen had a genius for contacting those headline makers, and that and much more was what we set about doing in the cause of peace.



Marta Friesen, B.C.; Helen Tucker, Ontario — VOW President; Thérèse Casgrain, Québec — VOW Vice President. About 1961 or 1962.

That was the beginning for me, although thousands of women had already responded to the Toronto *Star* column written by Lotta Dempsey which led to the formation of Voice of Women. The world that spring seemed on the brink of nuclear war. The US/USSR Summit Conference had failed. An American U2 spy plane had been shot down over the Soviet Union. A 1964 Toronto *Star Magazine* article continues the story:

In the course of her column, Miss Dempsey dropped the casual comment that men were too concerned with political systems and economic considerations, while women were more concerned with people, and she added, "It seems to me that if we had a summit conference of women dedicated to the welfare of children all over the world, we might reach an understanding.

The seed fell on fertile ground. A number of Toronto women got busy on their telephones and by June 10th they had their first public meeting in Toronto's Massey Hall, with Britain's Nobel Prize winner Philip Noel-Baker as principal speaker. A month later an organization was born, called simply the Voice of Women, with Mrs. Helen Tucker...as President and Mrs. Fred (Jo) Davis, as Vice-President.

The founders, amongst whom were media women, senators and Mrs. L.B. Pearson, declared: "Mankind must find another way than war to settle international differences." Their slogan was "construction not destruction."

Members, support and letters poured in; provincial and local groups were formed. The newsletter provided ideas for action, often suggested by members themselves. Campaigns were launched. Contributions ranged from one woman's "money I was saving for a washing machine but...peace is more important," to Old Age Pension cheques from a Saskatchewan couple writing, "We are fed up with this war talk. It won't matter to us if this world is destroyed, as it may well be, but it matters to our grandchildren."

During the summer of 1961 VOW branches were also formed in Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Nigeria and Jamaica, and contact was established with women's peace movements in other countries.

In the early sixties, following the postwar baby boom, thousands of women were raising children, not yet thinking of returning to the work force and not yet confronted by Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. One of VOW's strong points was the means it provided for women with time but little money, often tied to their homes and children, to take responsibility for action, to DO something constructive and effective. This lessened the feeling of isolation and, by joining together, they could make the weight of women's concerns felt in the places where decisions were being made. "What can One Person Do?" was a favourite flyer, giving all sorts of ideas and information about how to write letters or interview officials, and so on.

As far as I know, no one ever did a survey on the effects of all this female activity on the husbands and menfolk of these busy VOW members. It was more than some men could cope with to find, coming home to "supper and slippers by the fire," that children had been parked with neighbours and the "little woman" was off interviewing the local M.P. Often it was a cryptic note: "Hot dogs in frig. Please bath Johnny. There'll be 20 women in basement stuffing envelopes at 8. Love B." Many husbands were towers of strength and totally supportive, glad to see their women being involved, effective and *happy*. We called them the men's auxiliary. How many times have they done the dishes, baby sat, edited briefs, answered the phone, driven cars and run messages? Two husbands have acted as baggage masters for delegations of women visiting Canada and overseas. Others are experts at fund raising and producing potluck supper dishes. However, there were casualties. Some men just could not take this unconventional, independent type of wife, and separations and divorces resulted.

Campaigns

Voice of Women has mounted a number of significant campaigns. As well as addressing specific recommendations to the necessary authorities, these have also provided for maximum involvement and action on the part of VOW members and other sympathetic individuals and groups. This technique—of top level political action and grass roots involvement—has been effectively followed in other non-VOW campaigns, notably television surveys before submitting briefs to the C.R.T.C., Media Watch and action on pornography.

Apart from VOW's first campaign, which was strictly a fund raising one for the Canadian Peace Research Institute, the most notable and, incidentally, successful campaigns have been the Baby Tooth collection, the Antiwar Toys campaign and the Knitting Project for Vietnam children. In addition, many local and regional groups devised campaigns or joined local actions to fit situations as they arose. The nuclear activities of the U.S. and Canadian armed forces at Comox and Nanoose Bay off Vancouver Island have provoked many vigils and demonstrations, visits to the bases and leaflet distribution, often backed up by questions in the House of Commons from local Members of Parliament.

Similarly, Halifax has had visits from nuclear submarines, Labrador has to contend with low flying high-speed jets devastating human and animal populations. In Saskatchewan and Alberta VOW has visited and demonstrated against

chemical and nerve warfare research at Suffield and cruise missile tests. Manitoba has faced the training of NATO troops and Emergency Measures practices. There have been countless vigils and watches—at Litton Systems outside Toronto, on Parliament Hill, in front of all our Legislative Buildings, at Bomarc missile sites, at the U.S. border and at the embassies and consulates of many countries for many reasons. Visiting politicians have been met and admonished for their government's policies: Prime Minister MacMillan for nuclear tests, Henry Kissinger for the U.S. role in Greece, generals and admirals and others, as well as our own responsible ministers. The Vietnam War caused enormous responses for nearly ten years in Canada, the U.S. and overseas. Besides the Knitting Project and dozens of political actions, Nancy Pocock in Toronto and many others took part in the Draft Resister program. In addition, VOW was active and involved in Quebec's changing situation—biculturalism, the Quiet Revolution and in opposition to invoking of the War Measures Act. There were many other concerns in which VOW members became active including human rights issues at home and in other countries, threats to the environment, pollution, toxic waste, acid rain, chemical spraying and, of course, the whole issue of nuclear power in all its dangerous aspects. People sometimes ask why a peace group tackles such diverse problems and what the connection is between such issues as equal pay, television violence, day care, contaminated lakes and torture in Central America. Some women made the connection right away, others took longer.

It was only in 1981 that the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC), of which VOW was a founding member group, held its first workshop on Survival at its Annual Meeting. About 70 delegates saw "If You Love This Planet" (before Studio D won its Oscar!) and responded enthusiastically to Sister Rosalie Bertell, physicist and expert on radiation hazards, when she said, "It is appropriate to be passionate about survival. As Helen Caldicott says, 'This is the ultimate conservation issue.'"

Presidents, Persons and Personalities

Helen Tucker was one of the founders and the first President of Voice of Women. She was, and still is, a remarkable woman; dynamic, inexhaustible and a tireless and imaginative organizer. Helen devised new slogans and campaigns in every waking moment. Her unquenchable enthusiasm was her hallmark! And her hats! One of her nicknames was "Helen the Hat." At one Annual Meeting in Winnipeg, Helen was about to lead the delegation of twenty-eight Voices on a peace mission in Europe. She was wearing a spectacular hat covered with flowers. The following day when Solange

Chaput-Rolland caught sight of Helen again, she clapped her hands and exclaimed, "Oh, Helen! They GREW in the night!" Helen loved it! She can always laugh at herself. When Helen Tucker's involvement with VOW and international actions lessened, she became very active in the original organization of NAC and, with Laura Sabia as President, was its first Secretary. She is still organizing new projects and recently took a bus load of "grandmothers for peace" to present a plaque to [former] Prime Minister Trudeau for his peace initiatives.

Thérèse Casgrain, who organized La Voix des Femmes in Quebec, was the second President of Voice of Women, succeeding Helen Tucker in 1962 when Helen took on the Women's International Liaison Committee for International Cooperation Year. Thérèse was a remarkable and unforgettable woman. Stories abound of her exchanging pictures of grandchildren with Soviet and Chinese women, embracing Hiroshima victims and delighting children with her charm bracelet. Yet she was very discerning, with an acute political sense. Why not? She had been in politics all her life. Her achievements include obtaining women's vote in Quebec in 1940 and persuading the government to make Family Allowance cheques payable to mothers. She later founded La fédération des femmes du Québec. Whether Thérèse was having tea with Madame Vanier and the Soviet women's delegation at Rideau Hall, sitting on the grass before addressing a demonstration at Niagara Falls or getting into a tippy boat at Grindstone Island, charm, poise and sophistication oozed from every pore.

Many of us in the early years were inexperienced in dealing with the press. (I have to thank Ann Gertler for the many times she sat beside me at the telephone, feeding me information and ideas during interviews.) We knew how devastating a bad press report could be, and how opponents could use it against VOW. Not so with Madame Casgrain. After the Liberals came to power in 1963, Mrs. Pearson resigned from the Voice of Women. Her husband's government was about to accept nuclear weapons on Canadian soil. (Max Ferguson in his CBC radio program had already imagined Mrs. Pearson and her tea party of VOW friends pelting "Mike" with delicate porcelain teacups when he poked his head round the door to greet them.) After our regular meeting, Thérèse faced the reporters. "Madame Casgrain, have you any comments about Mrs. Pearson resigning from Voice of Women?" "Of course," she replied, "I can understand poor Mrs. Pearson's dilemma." (Short interval while she reminds them that her own father was a cabinet minister and her husband the Speaker of the House of Commons.) "Certainly Mrs. Pearson would want to be loyal to her husband and, of course, I can

sympathise with her position. Of course we understand." Radiating charm, she graciously dismissed the Press.

Thérèse wore a large, stunning, rose coloured velour hat with her "simple" black outfit. Helen Tucker, with her flowered hat and flowing draperies was a nice contrast. Imagine how President number three (me) felt sitting between these grandes dames in all their sophisticated glory. It is just as well I did not have a hat!

From 1963 to 1967, and for a brief interim period after Muriel Duckworth's term, I was VOW's President, and can thank VOW for giving me the chance to represent Canadian peace women on many occasions and in many different places. ("Join VOW and see the world" might have been our slogan.) There were NATO meetings in The Hague and Paris, meetings of Women Strike for Peace, Women's International League, Women's International Democratic Federation, at the United Nations, in San Francisco, Prague, Denmark. I went with one of VOW's delegations to the Soviet Union, and to Rome and Warsaw and London on the way; and later to Vietnam. VOW was host to four Soviet women,

and took them across Canada to meet as many Canadians as possible. (The Chinese exploded their first atom bomb and Khrushchev resigned during the time they were with us.) We organized many projects for International Cooperation Year—the "twinning" of cities, Grindstone student camp, exchanges of visits—and held regular Council and Annual meetings in most major Canadian cities. All this was done with no government grants, usually through the "bake sale" route and personal fund raising. I learned so much about speaking and listening, writing, meeting politicians and speaking through interpreters, conducting meetings, talking to the press, negotiating all kinds of problems and situations, organizing conferences and meetings; the list goes on and on. And VOW (with a strong push from Moira Armour) got me into the women's movement, feminism and politics. My continuing thanks goes to VOW and its members for all this and the lifelong friends it has given me.

On the occasions we met with officials, politicians and bureaucrats we seldom received a positive response; we were usually greeted with polite indifference and little action followed.



*VOW DELEGATION
OVERLOOKING THE
KREMLIN, on an exchange visit
to the Soviet Union, 1966. Ann
Gertler, Montreal; Lydia Sayle,
Vancouver; Kay Macpherson,
Toronto; Ruth Kettner, Winnipeg,
guide/interpreter; Bev McPhee,
B.C.; Fernand Simard, Montreal.*

On the other hand, the meetings with other women around the world brought us together in a way which established long-term friendships and renewed energy to cooperate on a number of projects and actions.

Maybe these meetings began dissolving the national, social and economic barriers which, in the past, have come between us and prevented communications and cooperation.

Perhaps this dissolution of barriers is what women will be aiming for in the wider political sphere in our quest for a peaceful and just society.

Muriel Duckworth was the fourth and last President of VOW before we evolved into coordinators and steering committees. After soul-searching and family discussion, Muriel gave up her job with the Nova Scotia Department of Education and changed her way of life to become VOW's President. We had just finished our second international Women's Peace Conference in Montreal at the time of Expo. The Middle East Seven Day War, the colonels' coup in Greece,

government upsets in Africa and South America and, of course, the Vietnam War, all claimed VOW's attention. Muriel represented us at conferences in Moscow and Paris, and meetings and delegations at home in Canada. She is an effective and serious speaker with nice touches of humour. Muriel has the unique ability to listen sympathetically, to advise wisely and to be a permanent, ongoing source of information. With her extensive reading and wide contacts, she is up to date on all the latest national and political issues. During her presidency, VOW welcomed two different delegations from Indochina during the Vietnam war and accompanied them across Canada. Although appearing calm and relaxed, she can be both tough and courageous. Who but Muriel would get up in a predominantly male conference and deplore the absence of women? Who else would force Pierre Trudeau to admit publicly that his government had lied to the public in linking the cruise missile decision with Canada's commitment to NATO? At the same time, Muriel's addiction to children and young people elicits a continuous response. Halifax VOW has young members and their babies at many of its meetings.



"WELCOME" TO MURIEL DUCKWORTH, new VOW President, 1970, Campbell River, B.C. L to R: Sylvia Button, Hornby Island guest; Christine Johnstone, Sec. Treas., Campbell River VOW; Morgan MacGregor, Campbell River; Muriel Duckworth; Terry Padgham, President, Campbell River VOW; Joan Jellie; Georgina Price, Vice President Campbell River VOW; Judy Welsh; Sandy Wisden, Robert and Kirsten.

After Muriel's presidency, VOW reorganized and became a less structured group. Donna Elliott took on the job of Coordinator and, with her efforts, VOW's prestige grew on energy and environmental questions. The Ontario Hydro, Mackenzie Valley and Alaska Highway Enquiries, Point Lepreau, James Bay, Saskatchewan uranium mining, Whitedog Reserve, the Skagit River and B.C., Newfoundland and Atlantic forest conservation received VOW members' attention.

VOW has also had several remarkable Secretaries, who put in full-time work on a part-time salary and kept us going. For the past five years, Dorothy Smieciuch, as Coordinator, has worked miracles in reorganizing, rejuvenating and reinspiring our hopes for Voice of Women and by keeping us all in touch through the national newsletter.

By the 70s, VOW's membership had declined, although the lobbying and other activities went on. There were now many single issue groups—status of women, human rights, environmental—which attracted many women. But, with the 1978 U.N. Special Session on Disarmament—and Trudeau's "suffocate the arms race" speech; with the city referendum campaigns and with petitions, public hopes and action had increased. By 1982 it was evident that little progress had been made in the disarmament talks, and people all over the world resolved to express their determination for peace at the next Special Session planned for June/July in New York. VOW has Non-Governmental Organization observer status at the United Nations, and it is thanks to Ann Gertler's constant monitoring and reporting that we have been kept up to date and informed as events develop. Nova Scotia VOW led off with their Women's Peace Petition. It was taken up across the country and gathered 115,000 signatures. Eventually these were presented to women M.P.s and Senators after a peace walk (with babies and balloons) up Parliament Hill and a breakfast and welcome from Ottawa Mayor Marion Dewar. On June 11 the Petition was taken to the United Nations and presented to the Secretary-General and to the Canadian Ambassador. Many Canadians travelled to New York for the June 12 rally. Kay and Jim Bedell walked from New Brunswick; others walked, flew, drove and bussed from all over Canada and the world, including many Hiroshima survivors. One bus load of VOW members and supporters went from Toronto. Here are some impressions recorded by Mary Vratsidis:

Anticipation ran high, in spite of the early hour. Forty-eight people were on board, gathered from B.C., Alberta and Ontario, ranging in ages from sixteen to seventy-five. A comment made to our bus driver by a passerby on

observing our Voice of Women sign: "Voice of Women? That's a strong voice you've got there!"

Since the U.S. Immigration authorities had been refusing entry to some travellers, crossing the border caused a few anxious moments, but forty-five minutes later, jubilation; we had all made it through, including Kay Macpherson who had been turned back before.

We shared expectations, information, songs, stories and food. The feeling of unity amongst us swelled. The miles sped by. First stop in New York City, a reception at the home of the Canadian U.N. Ambassador. Next stop, Barnard College and bed!

I feel proud of the peace movement, proud I'm here to march for peace. One voice counts.

We were each one voice, men and women, but blended together, were one-million strong streaming through the streets of New York City that sunny Saturday morning.

Everyone's experiences were unique, profound. We did more than march. Friday; there were press interviews, the Global Feminist Conference, the International Candlelight Worship, tour of the U.N. and the Hiroshima display of artifacts beside the children's Tree of Life drawings, the presentation of the Women's Peace Petition to Mr. Pelletier, Canada's U.N. Ambassador, and the intense question period afterward, the Ploughshares coffee house, the presence of the Japanese giving out tiny colourful origami cranes, symbol of the Hiroshima/Nagasaki survivors.

It's been the most memorable event of my life. I'll never be the same!

Here's what I wrote after New York:

I had been invited to be a speaker at the June 12th Rally. When all the missed messages and phone calls were sorted out this meant a one minute (NO MORE) speech and to be in the Speakers Enclosure in Central Park at noon. It was now about 8 p.m. on Friday, June 11th, and with a speech-making committee which must have had over a dozen members, I started to compose this one speech for Canada, "for women", "bilingual", "mention the Cruise", "talk about Candu", "the freeze", "nuclear fuel to Argentina"—everything. I finally took all the pieces and went back to Barnard College where everyone there proceeded to get into the speech-making business.



VOW IN NEW YORK, June 12, 1982. Kay Macpherson, Toronto; and Betty Mardiros, Edmonton.

When I went up on the platform I saw the crowds for the first time. We had been in an enclosure behind a high fence. What a sight! Thousands and thousands of people wherever you looked. Banners and flags too small to read, and the crowds stretching so far. It was that huge crowd—a million people coming together for disarmament and peace—which inspired everyone more than any speech or song.

Just after we had arrived back in Toronto the following evening, Susan, my daughter, still in New York, telephoned home. She and her dancer friends had been so long in the march that, when they reached Central Park, they thought they had missed the speeches. Suddenly they heard an announcement about “women.” Randy said, “Susan, that’s your mother!” “And there I sat,” said Susan, “with tears streaming down my face, so proud. That’s MY mother, speaking to all those thousands of people. What a wonderful thing.” I think *that* was the highlight for me. I had never really thought about what it might mean to my kids, or friends, or how lucky I was to have had such an opportunity, on such a day!

MESSAGE TO DISARMAMENT RALLY—NEW YORK— JUNE 12, 1982

“I am Kay Macpherson from Canada. I am happy to be here. The U.S. Immigration Department did their best to keep me out. Thousands of Canadians are here to say:
NO to Cruise Missiles made in Toronto, tested in Alberta or anywhere else
YES to making Canada a nuclear free zone
NO to Canada exporting nuclear reactors and fuel
YES to Disarmament NOW.”

“Today we have started to turn the tide of the arms buildup. We the people must make our governments turn to disarmament. We women and men have the power to give the world a future. Thousands of Canadians say in the words of our Women’s Petition for Peace—*WE SAY NO TO WAR. NON A LA GUERRE! WE SAY YES TO LIFE. OUI A LA VIE!*”

The enthusiasm and euphoria of the New York Rally led subsequently to renewed interest and action within Voice of Women.

There were and are so many “persons” and “personalities” in VOW that mentioning a few runs the risk of omitting many who deserve to have whole chapters or books written about them. Many fascinating and dynamic women joined La Voix des Femmes in Québec. When Madame Casgrain led a trainload of four hundred Quebec women to the House of Commons with an antinuclear petition (with a laundry basket full of supporting telegrams), the government could not at first find a French-speaking cabinet minister to meet the delegation of mainly French-speaking women. (This was 1962.) The women were indignant. On the train journey back to Montreal, Solange Chaput-Rolland was bemoaning the arrogance and insensitivity of the Diefenbaker government which could not speak to its citizens in their own language. Sitting next to her was an English-speaking Westmount woman who comforted her as best she could, in perfect French. They continued to talk all the way home and discovered they were both writers. Thus began the collaboration between Solange and Gwethalyn Graham which resulted in their book *Dear Enemies*, published simultaneously in English and French (VOW held a fancy book launching in Toronto at the Park Plaza, as well as Québec vins d’honneur). *Dear Enemies* and other actions led eventually to the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Bi-Culturalism, nick-

named La Commission Bi-Bi by VOW's Vice President Ghislaine Laurendeau, wife of André Laurendeau, *Le Devoir's* Editor and Co-Chairman of the Commission. She was a brilliant woman, responsible for many contributions to VOW's briefs and statements, who chaired our foreign policy committee. This was variously known as International Affairs or International Relations until, at one meeting, Beatrice Brigden, the stalwart 70 year old, bowler-hatted "Aunty B" from Winnipeg, solemnly asked whether we preferred having "relations" or "affairs." The debate ended in laughing chaos.

When Beatrice Brigden returned from visiting the Soviet Union with VOW's 1964 delegation, she set about telling as many groups as she could about Soviet women and how they lived and felt. After all, international understanding was one of VOW's prime objectives. She spoke to well over fifty groups—churches, native people, women, students, university and business organizations all over Manitoba. Recently we had a letter from a long time VOW member in Nipigon. She describes how, in the early 60s, their small group of four held meetings, got their news through the CBC, wrote letters to the Lakehead press and kept in touch with two VOW members there. Two of the women were "stimulated and inspired" by VOW members they met at the Annual Meeting in Winnipeg. Finally she says, "we subsequently brought Ms. B. Brigden to speak to a group of women here. We much appreciated her kindness and interest in women well off the beaten path to Toronto, as we are about eighty miles north east of Thunder Bay and the planes always fly over us." (The women in Nelson and Grand Falls say the same thing.)

VOW members never seem to give up. It is not really surprising. We just "love this planet." Some Voices disappear for a year or so. But sooner or later they are back again. I have run into a lot of them this year. Some VOW members have died "on the job" and what wonderful women they were. VOWs all over the country are always inspired when they hear such names as D'Easum, Lawson, Porter, Cunningham, Brigden, Shapiro, Gould, Brown, Casgrain, Smith, Latham, Bergren, Wright and many others, not to mention the stalwart husbands Duckworth, Pocock, Toole, Brown and so many who made their contributions.

There are VOW members who can only be called the anchor women of their communities. They, I think, organize meetings in their sleep; their minds are full of points to put in press releases, lists of phone numbers and instant biographies. Their conversations tend to start with "What are we going to do about...?" (Ann Gertler's pets are NATO and the U.N.; Dorothy Rosenberg always has a new project or film to

promote; Setsuko Thurlow stresses Hiroshima.) There are, of course, hundreds of others. "Elder stateswomen" include Win Hall who, at age 89, still goes canvassing a poll during elections; Eve Smith, the archenvironmentalist; Myrtle Wells, Mary Staples Reid, Nellie Peterson, Helen Freeman, Dorothy Cameron, Helen Fagan, Freda Handford and Dorothy Henderson. There are many VOW names associated with press headlines. Some of them horrified our more proper members. Nova Scotia VOW gets wonderful reports for such actions as "Debunk Debert" and the government's bomb shelter fantasies. The names of Culhane, Azmier and McEwen conjure up visions of tents on Parliament Hill, Victoria jails and such placards as "Holy Hellyer the Hypocrite" or "Vive Québec Libre."

The reason so often for our welcoming press coverage—good or not so good—or being in court or on the media is that it provides publicity and information for the cause of peace and disarmament which is so hard to come by.

That was why Thérèse Casgrain had the ecstatic look on her face when she was pushed by a huge gendarme into the police paddy wagon outside the NATO headquarters in Paris. (This was in 1964, and at the time there were many demonstrations opposing NATO's proposed Multilateral Force—every naval commander with a finger on the nuclear button.) We women were *not* in a demonstration. With one representative from every NATO country, (two for Canada—English and French!) we were quietly walking up to the NATO building, which was bristling with police, to keep our appointment with NATO's Secretary-General. We insisted, when told "One woman only" that at least two women must go in (those guards really were paranoid). Sweeping aside our objections, they shoved us into the waiting wagons, and off we went, to be searched and questioned and eventually put into a police cage—Casgrain called it a *salade basket*. There we stayed for about five hours. It was freezing cold in mid-December in this unheated police cell and, we immediately set about harassing our guards. One woman turned out to be pregnant (Oh, the brutality of such treatment!). Everyone, in turn, had to go to the washroom—under guard, across two courtyards, one by one. Everyone insisted on getting in touch with her embassy ("I have an appointment with my Ambassador," said the furious Belgian lady). The authorities were very glad when finally some petty official was sent to release us—on condition that we NEVER took part in demonstrations, NEVER did a whole lot of other things, or we would NEVER be allowed into France again.

As soon as we were released we made straight for our embassies and the media. Thérèse, of course, had dandled

most of the embassy staff on her knee when they were youngsters and the Ambassador beseeched her to advise him when she was going to do this sort of thing again. The “distinguished Canadian women” were on the front page of the *Globe and Mail* for three days; *La Presse* had a superb cartoon “Thérèse Casgrain à Paris” (Thérèse holding an antinuclear sign, stepping daintily into the paddy wagon) and, on her return to Montreal, the Québec Premier dashed across the Windsor Hotel dining room proclaiming “Let me kiss my jailbird.” As a reflection on VOW’s attitudes at the time, a number of our Ontario members resigned (such unseemly behaviour on the part of VOW’s President, and who was she associating with in this jail anyway? Left wing militants probably. She didn’t even *ask* who they were!) With all this, the press even managed to mention the *reason* for this fuss—our opposition to the NATO Multilateral Nuclear Force and, more important, some time afterwards the proposals for the Force were quietly dropped.

War Toys

Our efforts for publicity sometimes brought forth ingenious but perhaps impractical ideas. During the height of the Antiwar Toys Campaign in the 60s, a mother dashed into our Calgary toy convener’s living room. “One of our kids was playing with a war toy and scratched his ear.” “Wounded by a WAR TOY! What a headline,” exclaimed the convener. “Quick, smear ketchup over his face, take a picture and we’ll rush it to the press!”

The Antiwar Toys campaign has ebbed and flowed over the years, but has involved thousands of women and their children. At one time, Eatons had fourteen pages of war toy ads in its Christmas catalogue. Women all over the continent tore out the pages and mailed them, with a few well-chosen words and NO purchase orders, back to the store. Women leafletted street corners and picketed the stores, attended the spring buyers’ exhibitions and wrote articles. Child psychologists were interviewed, and busy mothers dreamed up all kinds of constructive alternatives. When the Lionel toys company had a Christmas ad in *The New Yorker* magazine of a toy train with a caption that read “This train does not shoot, kill, stab, etc., etc., it just goes round and round on its track,” the peaceful point had been well and truly made.

Radiation and Baby Teeth

When Ursula Franklin told me she thought the most important job she could do as VOW’s Chair of Research was to set about preparing a brief on Fallout Monitoring, I did not know what she was talking about. She had to explain that

radioactive strontium 90 and other lethal materials from the nuclear tests being exploded in the Pacific were being carried in the stratosphere and coming down all over North America. When they fell on the ground they got into the vegetation and the food chain and eventually into our milk and other foods. The Canadian government was not doing much to monitor this fallout and so knew little about what these dangerous substances were doing to Canadians’, and particularly our children’s health.

It is a typical tactic of VOW that, along with scientific and political actions to protect the health of Canadian citizens, there was a concurrent campaign to collect children’s baby teeth from all over the country, in order to assess amounts of dangerous minerals by region. Thousands of teeth (easily available bone which absorbs strontium) were required by Dr. A.M. Hunt of the Department of Dentistry at the University of Toronto. VOW members took up the challenge with enthusiasm. Boards of Education, dentists’ offices, libraries, the CNE and other public events had collections, and hundreds of women spent hours collecting, sorting and documenting the specimens (breast or bottle fed, age, where conceived and born, statistics about mother and child, etc.) Only the other day at the VOW Twenty-fifth Anniversary party on Hornby Island, B.C., fifty women were reminiscing about the rows of documented teeth they remembered on their living room floors. I was lucky enough to go along when Ursula Franklin did her lobby of Ottawa officials with the radiation brief. Later that fall, she eventually obtained her interview with Judy La Marsh, then Minister of Health and Welfare. Eventually, the government improved its monitoring and the Test Ban Treaty was signed.

Vietnam Knitting Project

I would like to quote a little about the projects which took so many hours and so much initiative and energy from all the women involved. Lil Green hardly mentions the drafting of letters, leaflets, meetings, knitting instructions, the sorting, folding and ironing of garments and blankets; the speeches, interviews, press releases, posters and fund raising that supplemented the efforts and energy of the women directing and participating in the Knitting Project. Here is an excerpt from her description:

This Voice of Women activity was one of the most consistent projects for aid to the Vietnamese people. For ten years—1966-1975—it involved hundreds of concerned men and women, not only in Eastern Canada but in the United States, where it was against the law “to aid and abet the enemy.”

The Project was a full-time after-hours voluntary job. My husband and three daughters were completely supportive and pitched in with the work. Every single item of the final total of 30,000 knitted garments and cot blankets (in dark colours) for the children of Vietnam and Laos eventually came through the dining room headquarters in my home. Every participant was thanked either personally or by letter. Many joined Voice of Women and were active. Every item was received, repacked and expressed to the Canadian Aid for Vietnam Civilians in Vancouver, B.C., from where shipments were made with other medical aid, etc., to Vietnam by ships. Voice of Women involvement enriched my life to this very day.

Some of us doubted at first the validity of expending so much time and effort on what was essentially an "aid" project, when political action and lobbying seemed more direct. But time and time again women would give variations of "I took my knitting to school/church/meeting/laundromat, etc., and when I was asked why I was knitting baby clothes in dark green or brown or blue, I would say that in Vietnam babies have to live mainly underground—sometimes they are floating in baskets and bowls in flooded trenches—and if, at any time, light coloured clothing could be seen they would be bombed by American planes. Women were horrified, shocked and wanted to know more and how they too could help." Thus many new VOWs began their work for peace.

Many New Brunswick Voices became knowledgeable and active in opposing environmental hazards such as chemical spraying of budworms in forests and the building of the nuclear power plant at Point Lepreau. Here is what Kay Bedell wrote about one action:

VOW in New Brunswick is a member of the Maritime Energy Coalition (MEC). On July 21, 1977, over a dozen individual MEC members (including VOWs) "established a presence" in four boats very near the docking facility of the barge carrying the calandria (core) for the Lepreau nuclear generating station.

While the MV Brunneck with the drum-shaped, 275-ton calandria on deck proceeded stern foremost towards the newly constructed dock, the sudden appearance of our four red and white inflatable dinghies took everyone by surprise. The crew members harangued us from the ship. The Power Commission men in their hardhats paced back and forth on the dock consulting with one another. A roaring helicopter circled above. One light dinghy was nearly capsized in the turbulence as the

engines were revved up beside it. We all maintained our positions as the Brunneck moved on steadily and the hawsers were thrown ashore.

We passed copies of a prepared statement to the dock to assure everyone that we planned no violence or sabotage, but were protesting the landing of the calandria. The waters were churned violently by the ship's propellers in an effort to force us away. By pressure from the ship with the rising tide, two of our dinghies were shoved right up on the dock and one of them deflated while the other two were in an uncomfortable position under the curve of the ship's hull and the oarsmen were miserably soaked.

We spent several hours in this situation, during which heavy machinery was manouvered around us. Cameras operated while reporters interviewed us. (Our supporters ashore had done their part efficiently!) An RCMP staff sergeant pleaded with us to leave but without effect. We were finally lifted from our places on the dock—Jim and I carried in state in our boat by four Power Commission workers, while two of our friends were lugged individually. Finally the heavy ram was lowered in preparation for the unloading of the monstrous object the next day.

That night we gathered together in our damp clothes to watch a sympathetic description of our protest on the "National" of CBC TV. There were favourable reports, too, on the radio, on TV provincial news and in the newspapers. We felt we had made our point.

As a good example of how peace groups can collaborate, how there can be different jobs to suit individual priorities and how the local effort makes a national contribution in our concerns, here is a report from Betty Peterson of Nova Scotia VOW:

It was only a brief press announcement but it quickly alerted Canadians to the ominous fact: Pentagon officials were to make an eight city tour across Canada to interest businessmen in defense contracts to support U.S. foreign policy. This was to be the "meat and potatoes" result of the special relationship between Brian Mulroney and Ronald Reagan. And Halifax was the first stop!

The actual protest comprised five component parts, combining several peace groups, of which VOW was central. Three on-going affinity groups had already established trust and working relationships. Pickets and leaflets greeted the first arrivals at the meeting at 8 a.m.

on December 3, followed by our now-famous street group impersonating two generals, U.S. and Canadian, and a big businessman passing out blood money. Their outrageous performance included carrying a trunk with arms and legs of war victims hanging out. The press conference featured four excellent presentations to about twenty media people. The rally which followed was well attended by old faithfuls as well as many new protesters. At the lunch hour, a disciplined and well-prepared group of fourteen, mostly women, sat in a circle amid a web of yarn and sang peace songs while a support group stood nearby and cheered as they were charged and carried off, limp and unresisting, by the hastily summoned police.

Outside a large group of well-wishers linked arms in front of the police van filled with civil disobedients. Upon orders of the police, they broke ranks and moved back, but not before several incidents occurred which, as usual, were blown out of all proportion by the press. There was no violence involved *per se* and supporters are investigating and resolving each report.

The fourteen arrested were held in jail for eight hours until the meeting was adjourned, while a support group held vigil outside. Upon release at 9:30 p.m., many came directly to Coburg House (our unofficial peace centre) to watch themselves on National TV. But publicity was not the object as subsequent meetings revealed. After serious deliberations a woman lawyer was chosen, and guilty and non-guilty pleas were considered. On December 11 the group was arraigned and, for the most part, chose the not-guilty route, scheduled for trial as a group on April 17. One woman declared herself guilty and will go to jail rather than pay the fine.

In retrospect, this action has produced many plusses: various peace groups are working well together and in trust; there is a core in each affinity group which is more willing to sit down and be counted; instead of a fixation on the cruise missile, more people are alert and disturbed over the connections between business and the military and our increasing support of U.S. foreign policy. Next time we can be sure that these connections will not be so well advertised.

This local action was following consistently on VOW's long-term practice which began with Ursula Franklin's 1967 brief on the Effect of Defence Production and Trade and Commerce Agreements on Canada's foreign policy.

At the other end of the country, after VOW visited the

Canadian Forces Maritime Experimental and Test Ranges at Nanoose, Mary Cox writes:

If there is a value in the experience of a visit to the CFMETR Base, it is in the confirmation of one's belief that the most important task of every human being today is to find *new ways* to meet our social and economic needs—through respect for all living things on the planet. For, as Gandhi once said, "There is no such thing as an external enemy."

There have been hundreds of examples of the variety of inspired activities women can devise and the conviction which motivates them. The frustrations and disappointments are numerous and sometimes overwhelming, but VOW members discovered networking and sisterhood before these words became popular. Here is part of a letter from Dorothy Inglis:

As a VOW member who started in B.C., transplanted to Newfoundland and spent a half dozen years in between in Central Canada, I have a personal overview of VOW in various regions and a reflection of an organization that lit candles of hope across the country and kept them burning.

The contribution that VOW made with all the briefs, the conferences, the analysis, the monitoring of events provided a platform for the women's movement to us. It is significant that the National Action Committee on the Status of Women has embraced the concept that peace is a women's issue and every annual general meeting reinforces the support delegates give to this topic as high priority. We can thank those who kept the flame alive until a women's movement had time to grow and claim the issue as their own.

In every province VOW left its mark. I knew I was home when, shortly after arrival in Newfoundland, I met Ella Manuel, Rae Perlin and Gladys Deutsch, who kept VOW alive in this province. Wonderful to see younger women today taking up the struggle. And, as a proud parent, it is heartwarming to learn that the infant we took to the first peace march held in Vancouver is now the man giving speeches to students in Richmond, B.C., on how to work for peace.

What about the development of VOW's philosophy and policies over these twenty-five years? From the beginning, VOW attracted women who had devoted their lives to nonviolence, to peacemaking, to working for equality, justice and

social change. But hundreds of VOW's new members had never joined an organization in their lives. Many of us were naive; we believed what we read in the press and what our politicians and officials told us. We had a lot to learn about the techniques of influencing public opinion, attracting favourable press and political attention, and influencing—let alone becoming—those who held the power and made the decisions. In the first few years there were fundamental differences among VOW's organizers over what we could and could not do. In their insistence on a nonpartisan (*e.g.*, non-political party) position for VOW, an attempt was made to restrict the organization to educational, aid, friendship and understanding efforts amongst the world's women. Individual members could take stands on issues, but not VOW as an organization. The key to this attempt was the incoming Liberal government's decision to acquire nuclear weapons, a policy which VOW opposed. The 1963 AGM rejected this restriction of VOW's purposes. Many of VOW's subsequent actions would not have been possible had it been accepted.

There have been many more diverging opinions gradually worked out. Some members believed that "militancy" was one tactic to be avoided in those days. Many VOW members were very nervous about marches and even vigils. Demonstrations were often thought to be unladylike. Nonviolent direct action and civil disobedience also caused much debate. But, as Solange Chaput-Rolland said, "When the wind blows, some leaves fall off the tree." Fortunately, others will grow.

In general, VOW has managed to work out its differences. The 1985 Halifax conference, "Women's Alternatives for Negotiating Peace", provided many good examples. Is this because fundamentally we all have the same goal?

Ann Packer of Edmonton brings up another point:

By the end of the sixties, a great many changes had taken place in society. The women's movement had a profound influence on members. Other groups emerged, *e.g.*, the environmentalists and feminists, and many members made their cause their own.

Now it is likely that most VOW members work outside the home or have some other full-time activity. This affects the organization as fewer women are in a position to dedicate the time to peace activity and it takes a tremendous commitment to any activity organized.... There is also the question of feminism, one form of which sees the world of violence we live in as being the result of a

basically patriarchal system, nuclear weapons being the ultimate form of violence—and that to get rid of violence we must first get rid of patriarchy.

Other women insist that without a worldwide system of socialism, "equality, development and peace" are impossible goals.

There are many questions still being discussed: Have women something different to contribute to peacemaking and problem solving because they are women? Is it biology? Environment? Socialization? Are women less violent than men? What are the differences in the techniques of negotiation and problem solving—past, present—and what could they be in the future? What would a peaceful world be like? What is needed to achieve peace, justice and to satisfy human and environmental needs? It is a long list, but many new techniques and ideas are being tried every day. It has all been said before: "Charity begins at home"; "There is no way to peace, peace is the way"; and Einstein's, "If only two percent of the world's population wanted peace strongly enough to work for it, there would be no more war."

The statement from the 1985 Halifax Conference says, in part:

We reject a world based on domination, exploitation, patriarchy, racism and sexism. We demand a new order based on justice and the equitable distribution of the world's resources.... Militarism is an addiction that distorts human development causing world wide poverty, starvation, pollution, repression, torture and death.

VOW's work goes on. We have to replace the use of the threat system (as Ursula Franklin says, "Do as I say or else") with a new agenda (as Marion Dewar says, "What is our common bottom line objective?") and a new, nonviolent, cooperative process of negotiation. Women have developed some of these, around their kitchen tables, dealing with their children, in their communities and workplaces. It is time for them to be used in public and international life.

A final comment from Terry Padgham:

The unifying theme of VOW's story is the tenacious instinct for survival that women possess and Voice of Women members channel this instinct into a life-long commitment to peace.



VOW MEETING with External
Affairs and National Meeting,
Ottawa, September 1979.
Top L to R:



1. Kay Macpherson
2. Nancy Pocock
3. Claire Perry
4. Eileen Kenwood
5. Marilyn Calmain
6. Dorothy Smieciuck
7. Peggy Hope Simpson
8. Judy Wouk
9. Terry Padgham
10. Anne Gertler
11. Alice Coppard
12. Deeno Birmingham
13. Norah Toole
14. Frances Elliott