

Canadian Women's Archives

CANADIAN WOMEN'S ARCHIVES is a regular feature of Atlantis and is designed to give a voice to Canadian women who, in the past, have had something to say about the role and condition of women. Diaries, letters, oral history and government documents are just a few of the sources that might usefully be tapped to enhance our understanding of women's history. The Editors of Atlantis urge readers to search attics, archives and ashcans for such material and submit it for publication.



Towards a Canadian Feminist Party

On February 11, 1979, a group of women met in Hart House on the University of Toronto Campus to discuss the founding of a women's political party. After several months of discussion and planning, the Feminist Party of Canada was launched at a public meeting in Toronto on June 10th. Laura Sabia, Angela Miles and Mary O'Brien spoke to those attending the historic event. The rationale for another political party is included in the following statements, "Towards a Canadian Feminist Party" published in April 1979 and "The Feminist Party of Canada: Why Now?" which appeared in June. Those interested in joining the party, receiving party literature or just seeking more information should write to:

*Feminist Party of Canada
Box 5717, Station A
Toronto.*

TOWARDS A CANADIAN FEMINIST PARTY

For a hundred years Canadian women have looked at their position in society and found it lacking. And for a hundred years they have been organizing themselves in various attempts to make changes, to correct the imbalance.

Women's struggle for political representation first took the form of securing the vote, for even this most fundamental of political rights had been denied them. They felt that once they had the chance to elect representatives and to sit as Members of Parliament themselves, they would become fully participating members of the political community. Subsequent history has shown that they were over optimistic.

Since that time, women have indeed increased their attempts to become elected representatives--the number of women seeking federal office rose from 4, in 1921, to 137 in 1974. But the number of women who won seats in those 53 years rose only from one to nine. The dismal prognosis is that, at this rate, we will need another 842 years to achieve equal representation at the federal level.

At the party level, women do the routine chores that political parties rely on, but we are not, generally, called on to be party decision-makers, and we are not given active encouragement to become candidates ourselves. Under our democratic system, elected representatives, regardless of their gender, are responsible to all their

constituents. Yet the record shows that they have regularly failed to respond in an adequate fashion to those concerns which determine women's lives--that is, the lives of more than half of those they are elected to serve. One is drawn to the conclusion that issues affecting a large percentage of the population are given short shrift if that large percentage happens to consist of women.

Government is affecting all our lives to an ever-increasing degree. And this broadening of powers brings with it the possibility of real threat to our way of life unless it is accompanied by a genuine sense of moral responsibility to all those who are being represented. It is that moral sense that has been missing from politics.

It is the aim of those who are now working towards creating a feminist party that women's full participation in the political arena will bring a new perspective and a new direction to government in general. For the feminist perspective is an all-encompassing view of the world--life becomes a multifaceted whole, no single facet of which can be ignored or treated as separate. Thus politics, in the feminist view, is seen not as a business set apart from life as it is lived, but rather as an integral part of our communal existence, a very necessary forum for the public discussion of the concerns that so intimately affect our lives and the tenor of our society.

The vision women will contribute to politics is that same vision we have always been depended on to bring to our more traditional spheres. In the family we have provided a moral base; in the wider world we have consistently struggled to humanize our environment--humanize it too for the men who share it with us--whether it be the neighbourhood, the workplace, or any of the many other institutions which structure our communal lives.

Traditionally, politics has not been one of the areas defined by society as the sphere of women, nor have women's interests been seriously articulated there. Traditionally, so-called women's interests have been consigned to so-called women's realm, and the designation has tended to be a derogatory one. But although the role that women play in society has historically been imposed on us and defined for us, it has in effect made us the custodians of those concerns that are most fundamental to a functioning society. Moral values, social relationships--women have taken historic responsibility for all that which renders communities more fully human. If politics is the process through which society safeguards the humanity of its members, then women belong in politics; and if politics is not such a process, then clearly women are needed to make it so.

The political process as it is now practised is not based on human or moral considerations, but on values

which, at best, are not conducive to the creative resolution of the problems our country faces. Life, to fulfill its highest potential, depends on integration, on creativity, and politics must be redefined to incorporate these qualities.

A change is in order. A political party with a feminist perspective can be both the focus and the vehicle for that change.

APRIL 1979

THE FEMINIST PARTY OF CANADA: WHY NOW?

1. Feminism has been recognized by thoughtful political theorists as a major, if not the major political movement in the world today.
2. The current phase of feminism with its reclamation of our foremothers' work and our own analysis and vision has wrought fundamental changes in our personal, subjective lives as well as in our lives as historical agents. We now face the new political challenge of developing many forms of collective self-organization which can begin to translate this new consciousness into a transformed society and existence.
3. Up to now the Women's Movement in Canada, in its relation to government, has acted as a prod and irritant: by means of caucuses, coalitions, committees; writing briefs, making presentations, demonstrating, electing a few women--all this in a context of male dominated and defined politics.
4. Some of this political action has brought us out of obscurity into relative prominence, but only as recipients rather than active determinors of our public reality; never with our own sensibility, language and priorities.
5. Some of our reticence has been due to the hope that our voice could be heard and our concerns attended to by the established political parties. But we see that pressure politics, lobbying and the like, have at best made few significant changes in the lives of most women. Women constitute the majority of the poor, the majority of the unemployed, unpensioned and the majority of the unorganized in labour. Women are still the physically and mentally battered in Canada.
6. While it is true that some of the established parties, some of the time, do recognize women's situation and needs, they do so on their terms, in their language and cate-

gories, on their time and for their own reasons.

7. We must remember that whatever little consideration we do get from male dominated government and parties is due to the effort, energy and spirit of the Women's Movement in Canada. It is the Women's Movement in the shape of services to women, women's collectives, women's centres, coalitions of women's groups, etc. that maintains our visibility and pressures the government to sustain the paltry assistance it gives to women's programmes and issues. It is the ceaseless work and frequently life-sapping dedication of our sisters which guard the very few, hard won advances we have made in Canada.
8. A consequence of constant vigilance is often the loss of a consciously articulated vision. So much toil goes into preservation and resistance to erosion that we in the Women's Movement have had on occasion to lay aside our feminist vision as an informing principle in our lives and movement work.
9. We have until now been in the servants' quarters of established political life. When we move upstairs to the main house, it will not be merely to fill the same chairs, but to rearrange and transform the entire establishment.

10. Because the Feminist Party of Canada is an integrated segment of the Women's Movement, our policy, process and structure will be an expression of that movement. In traditional political terms, our "policy advisors" will be from the Women's Movement and our policy rooted in that experience and research.

Members of the FPC will continue to participate in existing women's groups, thereby enriching and extending our reach. Because we are part of a deep and widespread social movement, we (unlike existing parties who emerge only at election time) will be an ever-present reality. Feminist education will be at the very heart of our work: through study groups, consciousness raising groups, issues discussion groups. We envisage our educational component as neighbourhood based projects which will deepen and strengthen our political development. As the FPC, we can carry on the struggle as well as shape new policy and structure. We can, as has been said about our movement, "change society and reinvent life."

JUNE 1979