

## Voice of Women Dialogue

*On January 24, 1981, Voice of Women (VOW), Nova Scotia Branch, held a general all-day meeting to discuss plans and actions for the future. Muriel Duckworth, national president of VOW, 1967 - 71, and Peggy Hope-Simpson, Co-ordinator, Ploughshares, N.S., began the discussion by speaking informally about their experiences with VOW. The following dialogue is a transcription of their talk. Not only does it contribute to our knowledge of the history of one of Canada's most important women's organizations during the 1960s,<sup>1</sup> but it gives us a vivid sense of women's initiation into the areas of politics and protest. It also offers us some idea of how women's political strategies can develop out of our own women's culture and recognition of our responsibility for and identity with the women of every nation.*

PEGGY: It goes back to the early fall of 1960. I was sitting in my livingroom one evening when David, my husband, came home. He said, "Look, I've got all these papers and I don't know what to do with them. There's a letter from Jo Davis in Toronto. They're starting a women's organization—it's a peace organization." I said, "Let me look at them," I read them and I was absolutely overwhelmed. It was an answer to what I was feeling because it was so strong and because we had had, that previous year, experience in a peace group called the Committee for the Control of Radiation Hazards which consisted mostly of scientists and well-known people who had been holding meetings across the country.

At this time, Fall, 1960, I had four young children—a new baby, a few months old, and so what could I do? I didn't know all that many people in Halifax since we had only been here a little over a year. I began to think about who the well-known women in Halifax were and Muriel's name came to mind. I thought, she's always speaking out, and spouting off, so I'll phone her. I didn't know her but she responded immediately. We talked about it and then pulled together a first meeting, which took place in Muriel's house on Cambridge Street in October. Joan Marshall, who was a Maritimes CBC commentator (women's commentator) chaired it and we had about 22 women there.

The other thing that got us immediately involved was the question of the dumping of some nuclear waste off the coast of Yarmouth (Nova Scotia). These were American products, we didn't know at the time what they were, but low-level radiation-contaminated materials were being dumped by a private concern. The Committee for the Control of Radiation Hazards took this up: specifically, Dr. Gordon Kaplan, a biologist-geneticist who was at Dalhousie University, and my husband, a geologist concerned about radioactive trace elements in the environment, and Archbishop Berry of the Roman Catholic Church. The three of them signed a petition together and it went on the air. In fact, it was on national

television and radio. This was really a first in Canada—a definite protest on this matter.

Then Voice of Women took up this issue. We'd only been formed about a week, when we were immediately plunged into controversy.

**MURIEL:** Halifax VOW held a public meeting which was televised. It was the first protest meeting in Canada about nuclear dumping.

And while all this was going on, nationally VOW was also getting off the ground. It started in July, 1960, in Toronto and I heard about it first over the air. It sounded quite exciting. There was an incipient Women's Movement for Peace in Toronto that hadn't really coalesced. But absolute terror galvanized VOW into being. There's no question that everybody was terrified about what was going to happen. In May, 1960, Lotta Dempsey, a columnist for the *Toronto Star*, had written, "Where are the women? The men aren't able to cope, where are the women?" As it turned out, the women were there and they had already met.

The issue was the U2 incident over the Soviet Union when the American spy, Gary Powers, was shot down. I think we were all innocent then and didn't realize that this international spying goes on all the time. There was an international conference in Paris. Khrushchev broke it up and went home saying, "This is something that we won't stand for." Everybody thought there was going to be a nuclear war right then.

That is why the Voice of Women got off the ground—over 3,000 women joined across Canada. Within a year, the membership was over 5,000 and the mailing list for the *Newsletter* was 10,000. Thousands of people made

inquiries about this organization and about what they could do. The difficulty was then, and it still is now—what do you do? You're scared to death, you're in despair about the situation, but what on earth do you do?

One thing that happened nationally, at the same time as VOW, was the founding of the Canadian Peace Research Institute by Norman Alcock. Feeling this same sense of urgency and despair he'd left his job in industry to found this organization. The Voice of Women in Canada put a tremendous effort into getting this Institute started—raising money for it, talking about it, helping to get publicity. In the beginning, there was a lot of media support—for example, Joan Marshall's program went all across the country. Well, I could go into more detail about the relationship between the Voice of Women and the Peace Research Institute but essentially what happened was that the Peace Research Institute decided that they really needed big money from the government and that to be known to have the support of Voice of Women was not going to help them. So they really discouraged us from continuing our efforts for them. Although we had made a special issue of being politically non-partisan, they perceived us as being too far left. That was the end of a beautiful relationship. Individuals within VOW still did support the Peace Research Institute but it was no longer a big issue for us to try to raise money for them.

**PEGGY:** At this time, too, we were looking at the United States to see the organizations that were beginning to come together. This was so hopeful to us and I can remember at one time we were supporting, financially, three different little fledgling organizations in the States which were struggling because the opposition there was even more intense than in Canada. There was SANE (Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy) and the Society for Social

Responsibility in Science as well as the Women's Strike for Peace Movement which came into being in the early '60's just after VOW.

MURIEL: People were ready for action. Dagmar Wilson, a writer of children's books, picked up the phone in Washington and began calling people, asking, "What are we going to do?" She was later investigated by the House on Un-American Activities Committee because they had brought somebody from the Japanese Peace Movement into the States to speak. That was a high spot in their history. When she came to be interrogated before the Committee, many Strike for Peace women came with her carrying flowers and bringing their children. A farce was made of the whole thing and it contributed to the end of that Committee.

In 1964, we got involved in the Baby Tooth Campaign. The children wore little buttons saying, "I gave my tooth to science." The idea was to find out if they were storing up Strontium 90 in their teeth. The data was to be used for a research project in the Faculty of Dentistry at the University of Toronto. It sounds so simple, so innocuous, and in most places, in Montreal for example, it was a tremendous success. Here, in Halifax, I tried to get one of the sororities, not within the universities but within the community, to take it on. It seemed like a logical thing for young women with children but they were afraid of it. It sounded disloyal, too far left, too much danger.

This is the type of thing we have had to cope with and it doesn't disappear. It comes and goes—the latest occasion was when we were in Ottawa in November, 1980. National VOW presented a brief to top civil servants in the Department of External Affairs. Afterwards we heard that the response to the brief from one of

these officials was to dismiss us as a bunch of Communist women!

Our peace campaign was fraught with difficulties from the very beginning. The Cuban Crisis came in the fall of '62, soon after Voice of Women was founded. We were very active then, in trying to keep Canada from following the United States in whatever they were doing.

PEGGY: That's right. The week following the Missile Crisis was an incredible experience. It was the most shattering one I have ever gone through. For two days I seriously debated whether I should send my children to school. I was really afraid to let them out of my sight.

My husband clearly remembers another incident. I'd gone to Ottawa as a VOW delegate to present our brief to External Affairs Minister Howard Green. David had been left at home with our four kids and he'd opened the door in the morning (Nov. 2, I guess it was). There was the local newspaper with the headline, "Halifax Woman Says Out of Nato." Under it was a picture of me talking to an Ottawa-based *Chronicle Herald* reporter.

Another interview at this time was headed: "Don't Let Children Become 'Pawns of War'," and it went on to say: "Mrs. Hope-Simpson suggested that Canada should withdraw from NATO because: 1. NATO failed to carry out the political functions it was intended to do; 2. It had become the executor of the deterrent; 3. It blocks progress in the United Nations; 4. It refused United Nations' intervention in Berlin. Withdrawing from NATO, she said, would free Canada to work with a country like Sweden on legal proceedings and peace keeping forces."<sup>2</sup>

Howard Green told a Halifax VOW group

later, privately, that it was VOW's strong representations during this crisis—including briefs, letters and telegrams—which caused the government delay of 48 hours in putting RCAF planes on the same NORAD alert as the US forces. NORAD authorities said they never did get permission from Ottawa to have the US nuclear-tipped interceptors move into the northern Canada bases.

**MURIEL:** One fantastic aspect of these activities was that we were suddenly plunged into the media with no experience. We had to do it and when you have to do something you learn pretty fast. You sit around and try to advise each other and try to pull everybody's thoughts together so that you can be somewhat consistent. Those were arduous discussions—it was very hard work.

**PEGGY:** We were constantly being driven by events. We were ridiculed too for only being "moralistic" and not being "realistic." In those days it was difficult to make an informed criticism of the nuclear arms race because there was such a lack of documentation and information. Everything was classified but we felt it was essential to have an informed public debate.

**MURIEL:** Let me tell you about our first action on the street. When I look back on it now it just astounds me how hard it was. We argued and talked and, in the end, we were planning a simple peace vigil for November 11. Just to stand silently with one sign that said, "Vigil for Peace." None of us had ever gone on the street before to do anything and merely to stand there was a frightening thought. We argued and, in the end, one of the English women who was a member of the group, said, "If you don't do it, I'm resigning." That made us pull up our socks and we went out and stood with this one ban-

ner. We had nothing to give anyone to read. We did it up on the side of Citadel Hill by the Sailor's Memorial where there were no people. It was Sunday, cold and windy. A few people joined us after Church and the motorcycle police were there.

We got publicity in the *Year End Review*, and, in an editorial in our newspaper, they mentioned it as one of the outstanding events of the year. But it was so difficult. We were very, very nervous. We realized that in the future we must have a printed statement to hand out.

That was the beginning, really, of trying to make November 11th a reminder of the need to put an end to war. We wanted to have an alternative to the military observance of Remembrance Day, to be a presence at the Cenotaph with banners and petitions for peace.

I want to mention also the role Voice of Women in Canada played in initiating International Co-operation Year. That idea grew out of an International Conference of Women for Peace which we organized. It was held in 1962 in Montreal, less than two years after VOW began. (We sent women to all sorts of international gatherings to talk to other women about peace and disarmament and that's been quite important all along.) From this conference came the idea of what we called World Peace Year but it was changed to International Co-operation Year. Some of the women from that Conference in Montreal met with Nehru, who was about to speak at the UN. He presented the idea to the UN General Assembly and it was adopted: 1965 was declared International Co-operation Year.

Our Centennial project was another International Conference of Women for Peace, again held in Montreal. You never have an international conference like that without a

crisis. This was in the middle of the Vietnam War which was a big, big aspect of the discussion and planning for action. But that very week we witnessed the Six Day War in the Middle East and the beginning of the Biafra crisis in Nigeria. Our delegate from Nigeria was from Biafra and it required high level intervention to get her safely home. In the end a person might think—"Here you are having a conference for peace but the world is falling apart all over. What's the point?" But the fact is, you either go ahead and do what you can or you have no bearing on what happens in the world.

Another first for VOW here in Halifax was the study we did of local discrimination against blacks. For working purposes we'd divided ourselves into two committees—the Human Rights Committee (at that time there was no special thought of a Women's Rights Committee) and the Peace Committee. The Human Rights Committee did a serious investigation on the employment of black people in Halifax. That investigation became the subject of a national CBC television programme. I remember we all made phone calls to businesses and industries and I phoned Simpson's personnel department and asked if they employed blacks. They said, "Oh, yes, we employ blacks." I said, "Well, I just never happened to have seen a black person on the floor." The answer was, "Well, you wouldn't want to buy a hat from a black woman." This was in 1962.

That study was an important development in the early days of the anti-discrimination movement in Nova Scotia.

VOW was also among the first, if not the first, to call for a moratorium on exploration of the North until they knew what the consequences would be. VOW has always had this feeling of the inter-relatedness of things.

Somehow we're always having to make these choices of how to separate what is strictly the Peace Movement and what is the Women's Movement, what is the Ecology Movement and what is the Human Rights Movement. I think these movements are alive and effective because more and more of us see these things as interrelated.

PEGGY: Yes, and we were really the first Nationalists. Before the Committee for an Independent Canada was formed, we were saying Canada must have its own defence policy, it must have its own foreign policy. That's still our position and we are still being attacked for this stance, accused of being disloyal, or perhaps only "unrealistic."

MURIEL: I think we're back in a situation where people are just as shocked when we say we should get out of NATO and NORAD as they were twenty years ago. From time to time there has been more public support for our position but now there's a danger of a right wing reaction obscuring our vision.

PEGGY: On the other hand, people now think that it's okay to be very critical of US leadership and policies. But they haven't got to that next stage of saying that we have to re-examine our treaties with the US. The government is being more forceful with the Fisheries Treaty and other bilateral environmental concerns such as pollution on the Great Lakes and clean air. But what about the Defence Production Sharing Arrangements which tie Canada into manufacturing component parts for US nuclear weapons systems like the MX Missile and Cruise Missile? That's our high technology communications industry. Because of these arrangements, we're part of the US Counterforce and First Strike policies. Our role in NATO and NORAD compromises our independence and our credibility in playing a

more constructive Middle Power role in the world.

MURIEL: There are a couple of other things that I really want to mention. During the Vietnam War we twice brought Vietnamese women to Canada in co-operation with the American Women's Peace Movement. We have never had a government grant to do anything, we just did it on our own, and raised thousands of dollars. We had to pay the fare of all the delegates travelling across Canada and back, and provide accommodation and speaking arrangements without any co-operation from the government. The first delegation came in 1969, the second in 1971. I travelled with them and the first time we went, in advance, to the RCMP in Ottawa to ask for protection for these women. We felt pretty sure the RCMP would be watching us, and we thought that if we had them on our side it would be a better idea. They were quite cold but they couldn't refuse. We knew there were plainclothesmen in the audience wherever the delegates spoke.

The Vietnamese women were fearful for their lives. So were we. When we went to lunch one day in Hart House in Toronto, they saw other Vietnamese there and their eyes were constantly searching for possible assassins. One day we took them for a walk along the beach in Vancouver and they were very distressed. They thought we were putting their lives in danger because they were right out in the open where everybody could see them and take a shot at them.

When we went to the border at Niagara Falls we were very careful with them. The meeting was held in a church and they were not taken close to the border at all. Hundreds of people walked across the International Bridge to the meeting. In Vancouver, too, hundreds of

people from the US Peace Movement came to meet them. We got into the really vigorous beginnings of the Women's Movement in the US Black women, who, at that time, hardly knew why they were there, knew these women were *their* sisters. This was a new experience for us. These women were claiming the Vietnamese as *their* sisters and we white women had to accept the special bond they felt.

These visits were a real contribution to our understanding of what was going on in Vietnam. The second time, Laotian women came with them too. One Laotian woman was the daughter of a man who had been a minister in the Coalition Cabinet that had been thrown out with the help of the CIA. Thousands of people were living in caves in the mountains as the only way to avoid the daily bombings. Children were dying of TB because they never saw the sun. They couldn't go out in daytime because of the danger of the raids. Our Laotian visitors took home a huge supply of vitamin pills for the children. This story wasn't being told. We probably need to bring a couple of Cambodians across right now to tell *their* story.

Another national VOW activity was the Train for Peace that went to Ottawa in 1962, just after the Cuban Crisis. We wanted to persuade the government not to let nuclear weapons come into Canada. It was the next year, on New Year's Eve, that Pearson snuck them into our country and they've been here ever since. Peggy was on that Peace Train.

PEGGY: Seventeen of us met with Pearson in his office (he was opposition leader at the time) but within two months of that meeting the Diefenbaker Government had fallen and Pearson was the Prime Minister. That meeting was incredible. We were with him at least an hour and a half and we argued with him over this question of the acquisition of nuclear

weapons. Thérèse Casgrain was there. I can remember personally saying to Pearson as we were leaving, "Mr. Pearson if you accept these nuclear weapons, you will never be able to speak about it to your grandchildren."

**MURIEL:** Then he went off to New York for a week of meditation on whether he should bring them in or not. And, after a week in New York City, he decided he should.

But to go back to the Peace Train. Four hundred VOWs gathered in Montreal and hired a special train. In Ottawa they marched to the Parliament Buildings where, in the Railroad Room, they were to meet with members of the Cabinet. More than half the women were French speaking, from in and near Montreal, and the Government sent a man who couldn't speak French.

**PEGGY:** Howard Green met with us, a very nice guy, but he couldn't speak French. There was a real rumpus about it and the women at the back of the room just said, "Speak French." It was a ridiculous situation because there was Thérèse Casgrain acting as translator. Howard Green would say something, she would translate it for the French women, the French women would reply, and she would translate back to the Minister. This went on until finally the French women just roared and said, "We demand a French-speaking minister!" Poor Howard Green hustled out through the big beige door there on the platform, saying, "I will get the Minister of Transport, he's bilingual." "Yes," they said, "we will need a Minister of Transport to transport these policies!"

**MURIEL:** I think VOW was one of the first organizations that tried to be bilingual, nationally, and we made a valiant effort but there were no government grants for simulta-

neous translations at national meetings. The francophones wore themselves out. They were terrific, their ideas were good and they made a big contribution. In addition, they had to translate all our national press releases, resolutions and briefs as well as look after the publicity for the Quebec VOW. They worked hard. For that reason and because they got involved with their own nationalist struggle, they dropped out. Today there are very few francophone women in Quebec still in VOW.

But that reminds me—on the Peace Train, in 1962, an important encounter took place. Solange Chaput-Rolland, one of the founders of Voice of Women, and now a member of the Quebec legislature, was very depressed by the fact that the Department of External Affairs had made no preparations to speak with a large francophone delegation in French. She happened to sit beside Gwethalyn Graham, author of the best-selling novel, *Earth and High Heaven* (1944). They talked rather bitterly about this experience and, before they got back to Montreal, they had decided to write a book together. It would be a dialogue, Gwethalyn writing her chapters in English, Solange hers in French. Published simultaneously in French and English in 1963, *Dear Enemies* was an early and important exposure of the deep-rooted problem. One of the things the Peace Train demonstrates is the constant communication between local and national levels of VOW. In Halifax we carried on the Human Rights programme and we had a study group for quite some time. *Speak Truth to Power*, a Quaker publication (1961), was used as one of our basic resources.

**PEGGY:** *Speak Truth to Power*, I believe, has had a very profound effect on our central theme of non-violence as a way of life. It has permeated a lot of social policy strategies such as mediation, conciliation, labor relations and

the idea of concensus which is very, very much part of Quaker tradition.

**MURIEL:** VOW has been much more organized than it is at present. For example, in the early 1960s, we sent delegations to the premiers of all the provinces trying to get their support: first, for the idea of International Cooperation Year; second, for not bringing nuclear weapons into Canada; third, for stopping atmospheric testing. And we have often, over time, sent similar delegations to our Members of Parliament and high-ranking government officials.

We've also pioneered strategies for reaching all sorts of people. One example is using the malls on Mother's Day to inform more women of our position. Another was the way we responded to the Christmas bombings of Hanoi, 1972. Everybody was in the middle of getting ready for Christmas but we knew we had to do something. This is the way life pushes you.

Anyhow, we called people together and we went down to the American Consulate which was in the Bank of Nova Scotia Building on the sixth floor. We took little symbolic packages of medicine, food and clothing. We wanted to say to the Americans—this is what you should be dropping on Hanoi. There were about twenty of us who went up to the sixth floor with television cameras. The Consul was profoundly uneasy. We had to put the packages on the opposite side of the desk from him because he was really very nervous. But it was a peaceful protest.

**PEGGY:** The American women couldn't send anything to the enemy country but they used to send money and medical supplies to Toronto for the knitting programme which Lil Green organized.

**MURIEL:** She is an employee of the Electrical Workers' Union and a very politicized lady. She had all kinds of women knitting for Vietnam and she sent them a *Newsletter* regularly about what was going on there.

**PEGGY:** I'll never forget those little baby garments the women knitted. They were all either grey or navy blue—dark colours so they wouldn't show up during the raids.

**MURIEL:** I remember another national action involving the little toy Japanese umbrellas that children have as favours at parties. We typed little notes to attach to their handles and we bought lots and lots of those and handed them to people on the street. I remember just walking up Spring Garden Road handing out this little umbrella and the message was: The nuclear umbrella is as much use to you as this would be in case of a nuclear attack. This action went on all across Canada. We don't know—it may have contributed something to the decision to stop atomic testing in the atmosphere.

Aside from these crises actions, we continued to initiate peace actions on November 11th, International Women's Day and Hiroshima Day.

Locally we always place a float in the Halifax Natal Day Parade which is also a big day for the military. I've met people who said they remembered our truck with flowers and children and a large Nuclear Disarmament symbol as the most memorable statement in the whole parade.

We have continued to hold educational meetings and to publish a newsletter with information not to be found in our daily paper. It's small things like this that have a cumulative effect.

I feel we're on the verge of a re-vitalization of VOW. With the Reagan government in power, many of us have the same sense of urgency we felt during the late '50s and early '60s. We need many more new and active members.

PEGGY: And we need support for the world wide Women's Petition for Peace. (See insert) on International Women's Day, 1981. VOW Nova Scotia is launching it in Canada.

We need women to take the petition to every women's group in Canada. It's important that women speak up clearly for life. That is realism!

#### NOTES

1. See Kay MacPherson and Meg Sears, "The Voice of Women: a History", in *Women in the Canadian Mosaic* ed. Gwen Matheson (Toronto: Peter Martin, 1976).
2. *The Chronicle-Herald*, 2 November, 1962.