

Dorise Nielsen, 1902 - 1980: A Tribute

*Dorise Winifred Nielsen, United Progressive Member of Parliament for North Battleford, Saskatchewan, from 1940 to 1945, died in China in December 1980. The third woman to sit in the federal house (after Agnes Macphail and Martha Black), Nielsen was an outspoken critic of the wartime labour policies of the Liberal government and a fearless spokesperson for the rights of Canadian women both in the home and in the paid labour force. In her book, *New Worlds for Women* (Toronto: Progress Books, 1944) she outlined a program which included full employment for men and women, equal pay for equal work, maternity leaves and allowances, scholarships and training opportunities for women and girls, and adequate child care which would include state assisted health care, day nurseries and school lunches. Socialist in her sympathies, Nielsen was also a strong feminist, arguing that "women will need to be a great deal more active in whatever organization or political party they happen to belong to." (p. 99) Without the voice of women in politics, she argued, there could be little hope for social and economic security in peacetime.*

Dorise Webber came to her political position by a circuitous route. Born in London, England, to a working class family whose political affiliation was with the Conservative Party, Nielsen was trained in biology and art at Hockerhill College and St. Mary's Art Academy. After teaching elementary school for three years in London, she moved to Canada in 1927 where she found a teaching position in Norbury, northern Saskatchewan. In the following year she married Peter Nielsen, a homesteader in the region. Angered by the hardships and poverty she and her neighbours en-

countered in the agricultural frontier during the Depression, Dorise Nielsen's political perspectives quickly became radicalized. She worked for the Farmer-Labour candidate Frank Rose in the 1930 federal election and was attracted to the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) Party when it was formed in 1933. Although Nielsen was an active CCF member throughout the 1930s she was expelled from the party in 1940 because of her campaign strategy. Believing that the incumbent Liberal member for North Battleford, (C.R. McIntosh), must be defeated at all costs, Nielsen rallied Conservatives, Social Creditors, Independents and Communists in support of her Unity Platform. Despite opposition from many quarters Nielsen won the election.¹ She saw her role as spokesperson for the poor and oppressed of Canada:

As long as people are living in poverty, Canada is not a great nation. Actually, the most subversive thing in Canada is poverty. I shall never forget that. I shall never forget why I was sent here and whom I represent.²

Her speeches in the House on behalf of Canada's farmers, wage labourers and women testify to the strength and consistency of her commitment.

Dorise Nielsen ran for re-election in 1945 as a Labor Progressive candidate and was defeated, but she continued to serve as a member of the central executive of the Labor Progressive Party. Reportedly frustrated because Canadians both on the left and on the right did not understand her socialist position, she went to

*China in 1957 and became a Chinese citizen in 1962. During the last 20 years of her life, she taught English and worked as an editor at Peking's Foreign Language Press. She died in Peking in December, 1980, and her ashes were scattered over China in accordance with her will.*³

The following is an excerpt from Dorise Nielsen's speech on war labour in the House of Commons on May 4, 1944, a fitting documentary tribute to one of Canada's pioneer feminists.

Julie Landau, Oberlin College
Margaret Conrad, Acadia University

NOTES

1. For details about Nielsen's career see L.L.L. Golden, "Out of the Needs of People," *Saturday Night*, 22 June 1940; J.A.P. Haydon, "Only Woman Elected in Canada's General Election," *Canadian Congress Journal* (May 1940); "Farmer's Wife," *Time*, 17 March, 1941.
2. Cited in Golden, "Out of the Needs of People."
3. *Globe and Mail*, 15 December, 1980. We wish to thank Professor David Frank of the University of New Brunswick for bringing this newspaper report to our attention.

Mrs. NIELSEN: Mr. Chairman, before this item passes I should like to discuss briefly some questions which come under the jurisdiction of the Department of Labour and which are of special concern to women. I make no excuse for holding up this item while these matters are being discussed. Perhaps one of these days, instead of just having women sitting in the galleries of this chamber, we shall have dozens of them occupying benches here, and then I hope that the problems of women will be more adequately discussed than I can possibly discuss them alone. But there are certain matters which I feel should be brought before the minister for his consideration.

When the minister was introducing his estimates he gave the latest figures of the em-

ployment of women in industry, and they were really astounding. He told the committee that it was estimated that on October 1, 1943, no fewer than 1,075,000 women were gainfully employed in Canada as compared with only 638,000 in August, 1939. We all realize the tremendous number of women, both English and French speaking, who have taken their places in industry because of the war. Most of these women had no previous industrial experience, yet they are filling places which it was thought that women could never fill in our gun factories, shipyards, steel mills and other industries.

I understand that today women are performing over seventy per cent of the operations necessary in the manufacture of machine guns, and more than eighty per cent of those working in the instrument factories are women. We have heard of the large number of people who have left the farms and of the women who have replaced them. According to the minister's figures this number is 750,000. I should like to say something about women working on farms, but that is not the matter with which I want to deal tonight. I intend to refer more particularly to those who are working in industry.

It has been recognized by employers in this country that wherever it is a question of dexterity or accuracy or patience or pride in work, women are not second to men. They become good trade union members too, once they understand the democratic functions of trade unionism. I have spoken to large numbers of women who recently have been enlisted in trade unions, and I found them enthusiastic about the necessary work of trade unions and the carrying out of democratic procedure within their shops and work places.

Not only do the women in our armed ser-

vices not receive equal pay for equal work, but all women in employment have suffered this liability. I am not the first to raise this question, nor is this the first time I have raised it. It has been brought up in this chamber by other honourable members. I want honourable members to realize that in urging the government to make it the law of the land that there shall be equal pay for equal work, to accept this principle, I do so not only to protect women but to protect the employment of men as well. If employers find that they can employ women to do work just as efficiently as men and pay them less, we shall find, when the war is over, that perhaps they will use these women as a reservoir of cheap labour and thus deny our working men opportunities for employment. I bring this to the attention of the committee because I believe many honourable members are already aware that, since this principle has not been embodied in our statute books, this discrimination exists in a great majority of our industries.

This principle has been acknowledged by the great trade union groups of this country. They have asked that it be embodied in our labour code. We have had a ruling of the national war labour board on this issue, and I should like to quote from the *Montreal Gazette* of March 15. Decisions in two cases had been given by the board, and this paper had this to say:

The national war labour board in decisions given today went on record supporting equal pay for equal work for men and women on a basis of efficiency.

Dealing with appeals involving two Niagara district companies—the Electric Metallurgical Company of Welland, Ontario, and Welland Chemical Company of Port Robinson, Ontario. And later on:

Mr. Justice C.P. McTague, giving a

unanimous decision by the board, said that wage control regulations made no distinction between male and female workers. The principle of equal pay for equal production was not dealt with in orders in council and the board felt the time had come when it should declare its policy.

Equality of pay should be based on efficiency and support of the principle did not necessitate a general revision of pay to all female workers, but only to those on jobs similar to those held by men.

In the United States it has been the policy of the war labour board to accept the principle of equal pay for equal work. I urge strongly upon the minister that he recognize the necessity of having in our labour code definite authority whereby employers will be forced to put this principle into effect. I endeavoured to get some information about this matter of equal pay for equal work. Honourable members may remember that I placed a question upon the order paper a while ago. I asked if, from the material collected by the war labour board, figures could be given with regard to the number of larger industries in this country that were giving equal pay for equal work. The parliamentary assistant to the minister stated that he would try to get this information for me, but he assured me that it would take at least six months and would cost a tremendous amount of money. For that reason I was willing to drop the question for the time being. However, I would ask the minister to try to get from his officials statistics which will give us some idea of how far employers in Canada are accepting the principle of equal pay for equal work.

The government is not giving a lead in this matter in its own contracts. In government contracts, where the government itself is an employer, there is no provision for equal wages to women who are doing the same work as

men. I understand that under P.C. 7679 covering government contracts women may be paid twenty-five cents an hour, while men receive thirty-five cents an hour. If the government recognizes the principle of equal pay for equal work it should put it into effect in its own contracts.

I think I am correct when I say that women today are doing a tremendously difficult job in taking care of their own homes and families to the best of their ability in addition to helping in the war production of this country. But they are wondering what their position will be when the war is over. They are wondering about their right to continue to work. This concerns not only industrial workers but professional women and women in other groupings. They want to know what attitude the government will take. Are the government and our employers going to say to these women, "Well, girls, you have done a nice job; you looked very cute in your overalls and we appreciate what you have done for us; but just run along; go home; we can get along without you very nicely." Is that the attitude that will be taken, or shall we realize that the prosperity of Canada after the war will depend upon our ability to develop our natural resources, to maintain our industrial development, to expand our national income and to give employment to all those, whether they be men or women, who can help to add to the general progress of this country?

We should rid ourselves of the old Victorian idea or perhaps the idea that we had in the depression years that women, when they want to work in industry and elsewhere, are usurpers in taking men's places. Women would like to have a definite understanding that this government recognizes they have a place to fill in the years of peace just as they had a place to fill in the years of war. As regards all those

young women who are doing war work, those in the armed services and in industry, young girls finishing school and soon to become young women, I do not think I would be incorrect if I say that their one great hope and desire is that very natural desire to marry, to have a home and children. That is the foremost hope of all young women, provided, of course, they have some idea that their home will not be a slum or a tenement, and provided they have a fair justification for believing that if they have a little family they can bring up their children with health, pleasure, and a certain degree of education. But there is this, too, to remember. Canada has not yet paid the price for freedom. Before this war is over we may have lost part of a generation of our young men. There may be thousands of young Canadian women who, having worked during the war to help win the victory, may be engaged to a boy overseas, and there are young women who hope to marry some boy now overseas. But many of them may be denied the privilege, the natural right of all women, to have a home, a husband and children. We must not forget these things.

I can remember that during the last war I had a sister, quite a few years my senior, who was married to a man fighting in the armed services of England. He was killed in the month of the armistice. My sister had her first and only child one month after her husband died, and I have often wondered in the long years since who paid the greatest price, who made the greatest sacrifice, whether it was the man who died or the woman who went on living.

At least we as a nation can guarantee to our women the right to live, work and make a home for themselves if they are not in a position to have the advantages which would naturally be theirs by marriage and a home and children of their own.

We must also realize that during the war many women have developed skills and a knowledge which they did not have before the war. They will feel, having developed a certain degree of skill, frustrated if they are no longer able to give of their skill and use it in the interests of their country and in the interests of their own living and building for themselves a better and happier home. There are these women to consider.

There are also the women to consider whose husbands may come back from the war disabled, with a pension, of course, we hope; but these women will nevertheless feel that if they can go out to work they can greatly add to the finances of the home and to the opportunities they can provide for their children and their children's education.

These various things women are thinking about, and they are wondering to what degree the government of this country is going to safeguard their rights in having the opportunity to work without being regarded as usurpers of men's places. They also want to know whether the government will guarantee to them the right to have equal pay for equal work. Some honourable members may have read the report of the subcommittee of the government's committee on reconstruction which had to deal with women's problems in the post-war world. I should like to quote briefly from a summary of the findings of the committee because, after a considerable period and quite a little research work with respect to women who are working, the committee arrived at some very decided conclusions.

The subcommittee expresses the following opinions:

1. To women in each group—
That is, whether they happen to be in-

dustrial workers, professional workers or workers in some other lines.

—the right to choose what occupation she will follow must be conceded as a right to which every citizen is entitled. She must also have the right to equality of remuneration, working conditions, and opportunity for advancement.

We believe that the right to choose is not going to operate to make every woman, or even much larger groups of women, want to leave their homes for the labour market. It is the right to choose which is demanded. Happier homes, and, therefore, a happier democracy, will result from the recognition that women choose or do not choose marriage as their vocation. It must be remembered that for many single women marriage will be an impossibility because of the casualties of the war.

Many women in all three groups will find their situations changed in the post-war years. A large proportion of the women now working, both married and single, have been earning money for the first time, or the first time since marriage. They have gained an entirely new realization of their skills and capacities. Many will return gladly to home life. Others will feel a sense of frustration if they have not the opportunity to exercise these abilities. For some public activities will serve, others will wish to be gainfully employed.

For those women who want to continue working, facilities which have been developed during the war should be continued and expanded. For example, war-time day nurseries should be continued on a peace-time basis. The subcommittee to the advisory committee on reconstruction suggests that day nurseries should not only be used for the children of working mothers, but should be developed as nursery schools and should become part of the educational system. The subcommittee lists their advantages to the children as follows:

- (1) Supervised play.
- (2) Space and adequate play equipment.

- (3) Companionship.
- (4) Consistent routine.
- (5) Careful supervision of health.

I would suggest that there are women already who are working who do not come within the provisions of the various forms of insurance which are given to men. Women teachers and women nurses do not come under the employment insurance benefits which are open to men and I feel that a grave injustice is done to these women in that regard.

For those women who feel that they have not the ability or the education or the skill or the liking for other occupations, there is of course a very large demand that they should work at domestic service. But there again, in that field of women's work, I believe we have to do a great deal to make it attractive to them and to safeguard them. A little while ago I received an interesting letter from a young woman, who addressed her letter from the Y.W.C.A. in Edmonton, Alberta. It was a well-written letter, such as would indicate that the writer was an intelligent and well-educated girl. I should like to read the first two paragraphs of her letter.

Two or three of us who are in domestic work here are hoping to work up some interest in a union for domestics. We should greatly appreciate your advice.

I have been interested in this work for a number of years, though I have not been able to work at it steadily. I have been working for some months as cook general at the home of Lieutenant-Governor J.C. Bowen and lost my position a few days ago immediately on their becoming aware of my union activities. I was given no notice.

That is not perhaps indicative of the usual way in which capable and good domestic servants are used by their employers, but it indicates that there is no protection in a case such

as this for a young woman who has loyally and faithfully served her employer as a domestic servant, and who yet expresses the desire to belong to a union of her choice to protect her rights.

These women wish to protect their rights, hours of labour, pay, the length of time they should be given by way of notice before leaving employment, and so on. I would say there is great need that we should protect women in domestic service. The committee to which I referred a little while ago, the subcommittee of the government's committee on reconstruction, has the following to say regarding the employment of women as domestic servants and in household work:

- (1) A standard of proficiency should be set by a training programme financed by the dominion and provincial governments. The cost of training should be borne by the government, but the student should carry her own living expenses with the help—if necessary—of government loans at low interest rates.
- (2) A signed agreement made between employer and employee, made through national selective service, would protect both by providing a definite statement regarding wages, termination of employment and other working conditions. Any dominion or provincial labour code should include household workers.
- (3) Labour legislation should be amended to include household workers under the minimum wage acts and related legislation.
- (4) Occupational branches of social insurance should be open to household workers, that is, unemployment insurance, workmen's compensation.
- (5) An organized supply of trained part-time workers should be made available to fill the

need for various types of household service. This kind of service is particularly required in homes of moderate income where it is impossible for the housewife with several children to have full-time assistance.

I realize that the women of this country have not as yet formulated their wishes with regard to these particular problems, but I noticed in the *Montreal Gazette*, in March of this year that the women of Australia had been far ahead of their Canadian sisters in working out for themselves a certain code embodying their wishes and desires and the demands for which women in Australia will consistently fight until they are successful. I should like to commend the women of Australia for the progressive steps they have taken, and I only wish the women of Canada would see the wisdom of themselves doing something along the same line. From the *Montreal Gazette* of March 22 I quote the following:

An Australian women's conference here prepared a women's charter which they managed to compress into a mere 5,000 words, but it took them a long time to do it. Further compressed, here it is:

Woman as citizen: No discrimination in respect of the responsibilities and rights of men and women as citizens.

Mother and homemaker: The indispensable service rendered to the community by mothers demands special consideration of fullest maternity services, nursery schools and opportunity for creative work; and, as dependent economic status denies liberty, opportunity and justice to the homemaker, and that economic independence strengthens character, we recommend a personal endowment of a minimum of 30 shillings (\$5.50) a week be paid to her by the commonwealth, operating on the same system as child endowment which shall continue.

Woman as voluntary worker to be recognized for her great contribution to the community, and have opportunities, and be given expert training in the social services that she may attain professional status.

Woman in the services to be granted the same status, pay, dependents' allowance and other benefits and opportunities offered to men.

Woman in the country be afforded facilities in rail transport, telegraph services, water conservation, special mobile health and baby care services.

Woman in public life to be given opportunity to go forward and stand as candidate for national and international delegations, legislative bodies, diplomatic posts, responsible administration; and as members of boards, and commissions, in order that their potential capabilities may be developed and utilized for the national good.

Woman as peacemaker: The part women have played in their country's struggle to win the war justifies that they be given wide representation at international peace table.

I wish the women of Canada would urge that the same liberties and freedoms, the same justice be accorded to them in this country and that they, too, have the right to represent a part of Canada at the peace table when that happy time comes.

In what I have said to-night, I am of the opinion that were we to grant these further privileges and rights to the women of Canada, it would not mean that they would wish the more to forsake the home. They would rather, I believe, feel that motherhood was their primary duty, and as long as marriage and motherhood was not the only avenue open to them they would, I believe, embrace it with all the more love, feeling that they had chosen it because it was the thing that was nearest and

dearest to their hearts. When women do have all the free pursuits of a great nation open to them they will, I believe, become better citizens and, because of that, better mothers, and they will bring to the home the feelings of equality and devotion as the basis for happiness to a far greater degree than they do at the present time.

Mr. MITCHELL: I am afraid my honourable friend is a little out of date. As a matter of fact, it was twelve months ago that I was chairman of the national war labour board, and while I was acting the principle of equal pay for equal production was laid down by the board. That in itself was a revolution. I think we were the first free nation that laid down that principle.

Mr. BLACKMORE: What has been done about it?

Mr. MITCHELL: A great deal has been done about it.

Mr. BLACKMORE: What, for example?

Mr. MITCHELL: I am not going into the 45,000 cases that come before the board dealing with the employment of men and women in the industrial structure, but as minister I am saying this and it should be enough for my honourable friend, that the principle was laid down by the national war labour board when I was chairman.

Mr. BLACKMORE: One or two examples will be enough.

Mr. MITCHELL: I do not carry all these decisions around in my pocket. If my honourable friend is ever unfortunate enough to hold this portfolio he will find it rather difficult himself.

Mr. NOSEWORTHY: Has the government applied the principle in practice?

Mr. MITCHELL: Not the government but the national war labour board. They are the people who adjudicate on the wage structure. No one knows that better than my honourable friend. Let me pay this tribute to the women. The other afternoon when introducing my estimates I said that without the assistance of the women we could not successfully wage the war. The contribution made by the women of Canada has been magnificent. When I point out that 1,043,000 women are engaged in the industrial structure and that the women in the armed forces number 32,000 and on the farm, 760,000, according to the figures of September last year, honourable members will get an idea of the part played by the women of this country.

As I pointed out before, I was in Great Britain late in 1942, and I vividly remember speaking to the general council of the British trade union congress. I made the observation that the women were doing a better job than the men, and I suppose that is instinctive. In the family circle the women will fight harder for the children than will the average man. Therefore, when the nation or state is in jeopardy it is instinctive that our womenfolk will fight just as valiantly, and perhaps a little more valiantly, for the survival of the race and the state. My honourable friend can rest assured that this government—and I think I can speak for every government in this country and every party in this House of Commons—have just as much interest, and might I say real interest, in the progressive affairs of the womenfolk of this great dominion as anyone else. What my honourable friend said is quite true. Basically, I suppose, it is as old as history itself. Men chase the good-looking girls. That is instinctive. The most natural

thing to do, I suppose, as my honourable friend pointed out is settle down and see that there will be someone here two thousand years from now to call this country Canada. That is as old as history itself.

I appreciate the constructive suggestions made by my honourable friend this evening. She can be sure that not only this government but, as I have said previously, every government, whether provincial or municipal, will share the same views as my honourable friend with reference to the rights of the womenfolk in this broad dominion.

Mrs. NIELSEN: I wish to ask one more question. The minister has stated that the national war labour board and the government acknowledged the principle of equal pay for equal work. What happens then when a group of women in a certain factory are not receiving equal pay for equal work? Must they bring

their case before the national war labour board?

Mr. MITCHELL: My honourable friend knows this as well as I do. There are ten war labour boards in this country. They are the boards that adjudicate on the question of wages, whether they be men or women for that matter. Any individual engaged in any civilian pursuit has the right as an individual to place her case before either the regional board or the central board. If my honourable friend were engaged in a civilian pursuit she would place her case before the regional board in Saskatchewan, since that is her own province, or if she were engaged in a national industry, before the national board. That is the machinery and that is the mechanics of it. While it is comparatively new, I suppose in the course of time it will develop a greater degree of supervision and will create working standards for men and women in this country.