

WG-22

## 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.

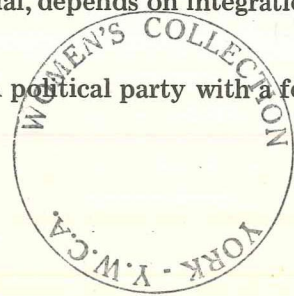
It is the aim of those who are now working towards creating a feminist party that women's full participation in the political arena will bring a new perspective and a new direction to government in general. For the feminist perspective is an all-encompassing view of the world - life becomes a multifaceted 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 consideration, 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.



THE BEGINNINGS OF THE FEMINIST PARTY OF CANADA

FEBRUARY - APRIL 22, 1979.

The original Hart House meeting held on Sunday, February 11, 1979 was called for the purpose of founding a women's political party. When we gathered together, there was a division amongst us as to whether this would be the most effective direction to pursue. Clearly, we were dissatisfied with the present situation in government but we could not agree on the most effective approach: should it be that of a political party or that of a feminist caucus. A troublesome question was raised: how could we expect women, with only their gender in common, to take unified action and overcome the years and allegiances of ideological differences. We looked to a volunteer interim committee to explore both the philosophical practical alternatives. These women here before you made up that committee

Since that first meeting we have met as a whole group for approximately three hours every Sunday afternoon and once during each week as a member of particular subcommittees. At our first meeting on Sunday March 4 we discussed the major issue facing us: how to increase women's participation in the political system. Again we were divided as to the best approach; some of us were committed to the formation of a party, others were convinced that this would be unworkable. We were at an impasse. Then in an attempt to get a wider perspective, we recounted the records of women already in politics, those women who had achieved positions of power. From this cursory analysis, we discovered that most female politicians, regardless of background or party affiliation, reduced their connections with women's organizations to a minimum, when they obtained office. Possibly it was the fear of becoming isolated outside the male dominated power structure, that caused some of these women to deny the roots from which they had come. It was as if this link would weaken their credibility. This, then, is the problem: no matter how many women are elected, from the evidence we have thus far, they do not, on the whole, address themselves to those issues of concern to women, that have been continually neglected by everyone else. Collectively, women work to elect qualified candidates but at the moment of victory these women shake off political debts and walk on alone.

At this point, some of us who had been resistant to the formation of a feminist political party, realized that a feminist caucus is rendered ineffectual for this very reason; it has no reliable voice to depend on. And it was at this point that the interim committee resolved its indecision. We recognized the necessity of a women's political party; for only then, when the potential candidate has a context within the party and is shielded by the party structure, would she be able to maintain feminist beliefs while in office. When we saw that a feminist party was the only method that could truly be representative of women's needs and desires for change, the choice was clear. We now ask you to join with us in the realization of this vision. Once the commitment was made, we were, and are, and will continue to be, faced with the formidable task of turning vision into policy and policy into strategy.

The weeks following the March 4th meeting were filled with similar kinds of exploration. We examined the procedure for registering as a political party and studied the constitutions of the established ones. As we drew up our first statement, many ideas were raised that demand further and more complete development. Those skeleton committees we believed to be necessary, have been loosely defined in both title and in function, with the emphasis placed upon their flexibility. We have recognized our mandate, to report back to you, the group as a whole; and have organized and prepared ourselves for this meeting today as we are doing for the public meeting scheduled for June 10 at O.I.S.E.

This, then, is the vital question: If there were a women's political party, would you support it? We have only germinated the idea, now we must all help to realize it; for this we need support, dedication, imagination and not least of all, commitment to our goal. And so we present to you our statement and afterwards we welcome a discussion.

April 1979.

Feminist Party of Canada, Interim Committee .

NEXT PUBLIC MEETING: Sunday June 10, 2 - 4 p.m.  
252 Bloor Street West (O.I.S.E.)  
Toronto

For further information: call (416) 487 9427