

**National Association
of Women and the Law**



**Association nationale
de la femme et du droit**

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A Mandate of Equality

**Women and Electoral Reform:
Pursuing a Feminist
Policy Agenda in Canada**

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Part I: Setting the Context

Introduction

The National Association of Women and the Law (NAWL) is a not-for-profit, feminist organization that represents a nationwide membership of lawyers, law students, academics and other individuals who share a commitment to gender equality. Since 1974, NAWL has been promoting women's equality through legal research, advocacy, reform and public education.

Pursuing electoral reform is an important issue for equality-seeking women in Canada, and is the main focus of the following paper. The limitations of the current First Past the Post (FPP) electoral structure will be examined from the perspective of the Canadian women's movement and its policy priorities. Furthermore, three mechanisms for political change will be investigated according to the ability for elected representatives to pursue a feminist policy agenda, including the establishment of a national Feminist Party, the implementation of gender parity within the existing political parties, and the introduction of proportional representation. The possibility of fully realizing a women's equality agenda within the federal legislature is doubtful without a means by which increased numbers of feminist women are elected to the Canadian Parliament, and are thereby sanctioned to participate in public policy debates on the basis of their feminist principles, regardless of party.

Why Now?

In 2000, women in Canada mobilized in many ways for the World March of Women to End Poverty and Violence against Women. Across the country and around the globe, women raised awareness about the poverty and violence they experience, and made concrete demands to governments to alleviate these realities. The federal government adopted very few of the policy measures advocated by thousands of women across the country despite being one of the largest mobilizations of women in Canada in recent years. Once again, the philosophical divide between a legislative agenda based on neo-liberal economic policies and the substantive equality needs of women proved as large as ever.

The experience of mobilizing for the World March of Women in Canada has created an impetus for individuals and organizations to reflect upon the political strategies that women's movements are using to advocate change. The lack of action in response to the World March of Women of key decision-makers and elected representatives at the bureaucratic and Parliamentary levels has highlighted the contemporary limitations of Canadian feminist organizing.

While many of the achievements of second-wave feminism in Canada relied upon women successfully pressuring multiple access points within the legislative, bureaucratic and judicial structures of the federal state, the boundaries of legitimized political discussion have since shifted to exclude many equality-seeking women and their policy priorities. The universe of political discourse, which "filters and delineates political activity of all kinds", has changed, thereby marginalizing the collective identity of women and the accompanying set of demands that the emergence of Canadian feminist consciousness had forged (Jensen 1987). Over the course of the National Women's Lobby coordinated by the Canadian Women's March Committee, federal ministers, lead departmental bureaucrats on gender equality as well as elected representatives from an array of political parties (with the exception of the regionally-based Bloc Québécois) all had difficulty accommodating the vision of women's equality advanced by the Canadian and Québec women's movements.

This reality is a matter of both ideological and structural conflict. Those occupying positions of power in government and in Parliament no longer regard the women's movement as a significant political threat. At the same time, many of the policies and programs put forth by national feminist organizations are at odds with the re-orientation of most governments in North America towards enhancing the state's role as a primary apparatus for market economies. Women cannot rely as heavily on the possibility of reaching shared understandings of women's equality with federal, and in many cases, provincial governments as a means to achieving feminist policy goals. For example, our federal government has actively disregarded previous national and international commitments in regards to the issue of pay equity made in the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and at the United Nations. This is being done despite the increased numbers of women in Parliament, many of whom are knowledgeable of and have been acquainted with feminist struggles in the past. Given this scenario, it is very unlikely that the rich

legacy and ongoing practices of activism by diverse communities of feminist women will translate into concrete action without a direct challenge to our political system.

In the new context of corporate-led globalization and the shifting cultural terrain that is facilitating it, existing formal political structures at the federal level are woefully inadequate to meet the realities of the majority of women in this country. Women are in need of political strategies that will enable them to take positive action on public policy matters that are fundamental to their civic, social and economic equality. This document will address one of the mechanisms feminists and other social justice advocates are currently revisiting, namely electoral reform. After years of thinking about how to accommodate women into conventional political bodies, many women are now asking how the system can be reformed to better capture women's civic engagement and empower elected women to pursue their goals for a just and egalitarian society.

Women and the State

The gap between women's movements and the federal government can be in part attributed to the slow dissolution of the welfare state, despite the commitment of the dominant Canadian women's movement to its survival. Many second-wave feminists advanced women's equality by arguing for a re-visioning and broadening of the state's mandate, in order to promote equality through the public and private spheres. After the release of the federal report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in 1972 (for which women had heavily mobilized), a renewed national women's movement solidified around implementing the Commission's recommendations. The National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC), with chapters across the country, was founded to coordinate and pressure the federal government to take action (Findlay 1987). Other national organizations such as NAWL were also established with the goal of improving women's legal status and rights. This precipitated an array of victories, including significant reforms to marriage and property law, the inclusion of an equality clause in the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and an increased awareness and penalties for the perpetrators of violence against women. As well, the recognition of the inherent right of Aboriginal women to maintain their status regardless of who they married, the adoption

of employment equity legislation for the public service and the decriminalization of abortion in order to enhance women's reproductive choice were also successes for the Canadian women's movement (Dobrowsky 2000; Canadian Women's March Committee 2000).

In tandem with these advancements, successive federal governments began pursuing a neo-liberal economic agenda, which has effectively compromised the scope of the welfare state. In particular, they began to retreat from their historic role of facilitating the delivery of public services in the post-war economy through financial transfers to provincial governments.

In 1978, the Trudeau government placed a cap on the amount allocated to provinces for health, education and social services assistance, regardless of the costs provinces and territories incurred for the provision of these programs. This trend continued throughout the 1980s with the election of a Conservative government, and culminated with the elimination of the Canada Assistance Plan by the Chrétien Liberals in 1996. This latter action cemented the current government's commitment to devolve the bulk of responsibility for programs and services to the provinces and territories. Over time, the reduction in fiscal support from the federal government has slowly eroded the provinces' and territories' ability to offer comprehensive social programs which are delivered across regions, and upon which many women and their families rely. These measures have resulted in fewer and less reliable public services, inadequate income security and Canadians' greater economic vulnerability to market trends. Countless women have been left to assume more care-taking responsibilities in the private sphere and expend already scarce financial resources on the provision of basic services for themselves and their families (Canadian Women's March Committee 2000). In effect, the welfare state has been 'hollowed out:

The current era of re-structuring involves a complex displacement of state power and the political terrain once occupied by the welfare state. While the emerging neo-liberal state maintains all the trappings of democracy and sovereignty, it nonetheless rests on impositional claims that prioritize the market over politics, limit the terrain of governmental intervention and valorize the private over the public (Brodie 1988: 30).

Subsequently, many of the early successes of the second-wave of feminism have come to be regarded as highly symbolic in nature (Brodie 1998). In the absence of the federal government's willingness to play a lead role in funding and regulating social programs and policies which

directly address women's lives, the equality for which women have worked so hard remains elusive. Marginalized groups of women, including Aboriginal women, women of colour, women with disabilities and low-income women, suffer the brunt of these changes as a result of multiple oppressions.

Advancing a Women's National Policy Agenda

During the World March of Women, women and women's organizations in Canada took the opportunity to reiterate the vital and active role governments can play in the promotion of women's equality. The Canadian Women's March Committee, which coordinated the development of a national policy agenda, identified 68 demands directed to the federal government. These demands included the modifications to social and economic policies, human rights codes, labour law, criminal law, immigration and family law and a host of other policy areas. Many were measures that would specifically benefit Aboriginal women, women of colour, women with disabilities, and lesbians, in the hope of ameliorating the specific manifestations of systemic and intentional discrimination that compound women's inequality. Other recommendations focused upon increasing state expenditures for feminist analysis and mobilization efforts, increased resources for the provision of independent services delivered by women's groups, an expansion of public services and the adoption of legislative policies that address the multiple needs of women as defined by their age, ability, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and citizenship status (Canadian Women's March Committee 2000).

While having mounted a broadly based national campaign, the women's movements in Canada, and to some degree in Québec as well, quickly realized that they have little political sway when arguing for an enhanced role of the state. The ideology of the market, the paradigm of 'scarce resources', and a focus on measurable outcomes, which successive federal and provincial governments have used to justify its slow withdrawal from the public sphere, have marginalized feminist critiques of the state that do not adhere to the promotion of a 'lean citizenship' in which it is individuals and families who must assume primary, if not sole responsibility for securing the socio-economic well-being of themselves and their loved ones (Mooers 1999).

The limited ideological framework, in which the federal government now functions, has also meant that traditional state actors, which many feminists have relied upon, are ill-positioned to influence key policy choices, particularly economically driven ones:

In a retreat to the more limited form of representation that has traditionally characterized policy making in Canada, the government is abandoning many of the special measures created in the 1970s to reflect women's interests in the state bureaucracy and limiting its consultations to carefully selected 'partners'. The social movements that were courted in the 1960s and 1970s are now considered to be a threat to our democratic system (Findlay 1998: p. 294).

Even the federal government's adoption of gender-based analysis guidelines in 1995 has been haphazardly implemented throughout departments. Where actual units have been established, they have often been marginalized and unable to wield much influence. In the course of the emergence of a neo-liberal, laissez-faire framework by which most public policy choices are now understood and measured, women's movements have been de-legitimized as actors vested in the public good. In a shift away from a national vision and commitment to an active, interventionist state based upon a commitment to the welfare of all of its constituents, the federal government has effectively rendered superfluous equality-seeking women's investment in the state:

These macro-economic perspectives have placed an onerous burden on marginalized economic actors, especially women. The capacity for the women's movement to reverse these trends has been diminished by the shrinkage and displacement of the political spaces created by the welfare state. The discourse of "restructuring" attempts to both depoliticize the market by representing it as natural and self-regulating and to close off spaces for political negotiation (Brodie 1998: 29).

This very reality confronted equality-seeking women during the World March of Women. Although having offered a coherent critique of economic and social policy choices based upon under-developed notions of equality which frequently collide with domestic and international commitments to women's equality, the ideological and political frameworks within which federal policy-makers now act is such that the advancement of this particular feminist policy agenda was indeed daunting.

Part II: Women and Political Representation

Women may have gained a toehold in the House of Commons, the Senate, the Privy Council and the executive ranks of political parties, but they have not as yet established a secure base from which to attain something approximating sex parity, especially in the country's most representative institution (Arscott 1995: pp. 63).

The effective de-politicization of many of the key issues identified by women's movements in Canada is precisely why some equality-seeking women are now turning their attention to one of the only remaining, potentially responsive political bodies to which women are entitled democratic access, Parliament. The 'closing down' of other spaces at the state level leave women little choice but to re-assess lobbying strategies and question whether they would have greater influence working directly within national and provincial/territorial legislatures. It is through the election of Members of Parliament (MP), that Canadians are given some opportunity to choose the dominant policy framework.

The consideration of electoral bodies as sites of women's organizing, however, must take into account the mixed results that have flowed from electing women to Parliament since the rise of second-wave feminism in Canada. The complexities of representation within the House of Commons are such that many women have not been able to consistently exert a feminist analysis given the constraints of political parties. This is particularly true when considering the policy-making processes within the governing party and given the re-orientation of Canada's economic policies since 1988 to one of corporate-led, free trade. The challenges confronted by feminist women in Parliament have been exacerbated by the fact that there is not yet a critical mass of female MPs in the House of Commons. As a result, addressing women's representational realities must include a systematic examination of the electoral processes by which women are selected for Parliament and the possibilities for coordination amongst equality-seeking women of all parties in the House of Commons.

Women in the House

The increase in the numbers of women in the House of Commons compared to 20 years ago has not translated into the adoption of more progressive policies to improve women's lives. In fact,

though by virtue of their numbers, women have become somewhat more visible in the House (they now constitute 20.6 per cent of all MPs) and are fulfilling significant roles as Parliamentary committee chairs, Opposition critics and ministers, the socio-economic status of the majority of women across the country has actually deteriorated (Canadian Research Institute on the Advancement of Women 2000). Furthermore, Canadian feminist Lisa Young has argued that in many cases, the recruitment of high profile women by the dominant political parties record has helped to conceal the gravity of some key policy choices and their impact upon women:

[M]ainstream political parties can avoid and have avoided hard programmatic commitments to the women's movement by recruiting highly visible and like-minded women. The recruitment of these women cannot translate into changes in public policy because parties, particularly those pursuing policy agendas inspired by neo-conservatism, are unwilling to address the structural sources of women's oppression (Young 1997: p. 85)

Examinations of equality-seeking MPs influence over the national legislative agenda in Canada on the basis of their feminist viewpoints has revealed the Canadian parliamentary system's severe limitations. Party discipline and its rigid structure sharply curtails an elected representative's ability to do more than represent her/his party's platforms, or one's region of origin (Young 2000). The promotion of outside interests, particularly feminist in nature, enjoys little room in most parties, especially when the majority of those elected have been white, male and middle class, regardless of their region of origin. Though particular party platforms have incorporated a few feminist demands, the declining commitment of governing parties over the past 20 years to work with equality-seeking organizations have created significant obstacles to the sustained pursuit of a coherent program for women's equality (Young 1997; Young 2000). This remains the case despite the increased presence of more women in the House of Commons.

At the founding convention of NAC, delegates committed themselves to "seek out women candidates who will stress women's priority issues at all levels of government" (as quoted in Young 2000: p. 60). Conscious that this would not be an easy task on its own, delegates also advocated for the formation of women's caucuses within parties, and recommended changes to electoral finance regulations, including increased levels of public funding for candidates to counter the disadvantages that many women candidates faced due to a lack of financial resources. Thirty years later, women's interest and success in presenting themselves at candidate nomination meetings remains a significant barrier to the election of women. The *Royal*

Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing in 1991 also recognized the barriers women confronted at the local riding level, and suggested a series of measures to address the financial costs of running for nomination (Lortie 1991). These included placing spending limits on nomination campaigns, permitting nomination donations to be eligible for tax credits and making child-care expenses an allowable tax deduction for candidates. No government in power since the release of this report has chosen to incorporate these measures into Canada's *Election Act*. Parties have been equally reticent to self-impose them, though in recent years, the New Democratic Party, the Progressive Conservative Party and the Liberal Party have all established on-going trusts which offer some support to women's candidates who have won their local riding nomination.

Despite the fact that these measures attempt to address the often-prohibitive costs of running for nomination and election, and facilitate greater participation levels, these measures are gravely insufficient. A feminist political project focused on electoral reform must examine the ways in which women and other marginalized groups are alienated from the current electoral system and its respective political culture (Vickers 1997). Many feminist women argue that efforts to increase and reshape women's participation in the current system without also examining the quality and nature of this participation may serve to heighten women's profile, but little else:

Unless the public agenda is gradually reshaped under a new set of pressures, an increase in the number of female MPs in itself serves no useful purpose other than a symbolic one. And important and promising though symbolic change can be, symbolism without real change can create false expectations that lead to disappointment, disaffection and even rejection of the political system. Making politics more responsive to the concerns of women is of greater lasting importance than making more women fit into the partisan corsets used by the political parties to mould women aspirants to public office in the image of political womanhood (Arscott 1995: p. 73).

Decades after women obtained the right to vote, hoping to transform politics, it is time to acknowledge how our current political structure is incapable of serving the multiplicity of voices of a 21st century, multicultural Canada - voices it was not designed to accommodate in 1867. The sustained absence of women and other minority groups from elected office over centuries demonstrates the degree to which not only the needs of these constituencies but the institutions themselves must be scrutinized. The rich legacy and ongoing practices of activism by diverse communities of women is a testimony to their commitment to a wide array of political processes

at the local, national and international levels. Many feminists, after decades of thinking about how to accommodate women into current political structures are now asking how the system can be reformed to better capture women's civic engagement and enable women to pursue their goals for a just, egalitarian society (Vickers 1997; Philips 1993; Arscott 1995).

Critical Mass

Many progressive women from within and outside Parliament believe that without a critical mass of elected women, feminist women and policies will continue to be subsumed by political structures and policy agendas that do not favour women's equality. Indeed, research on the effects of women's heightened participation in other countries supports this analysis. Legislative assemblies in Scandinavian countries have demonstrated that meaningful shifts in policy are not likely to occur until women are represented well above the 20 per cent mark. Though there is no consensus on a 'magic' number for women, the United Nations has identified 30 per cent as constituting critical mass for women (Cheema 1999). In its survey of women's participation in legislatures around the world, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) found that until systematic efforts are made to restructure electoral systems so as to intentionally increase women's political participation, critical mass is seldom achieved (International IDEA Web site 2001). Moreover, IDEA has concluded that a reformed electoral system is a more achievable goal: "Changing a country's electoral system often represents a far more realistic goal to work towards than dramatically changing the culture's view of women" (Ibid).

The policy results of political systems in which women constitute a significant percentage of the legislature's representatives are promising. Though few thorough reviews exist, a study of Parliamentarians in Norway revealed that positive changes towards women's equality have occurred in three aspects of political life since women's representation was increased (as a result of the application of a quota system) in the mid-1980s. First, equality-seeking women are increasingly able to influence debate on the impact of particular policy initiatives on women within their own parties, though women legislators were quick to point out that the varying ideological orientations of parties meant that women did not always arrive at the same

conclusions on issues of relevance to women. Secondly, male and female politicians alike noted that the political culture within parties is slowly evolving by virtue of the fact that fewer women representatives are less likely to engage in antagonistic styles of debating and instead often aim to foster an atmosphere of constructive dialogue. Finally, with more women in the legislature who favour feminist points of view, female politicians have had, on occasion, the opportunity to establish coalitions and alliances *across party lines* on public policy matters of pertinence to women.

Though these instances of collaboration have been rare, they illuminate how women are able to use their collective power to influence the political process in favour of women. As a result, women's increased presence has solidified a 'mandate of difference' for most of the women Parliamentarians who have pursued it. As principle investigator Bystydzienski put it: "By the early 1990s, the idea that women in politics made a difference had been/become institutionalized; women and men politicians alike had come to accept the 'rhetoric of difference' or the notion that women had their own political mandate" (Bystydzienski 1995: 54).

In Canada, elected women's ability to effectively assert such a 'mandate of difference' or, perhaps more to the point, a 'mandate of equality' is at the heart of feminist debates about the viability of a renewed women's electoral project. In an era when neo-liberal policies are becoming the dominant party framework, the opportunity for women from across the political spectrum to claim a legitimate voice while asserting a feminist analysis, and their ability to strategically use that voice collectively *within* and outside of Parliament is of utmost importance to the future of women's equality. Though there are few instances of such collaboration at the federal level in Canada, the existence of a women's all-party Parliamentary caucus between the years 1990- 1993 was a result of an identified need by female MPs to respond to some of the more negative aspects of Parliamentary life on the Hill (Young 1997: p. 90).

Coincidentally, it is interesting to note that during this same period, a sub-committee on the Status of Women formed and began its work in 1989. As a sub-committee of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health and Welfare, Social Affairs, Seniors and the Status of Women, it was comprised of three Progressive Conservative members, one Liberal and one New

Democrat, and successfully produced an unanimous report on the problem of violence against women. Unanimous reports are a highly unusual phenomenon given that support for Committee reports is typically partisan in nature and differs amongst governing and opposition parties. The report attributed women's experiences of violence to their economic and social inequality and made a variety of recommendations to remedy systemic barriers to women's participation in the work place and public life (Ibid). Ensuing controversy around the lukewarm reception of the report by the main committee precipitated Prime Minister Brian Mulroney's intervention on the matter in order to declare the establishment of a national task force on the issue. This example, while not replicated since, is an instance whereby self-identified feminist women, present in sufficient numbers, were able to advance feminist policy goals by explicitly cooperating with one another and challenging the conventions of Parliamentary committee behaviour. In exploring the implications of such collaboration by elected women, Young concluded that:

[The] electoral project goes beyond a call for employment equity in the 'hiring' of politicians. Rather, it calls for the election of women as women. Embedded within the project is the assumption that the election of women will lead to substantive changes in the nature of political institutions and the content of public policy. Because of this assumed linkage between representation in form or in numbers, and representation in content, or in substance, there is an expectation that women, once elected, will act in the interests of women, including working within the political system to open the political process to other women, serving as points of access for women's groups, introducing 'private' issues on to the public agenda and bringing the multiplicity of women's perspectives into the policy debate (Young 1997: 89).

Part III: Options for Change

The representational realities of equality-seeking women are an important vantage point from which to explore the weaknesses of our federal political institution, and the demands for changes to the federal electoral system in Canada. Around the world, initiatives to increase women's representation have shared one aspect: they have recognized gender as relevant to electoral processes. In doing so, they acknowledge that dominant groups exist, and that these groups are disproportionately advantaged in regularly achieving political power, to the exclusion of other groups. "The process of liberal-democratic recruitment, left unregulated, tends to favour the representation of the socially advantaged. The less powerful need politics to redress their

inequality, but their inequality prevents them from achieving significant measure of political power.”(Brodie 1991: 9). This approach broadens the notion of representation based upon geographic or partisan lines, to one that includes other aspects of an elected member’s identity, including socio-cultural and economic locations. It also enables Canadians to shape a Parliament in which the voices and perspectives of members of multiple groups may be quite distinct from the ranks of white upper-middle class men who currently dominate the Parliament. This section will address the viability of three strategies that may be utilized by equality-seeking women whose aims are to increase the presence of feminist women in Parliament.

Feminist Party

One way that feminist women in Canada have attempted to strategically contribute to the current formal political system is through the creation of feminist political action groups and, in at least one instance, the establishment of a feminist party. In January 1972, activists from the peace group Voice of Women and the Ontario Committee of the Status of Women along with many other women, assisted in the formation of the Women for Political Action (WPA) (Young 1998). They did so with the intention of raising awareness about the traditional parties’ mediocre commitment to recruit more women for election. They also presented two candidates as independents in Toronto ridings. The experience of running election campaigns without the institutional support afforded to those affiliated with the national parties was very challenging, and subsequent to the 1972 federal election, the WPA decided to divert its attention to working within the party system. In 1979, feminist women attempted to organize the first Feminist Party of the second-wave women’s movement. The party, a coalition of radical and more pragmatic feminists, did not survive very long as it was very difficult for participating women to come to agreement on both the policy priorities and strategy for the future of the party.

At the same time, women were also organizing within NAC and gaining considerable momentum. From its inception in 1972, NAC increasingly gained political influence well into the early 1990s. Until then, NAC’s organizational structure was designed to facilitate the political participation of women through its lobbying strategies and application of pressure on key decision-makers via the Canadian women’s movement. Orientation materials for newly appointed and elected members of NAC throughout the 1980s instructed women to think of their

roles as that of unofficially 'elected' representatives for women across the country. NAC's numerous successes, including its role in ensuring two sexual equality clauses in the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* which was enshrined in 1982, the organization of a National Leader's Debate on women's issues during the 1984 federal election and its heavy involvement in mobilizing women around the negotiations of the Meech Lake Agreement and Charlottetown Accord were such that for many years, the political energy of many feminist movements outside of Parliament was devoted to activities related to NAC-led struggles. As a result, the impetus to form a feminist political party did not arise again in the same fashion.

In addition, during the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, the three national parties at the time, the Progressive Conservatives, Liberal Party and NDP, were being forced to take action in response to the new focus on women's equality generated by the recommendations of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women. To address the demands for inclusiveness, parties began to hire women's organizers to recruit and retain women candidates as well as incorporate some aspects of feminist analysis into their policy platforms. As a result, until 1993, all three parties made concrete gains, particularly the NDP, in increasing the number of women candidates (two of these parties went so far as to elect women as leaders) and adopting elements of a feminist policy agenda into their own platforms. Though all three parties fluctuated in their commitment to feminist goals, they were compelled to pay some attention to the demands for women's equality, if only for appearance sake alone.

The degree to which the parties now in Parliament are responsive to feminism has declined substantially in the last decade. With the election of highly regionalized parties in the 1993 and 1997 federal elections to the House of Commons, the balance of power has shifted (Young 2000). The election of the Bloc Québécois as Official Opposition in 1993 and the rise of the Reform Party in 1997 facilitated the introduction of a new party system within the Canadian Parliament. This new party system is defined by more parties in the House (five instead of three) for which members of four of the five are from only one or two regions in the country. This has had an effect on the role that was played by the NDP throughout the 1980s. While holding the balance of power in a legislature in which there were only three national parties, it was able to capitalize on Canadians' tendency to support strong social democratic policies, and successfully

brought pressure to bear on both the Progressive Conservative and Liberal governments to adopt some of the measures that explicitly addressed the needs of equality-seeking women.

In 1993, at the same time that the NDP was reduced to the fourth party in five in a dramatically differently-configured House (which significantly weakened its presence in Parliamentary processes such as Committees, and access to Question Period and all-party debates), the governing Liberals have been able to aggressively pursue a strategy of deficit cutting without being subject to the same degree of opposition based upon left of centre values. In fact, the Liberal Party has received such a wide birth that it has radically reformed the funding and delivery of social programs to the extent of overtly breaking its commitment to establish a national childcare programs (made in 1993). In the most recent federal election in November 2000, women's representation as elected MPs stagnated. Furthermore, in the face of the Canadian Alliance's attempt to gain seats in Ontario and Québec, many Canadians who might have otherwise supported the remaining social democratic party, the NDP, defensively cast their votes with the Liberals to block the perceived threat of an Alliance victory.

This new political landscape has rendered feminist organizations and their policies largely irrelevant to the political manoeuvrings common in representative governments based upon Single Member Plurality (SMP) districts. "The combination of parliamentary government, highly disciplined and cohesive political parties and a state increasingly constrained by fiscal and global pressures has limited the efforts of the Canadian Women's movement within the partisan political system" (Ibid: 81). As a result, some feminist women have begun revisiting the idea of forming a national Feminist Party whose aim would be to explicitly advance a women's equality agenda. The viability of such a party in the current FPP electoral system, however, is highly unlikely. In SMP such as we have federally in Canada, only the votes cast for the winning candidate in any constituency are reflected in Parliament. Women and men who may be partial to supporting a Feminist Party are not likely to be sufficiently concentrated in a geographically defined constituency to win seats on a riding by riding basis, and hence candidates for a Feminist Party would have little to no chance of representing the party as an independent entity in Parliament, unless there is significant reform in the election process.

Proportional Representation

To address some of the constraints of the current parliamentary system, proportional representation (PR) has become an increasingly popular alternative voiced by organizations on both the left and right of the political spectrum in Canada. Immediately following the November 2000 federal elections, Judy Rebick, former leader of NAC co-authored an article in the *Globe and Mail* calling on Canadians to demand that Canada's electoral system be changed to accommodate a PR system. Co-written by a neo-liberal thinker from the Canadian Taxpayers' Federation, both writers made the point that the composition of the Canadian Parliament no longer reflected the will of a majority of Canadians. These political commentators were not alone. In February 2001, the NDP introduced a non-votable motion in the House of Commons on introducing PR into the current system. Three months later, the Institute for Research on Public Policy (IRPP) held a national conference on the issue. For David Beatty, professor of law at the University of the Toronto, Canada's SMP electoral system is not only a political party matter, it may also be a constitutional one. Beatty has asserted that Canada's SMP system may be in violation of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* under which Canadians are guaranteed the right to effective representation (Knight 1999; NAWL 2001). In this vein, he is currently proceeding with a Charter challenge on behalf of the Green Party, which, as a small party with dispersed support throughout the country, has never been elected to the Canadian Parliament.

Regardless of the divergent political views supporters of PR hold, almost all would agree that the SMP system not only fails to represent the diversity of the Canadian mosaic, but distorts the votes cast for each party: The legislatures created by Single Member Plurality [SMP] systems [sic] represent a distorted picture of the actual electoral preferences of the populace. Marginalized groups, including women, Aboriginal people, and visible minorities tend to have poorer representation in the legislatures of countries with SMP systems than in those of countries with PR systems. The SMP system also exaggerates and compounds regionalism in Canada by misrepresenting the true electoral strength of political parties within various provinces (Knight 1999: p.2).

In essence, Canada's SMP system presents two fundamental problems. It fails to provide representation in way that accurately reflects vote tallies, as votes for unsuccessful candidates in each riding do not count toward electing any candidate. The SMP system thus manufactures and exaggerates majorities (Ibid 1999). This is illustrated by the composition of Parliament over the past decade. In 1997, the Liberals attained a majority government with only 38 per cent of the

popular vote. In that election, the NDP and Bloc Québécois tied with 11 per cent of the vote, but the Bloc Québécois won 44 seats and the NDP won 21 seats. The Reform and Conservative parties tied at 19 per cent of the popular vote, but the Reform Party won 60 seats and the Conservatives 20. In the case of the Bloc Québécois and the Reform Party, their geographic concentration of votes has served to distort the results of federal elections in such a way as to exaggerate and compound regional divisions within the country (New Democratic Party 2001). In Canada's federal election 2000, the Liberal Party won a majority of the seats with only 38 per cent of the popular vote. Given that total voter turn out was 61.2 per cent, these numbers clearly demonstrate that the political preferences of a majority of Canadians are not being accurately reflected in the House of Commons (Elections Canada 2001). Proponents of PR also argued that FPP encourages strategic voting amongst the electorate. Voters are less inclined to vote for a smaller party if their expressions of interest for that party will not be significantly counted at the end of the day, and if it enables another less favourable party to accumulate enough votes to win.

PR is not a single, particular voting system, but a unifying principle among a variety of voting systems, in which the number of seats accorded to a political party reflects the degree of popular support demonstrated at the ballot box (Loenen 1997). FairVote Canada, a citizen-based coalition "providing concerned citizens, community leaders and activists with an organizational framework to build a nationwide grassroots campaign for voting system reform" (FairVote Web site 2001) outlines a number of electoral options under the banner of proportional representation for Canadians to consider. These include party list systems, mixed proportional systems, and the single transferable vote. In the cases of both party lists and the single transferable vote, constituencies would be converted to multi-member districts in which, in the former instance, voters would cast a ballot for a party's entire list of potential candidates in that district (versus an individual candidate) and, in the latter, citizens would vote for as many individual candidates (regardless of party affiliation) as there are seats in that district. In a party list system, the number of elected representatives of each party would be directly determined by the total percentage of support each party received through votes cast for the party list. Under the single transferable vote, a quota would be established which candidates would have to attain before becoming eligible for a seat. Thereafter, the first preference votes for each candidate would be counted and any candidate exceeding the quota would be declared elected. A candidate's excess votes would

then be transferred to the remaining candidates according to the subsequent preferences expressed on the ballot. The last place candidate is then eliminated, and these ballots would also be transferred.

Both of these options would introduce radical changes to Canada's national legislature. Opponents of PR assert that it would lead to unstable and weak governments that would be potentially comprised of highly fractious coalitions. While coalition governments might be more representative of the wide array of competing interests citizens have, a common critique of PR systems is that they force compromises that might be otherwise be unacceptable, and give minority parties (particularly ideologically extremist ones) undue influence in the policy making processes. In the case of party list systems, critics point out that it is not voters who choose which candidates will represent a district but the party itself. For parties with a clear commitment to gender and racial equality, however, party lists can be an effective mechanism for affording those candidates who may be perceived as 'unelectable' the opportunity to represent a district.

Particular measures mitigate against some potential pitfalls of PR. In some countries, a minimum quota of support for the party must be attained (typically 5 per cent) before a party is eligible for the redistribution of seats, which takes place under PR. Other countries have not discarded the SMP system but have supplemented it with PR. In Canada, this may be the most viable option for electoral reform. In such a system, half of the seats currently allocated to parties in the House could be elected as they are now under the SMP. At the same time, citizens would also be asked to cast a vote for their preferred party's list. After the constituency winners are declared, each party would receive an additional number of seats, taken from the candidates on their lists, to bring the party's overall representation in parliament up to a level proportional with its popular vote. In doing so, about half of SMP would be elected in constituencies, and the other half would be elected from party lists. Germany adopted a mixed proportional system after World War II to mitigate against the concentration of power with any one party, and citizens in Scotland and Wales recently chose this system for their newly created legislatures. New Zealanders also opted for a mixed system in 1996 as a result of two national referenda (Loenen 1997).

But how would any of these systems affect the representation of women, or increase the ability of women from across all parties to pursue a feminist policy agenda? It is useful to note that of the 10 countries with the highest percentage of women in Parliaments, all have systems that include PR (WEDO Web site; Women in Government 2). Of the nine countries with no women in their legislatures, seven use the majority system, one has a mixed system and the other appoints members (Ibid). Reasons women fare better in PR systems include the fact that the electorate in each district is not forced to choose between a male and female candidate (sexist biases and institutional factors most often favour males), which is often the case in single member plurality districts. Furthermore, in other PR systems, strong women's movements have been able to mobilize parties, and in some instances governments, to mandate quotas, which ensure that women are better, represented on lists. The 9000 members of the Bremner Association did this in Sweden in order to obtain nomination quotas so that men's and women's names would alternate on the electoral lists of all parties.

A move to a system that incorporates PR would not be a quick fix for women's equality. Women operating under PR system in other Parliaments around the world have had to organize and mobilize effectively to ensure that the representation of women and women's concerns remains foremost. Bystydzienski's (1995) review of the literature on women and electoral politics reveals that the numbers factor alone is far from adequate in explaining how women make a difference. She offers Norway as another instance in which it is difficult to separate women's electoral success under a PR system from a particular set of political conditions outside of the legislature which provided the impetus to increase women's engagement in the formal political sphere. "Whether or not women had an affect on politics is less a matter of numbers than of other factors such as political climate or prevailing ideology, the existence or absence of an independent women's movement and the structure of the political system" (Bystydzienski 1995: p.69). What studies of proportional representation reveal, however, is that it sufficiently alters the political structure to enable women to transcend the 'winner-takes-all' competition for votes one now witnesses in Canada. All too often, this zero-sum game does not successfully engage women who emerge from a more feminist political culture and/or whose parties are unwilling to place them in highly winnable districts. A mixed proportional system would enable Canada's national

parties to remain strong and vibrant while at the same time allowing equality-seeking members to better promote and empower the diverse voices within their own ranks.

Gender Parity

Gender parity is another mechanism through which women could increase their participation in political parties and, in some instances, their numbers in legislative bodies. For some, gender parity means that women would occupy 50 per cent of all seats in an elected body. When the new territory of Nunavut was being devised, citizens were asked whether or not they would support a parity clause in which each riding would elect two members, a woman and a man. Though the citizenry voted against a system of parity, the fact that it was put to a vote was an explicit acknowledgment of the role parity could play in redistributing political/electoral power. Within Canada, different political parties have implemented gender parity rules for a variety of party functions. The NDP elects all members of the Federal Council on the basis of gender parity. Provincial or regional caucuses must select an equal number of male and female representatives for participation on this council. The Liberal Party has instituted gender parity at each of their national conventions. Local constituencies are mandated to send an equal number of women and men, and even the selection of alternate delegates must abide by this stipulation. However, these measures have not been applied to the selection of candidates, arguably the most meaningful place where parity should prevail. This is in part a result of the SMP system in which only one candidate per riding is selected to represent her/his constituency. In such a system, all parties are very protective of their perceived winnable constituencies and as such local riding associations are extremely reluctant to support candidates believed to be risky (Sonia Pitre 2001). Pitre's study of women candidates in New Brunswick revealed that a number of local party executives of nearly every party but the New Democrats still engaged in the practice of actively discouraging women candidates from running in what were perceived as 'high stakes' constituencies. This phenomenon is certainly not unique to this province.

In June 2000, a highly controversial parity law was passed by the French National Assembly, which required that female and male candidates be presented in equal numbers for most elections (Bird 2001). The willingness of the Canadian government to impose a similar law on its political

parties is, at this juncture, inconceivable. As mentioned previously, the modest recommendations of the 1991 Lortie Commission to amend electoral financing regulations to reward parties for presenting a certain percentage of female candidates has not, 10 years later, been adopted. Almost every political party (with the exception of the Bloc Québécois) has maintained a fairly decentralized nomination process and it is unlikely this will change any time soon without a sustained effort by a critical mass of individuals to lobby for gender parity within the nomination selection procedures. In France, equality-seeking women within the women's movement were successful in lobbying for the state to mandate parity as a result of a sustained campaign that galvanized the French population. It is difficult to know if a similar campaign could be successfully mounted in Canada. Furthermore, it is not obvious that a system of absolute parity would work well for the various women's movements in Canada given other pressures on the party system.

Part IV: Conclusion

The women's movement is a unique social movement, promoting multiple interests and fostering collective identities with the intent of not only influencing political officials but also changing broader political and cultural practices and discourses (Dobrowsky 2000: 8).

The aim of a renewed feminist electoral project is not simply to add more women to the current mix in the House of Commons as many of the specialists to whom I have referred have articulated, but rather, to create new possibilities for the pursuit of a feminist policy agenda. The mechanisms outlined above are three examples of how a wide array of citizens involved in and supportive of women's equality would be able to engage with the formal political system so as to enable them to better express their political priorities. The current electoral system, with its FPP regime, effectively marginalizes challenges to power that do not conform to dominant party values. Within the House of Commons, it also disallows the aggregation of interests that transcend strictly geographical boundaries. In the current House, the dominance of the Canadian Alliance has served to further narrow the political space for feminist issues of national import to be inserted into parliamentary debate.

Regardless of the nature of the reforms feminist women and organizations may explore, it is important to reiterate that without clearly autonomous and vibrant women's movements that exert pressure from outside of legislative bodies, equality-seeking women elected to Parliament will not be successful in fulfilling a *mandate of equality*. Historically, legislatures were predicated upon absencing 'women' almost entirely from the discussions that took place therein and only since the emergence of second-wave feminism in Canada have equality-seeking women in significant numbers been able to claim a legitimate voice within its halls. Yet, this victory has been tenuous at best and in the face of the dissolution of the welfare state upon which many feminist interventions were predicated, an agenda of substantive women's equality needs a broader and louder voice heralded by women from across the political spectrum. Without strong and dynamic women's movements in Canada, this voice will not be welcomed, let alone recognized as a legitimate political intervention.

Finally, it must be noted that a number of citizen-based organizations and prominent political commentators have already begun calling for substantial changes to our current electoral system. As a national dialogue begins to emerge, it is imperative that feminist women are integral to these discussions. A project of electoral reform that does not explicitly acknowledge from the outset the need for mechanisms which promote women's equality, and one that does not include feminist perspectives and voices, will, in my view, run the risk of perpetuating the same elitist political culture and norms that now exist. The goals of equality, inclusiveness and justice that define the feminist political project in Canada must be central to any reform of Parliament. The real possibility of altering our foremost national political institution to respond to these goals does not come along very often, and those who have fought long and hard to assert a feminist policy agenda and who continue to do so must be ready for the challenge.

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