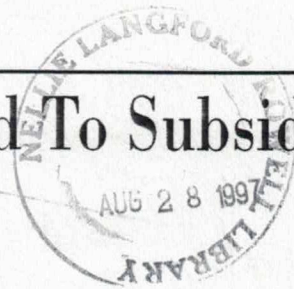


# "An Action That Will Not Be Allowed To Subside"

## NAC's First Twenty Years

by Anne Molgat



There are as many histories of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women as there have been women in NAC. In the two decades since the organization's founding, countless women have served on its executive, on its committees and on its staff. Untold numbers have attended Annual General Meetings or other NAC events. Every woman in Canada has had her life affected in some manner by NAC and has a place in its history.

NAC's history is also the history of its member groups, though painted on a larger canvass and with a broader palette. The tale that follows is the fruit of hours spent perusing the NAC archives and of conversations with some founders and past presidents. It is a piece of a much larger history that remains to be written.

### *Eleven Strong Women*

This text follows NAC through the times in office of eleven strong women, the NAC presidents. By focusing on them it may appear to minimize the contribution of their sisters who served with them on the executive. The story could as appropriately, though not as easily, have been told through the myriad issues NAC has tackled over the last twenty years. In choosing to rest the tale on the broad shoulders of Laura Sabia and her successors, it was inevitable that much of the cut and thrust of political debate was lost, and that many of the political issues disappeared from view. Staff, who have fueled the engine, fade completely from sight, as do the innumerable committee members and other volunteers. A history that depends to a very large extent on the incomplete and spotty

### NAC History Project

The stories of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women are invaluable pieces of the history of the Canadian women's movement. In the process of preparing "An Action That Will Not Be Allowed to Subside" we realized that many of these stories are in danger of being lost.

"An Action That Will Not Be Allowed to Subside" is the starting event of the NAC History Project. We are inviting you to participate. It provides us with a more encompassing outline of NAC's story than has existed to date. But its brevity, and the records available have meant that it could not capture the complexity and diversity of the stories and issues.

We hope that you will actively respond to the article. Write, or record, your own version of a period with which you are familiar and send it to us. Tell us in more detail about events or dynamics that by necessity we have either skimmed or not mentioned altogether. Tell us how you understand the more

controversial events where you were a participant. Tell us how events in the women's movement have affected or not affected NAC. If you think we have some of it completely wrong, let us know (as gently as possible) about your version. Send us photographs or documents that reflect the actions of the organization as you know or knew it.

We are not at this moment proposing to prepare the "grand history" of NAC. What we will do is make sure that your material is organized and preserved. We will make it available to researchers interested in the Canadian women's movement. And, we hope that in the near future our records will be able to support a number of longer, more thorough, reviews of our history.

Alice de Wolff  
Executive Coordinator

Send your contributions to : History Project, NAC,  
57 Mobile Drive, Toronto, Ont. M4A 1H5.



documentary evidence produced by the organization suffers from the weaknesses of that evidence. A great deal is missing from the NAC record. Stories begin but don't end, or end never having begun. Heated debate is glossed over. Documents are referred to but cannot be found. It is difficult, frequently impossible, to properly reflect the place of women of colour, of immigrant women, of women with disabilities, of poor women, and of lesbians in the National Action Committee. They are largely absent from the written record, particularly in the first decade. These absences skew, and weaken, the text. NAC's history is the history of all of these women. This is a first brushstroke on a very large canvass.

Like most "facts" in its twenty-odd years, the precise moment of NAC's founding is the subject of some debate. With the tabling of the *Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada* (RCSW) in late September 1970, the Toronto-based Committee for the Equality of Women in Canada (CEWC) had fulfilled its mandate. Founded some four years earlier to "pursue the human rights of women in Canada" and to press for the establishment of such a Royal Commission, this coalition of over 30 women's organizations had achieved its principal objective. The Report had been written and it remained to be seen what government action would come of it.

Within three months, it was clear to CEWC chair and founding mother Laura Sabia that, left to its own devices, the government would allow the Royal Commission report to sit on the shelf indefinitely. She called a CEWC meeting for 30 January 1971 at the University Women's Club in Toronto to discuss the next step. The 34 participants, representing 22 organizations, agreed to disband the CEWC. They created a new organization to be a "a clearinghouse for the exchange of information about the activities and plans for action of the women's participating groups" and to "spearhead a drive for the implementation of those recommendations of the

Royal Commission Report on the Status of Women which are aimed at equality of opportunity for women." The new organization, the National Ad Hoc Action Committee on the Status of Women, took over the CEWC's \$167 bank account. The founders promptly held their first fundraiser, passing the hat to raise an additional \$17. The gathering adjourned at noon, making it perhaps the shortest meeting in NAC history..

*"We propose to take responsibility for effecting change in the status of women in Canada. We believe that improvement in the status of women can most effectively come about through initiatives taken by women themselves and supported by government."*

By February 1972, the Ad Hoc Committee had 40 member groups and had extended its vision beyond the parameters set at its founding meeting. The women of Canada, they said, had "begun an action which will not be allowed to subside." They would educate, they would conduct studies, they would demand legislation, they would provide leadership. In a submission to the federal government, they announced: "We propose to take responsibility for effecting change in the status of women in Canada. We believe that improvement in the status of women can most effectively come about through initiatives taken by women themselves and supported by government." That submission, and the attendant lobbying, resulted in a \$15 000 grant from the Liberal government of Pierre Trudeau to organize a pan-Canadian meeting of women, the



Strategy for Change conference. Upon learning that the government did not fund "ad hoc" groups, steering committee members dropped the "Ad Hoc" from the organization's name, and the National Action Committee on the Status of Women settled in for the long haul.

### *Strategy for Change*

On 7, 8, 9 April 1972, nearly 500 women gathered at the King Edward Hotel in Toronto to "demand action to change and improve the position of women". Delegates representing groups participating in the National Action Committee, other women's groups, aboriginal women, "ethnic groupings" and "from wide-spread geographic areas" paid a \$5.00 registration fee and attended workshops on Political Action, Mass Media Impact, Day Care and Education, Economic Status, Direct Action Techniques, and Community Organization. Florence Bird, former chair of the Royal Commission spoke on the opening night, as did June Menzies of the Manitoba Action Committee on the Status of Women, Senator Thérèse Casgrain, artist Maryon Kantaroff, union activist Madeleine Parent, and Jan Steele, "chairman" of the Liberal Party Task Force on the Status of Women. Bird, representing a government whose members had declined to participate in the conference, urged delegates to endorse the RCSW's call for a federal advisory council on the status of women.

Bird's thinly veiled encouragement to delegates to do as the government wished galvanized support around the idea of an autonomous women's organization in which women would speak for themselves. Though delegates initially supported Bird's call for an advisory council, conversations through Saturday evening and late into the night convinced participants that the government viewed the proposed advisory council as a means of diverting the growing tide of feminist activism, or at the very least a way to bring it under government

control. Recognizing this, on Sunday morning the Steering Committee reopened the issue. After a heated debate the previous day's decision was overturned. Delegates decided to build their own organization to work for improvements in their lives. The National Action Committee had been launched.

Though not representative of the diversity of the women's movement as we know it today, the diversity of the Strategy for Change conference set the tone for the National Action Committee. Conference organizers recognized that: "A prime value of the conference was a two-fold realization on the one hand, by 'conservative' elements, that confrontation techniques are sometimes effective strategies in situations where change is not a part of normal expectations; on the other, by 'radical' elements, that reasoned argument based on substantiated fact goes further in the pursuit of real justice than does partisan emotion." Kay Sigurjonsson, a delegate to the conference and long-time NAC activist, has described this as a union of the "jeans and suits", the meeting of two generations of feminists, with different views with respect to strategy and sometimes differences with respect to political priorities, but a common objective.

### *Balancing Act*

This balancing act was to characterize NAC for years: one might argue that NAC's success had depended on its ability to encompass the two different tendencies within itself. At Strategy for Change the difference might have appeared to be generational. On the one hand there were the "old guard" small-"l" liberals who for years had been the women's movement; on the other, the younger "activists" or "radicals" emerging from the grassroots, the labour movement, and the rape crisis centres and shelters for battered women. On the Saturday night of the conference, a sixty strong self-described "radical caucus of women" met to share concerns and to draft a statement



outlining them. They argued that "status of women" issues needed to be placed in a larger context and demanded that a future conference discuss the right of every child to state supported childcare, "community control of education at all levels", "the inclusion of sexuality in the human rights code", and the radical social changes necessary to bring about the eradication of poverty. The caucus statement was printed in the conference report and referred to the next conference planning committee.

The decision of conference organizers to build the workshops and debate around RCSW recommendations had been a deliberate one. It provided a framework for the weekend's discussions. Many participants believe this framework made it possible for very different feminists, speaking sometimes different feminist languages, to work out a common platform.

Organizers acknowledged, and expressed regret at, the underrepresentation of some groups of women. Few women with disabilities participated. While individual women of colour and immigrant women attended, there is no evidence that they did so representing groups from their own communities. The

presence of open lesbians was muted. Though delegates attended from every province and territory, there was a preponderance of women from Ontario (365 of 471 registered delegates).

There was a strong delegation from Québec, led by Fédération des femmes du Québec president Yvette Rousseau, in spite of the lack of

simultaneous translation and the few conference documents available in French. A number of aboriginal women from across the country were present, and delegates discussed the "Indian rights for Indian Women" question.

The National Action Committee on the Status of Women was chaired until 1974 by long-time feminist Laura Sabia. The recommendations of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women and the 73 resolutions passed at Strategy for Change formed the policy base, and later steering committees of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women were left with the task of building an organizational structure on that foundation. In early 1973, NAC launched *Status of*

*Women News* as a vehicle for getting its message to its membership and to others interested in the women's movement. By September, *Status*, as it was commonly known, had 400 subscribers. Edited by Moira Armour, sometimes with the assistance of volunteers drawn from the community and sometimes with an executive-appointed editorial board, it contained information on NAC activities and other articles of interest to women. *Status* continued publishing until 1985 when it was replaced by *Feminist Action féministe*.

### NAC PRESIDENTS

1971-1974	Laura Sabia
1974-1975	Grace Hartman
1975-1977	Lorna Marsden
1977-1979	Kay Macpherson
1979-1981	Lynn McDonald
1981-1982	Jean Wood
1982-1984	Doris Anderson
1984-1986	Chaviva Hosek
1986-1988	Louise Dulude
1988-1990	Lynn Kaye
1990-[1993]	Judy Rebick

Sabia was succeeded in 1974 by Grace Hartman, who was also at the time the national secretary-treasurer of the Canadian Union of Public Employees. Hartman was the first of a long line of labour women with close ties to NAC. Union organizer Madeleine Parent who spoke at the Strategy for Change conference and who twenty years later remains on the NAC executive,



Laurell Ritchie, labour lawyer Lynn Kaye, and Monique Simard are but four of this line. Delegates to Strategy for Change had passed a resolution calling on "unorganized women to organize at their place of work, into unions which best serve their economic and social interests and do not discriminate against women in employment", and had expressed their support for "those organized women actively working for equal status within their respective unions." This commitment has continued over the years and in various forms; NAC has lobbied alongside trade union women on many issues and has supported a number of strikes by women workers including recent strikes by the Public Service Alliance of Canada and Nationair flight attendants

### ***Lack of Funds I***

A lack of funds and the push for the implementation of the recommendations of the RCSW shaped the NAC of this period. Organizers were hampered by the lack of the kinds of communications networks that currently exist among feminists, and did not have access to the funds necessary to develop them; one early executive member recalls how a long-distance telephone call was a cause for excitement (and panic if it had to be returned at NAC's expense). Though the "Ad Hoc" had been dropped from NAC's name, there was little sense among organizers that they were building an organization that might someday celebrate its twentieth anniversary. Subsequent annual meetings were less concerned with organizational development and the formulation of new policy than on the choosing of priorities from among the RCSW recommendations and the election (and frequently drafting) of executive members. Most executive members were from the Toronto area. Those who weren't had the means, either personally or through their jobs, to subsidize travel to Toronto meetings.

NAC's collaboration with native women, or as they were then known, Indian women, began with the Strategy for Change meeting but continued well beyond it. Delegates at the conference had been moved by an eloquent speech by Mary Two-

Axe Earley in which she described the injustice done to native women by the Indian Act and appealed for the participants' support. A resolution was adopted supporting Earley's organization, Indian Rights for Indian Women, and inviting it to join NAC. Earley herself remained involved in NAC for many years. The records suggest that throughout 1973 work was being done in support of the case of Jeannette Corbière Lavell, who had herself attended the conference. Also in 1973, NAC held a Conference Day which included a workshop on the "Supreme Court Decision re. Native Women's Rights". Interest continued through the 70's, and in 1978, Alberta native woman Jenny Margetts was elected to the NAC executive as a vice-president. The struggle against discrimination against women as legislated by the Indian Act carried on. In 1981, \$5 000 was allocated to a campaign to combat Indian Act discrimination, a leaflet was produced in support of the campaign, a "Native Indian Women's Committee" (later changed to the "Committee in Support of Native Women" to allow non-native women to participate) was formed, and resolutions in support of native women have been passed at many annual general meetings. Aboriginal women remain a strong presence on the NAC executive and NAC continues to make their issues its own.

In 1975, NAC held its first annual general meeting outside Toronto, gathering in Winnipeg in the spring. Delegates elected Ontario Committee on the Status of Women member Lorna Marsden as NAC's third president. Marsden's first taste of partisan electoral politics had come about as a result of a chance meeting in a workshop at the Strategy for Change conference with Aideen Nicholson who promptly recruited her to help in her campaign for the Liberal party nomination in a Toronto riding. She had since developed good contacts within the governing Liberal party and was instrumental in improving NAC's access to cabinet ministers and Members of Parliament. The first year of Marsden's presidency coincided with the United Nations-sponsored International Women's Year and which sparked NAC's first significant foray into global



feminism. NAC sent delegates to the Tribune in Mexico in June and to other related conferences throughout the year.

### *Annual Meeting Moves To Ottawa*

In 1976, the annual meeting was moved to Ottawa. The meeting site, described variously as "pretty much of a dive" and "unbelievably seedy", had the advantages of low cost and proximity to Parliament Hill. The first of NAC's now notorious annual lobbies with the government and opposition parties was held that year. Some 50 delegates met with 6 cabinet ministers, the leaders of the opposition parties and another 47 Members of Parliament from all three parties. Marsden, now a Senator, laughs as she recounts the reactions of some of her current colleagues who they discover her involvement in the creation of the NAC lobby.

By 1974, the executive was beginning to grapple with what it meant to be a national organization. Ensuring adequate regional representation was extremely difficult without the funds available for travel. While many on the executive were politically committed to regionalization, implementation was practically impossible with a bank account as small as NAC's. Despite rules stating that the executive should be composed of table officers, 12 representatives of "interest-oriented groups and/or specialists in fields of women's affairs", and 12 regional representatives, in practice the executive was composed largely of women in Toronto. They sent out a call for women to serve, by correspondence, as regional representatives. As the funding situation improved and as the leadership acknowledged that NAC's claim to be a national organization rang false to women outside central Canada, changes began to be made. Travel costs for regional representatives were paid and they began to play a significant role in NAC. The issue of regional representation was to remain one of the central organizational problems for NAC in the years ahead.

In 1977, Marsden was succeeded by Voice of Women activist Kay Macpherson, who like

Marsden and Sabia before her, served two years. Macpherson, who had been defeated by Marsden in a 1975 bid for the presidency, views herself as a compromise candidate, one of the originals and a member of the "old guard", but radical enough to appeal to some of the younger, more activist women. In the five years since the Strategy for Change conference, NAC's membership had grown from 40 to 120 groups, and the organization was attracting smaller, local and more issue-specific groups from the burgeoning grassroots women's movement. Macpherson, a long-time peace activist, laid the groundwork for the establishment of NAC's Survival of the Planet Committee and the incorporation of an analysis of militarism into NAC's agenda.

### *Officially Bilingual*

The 1976 AGM was the first to provide simultaneous interpretation in all plenaries, a workshop and the Saturday evening event. In the years that followed, the move toward state assisted bilingualism continued. NAC remained far from bilingual, but efforts were being made to integrate French-speaking women. In Macpherson's first year in office, a member of the executive attended the annual meeting of the Fédération des femmes du Québec, and FFQ president Sheila Finestone joined the NAC executive. It was not until 1979 that a motion was passed to ensure that all official NAC documents, except minutes of executive meetings, be issued in both French and English. The relationship between NAC and the FFQ has waxed and waned over the years. The FFQ left NAC in 1982 over a procedural dispute, returned and left again, ostensibly over the Meech Lake Accord.

As one might expect in a developing organization, minutes from this period suggest that administrative matters occupied a significant part of executive meetings, with lengthy discussions of plans for annual general meetings, publications and internal administration. Still, numerous substantive political issues were addressed in this period, including Bill C-25 (human rights legislation), equal pay for work of equal value, the role of women in broadcasting, and proposed amendments to the federal Social



Services Act, a campaign begun under Lorna Marsden. At Lynn McDonald's instigation, NAC also turned its attention to Statistics Canada and its inability to provide a breakdown of wages between men and women.

It was during Macpherson's term that the National Congress of Black Women joined NAC. Women of colour had until that point been largely invisible in the organization, except as occasional individuals. Kay Livingstone, the president of the Negro Women's Association had expressed concern in 1973 about the "lack of ethnic and minority group representation in NAC", but in a classic sidestep, she was told that such groups had been invited but had not replied. The minutes then report on the work being done by the Anglican Church Women in support of native women, and no more is said on the matter. It is not known whether the Negro Women's Association in fact joined NAC. A participant at the 1975 annual general meeting clearly recalls seeing only two black women there, including her guest at the banquet. There were resolutions in the late 70's on matters of immediate concern to immigrant and visible minority women, and the minutes of the annual general meeting of 1979 report that "Interest in immigrant or potential immigrant women's problems was high.". Delegates elected a woman of colour, Farida Shaikh, to the executive. It was not until 1985 and the election of Jon Leah Hopkins that a Visible Minority and Immigrant Women's Committee was formed. Several members of this committee were involved in the inaugural meeting of the National Organization of Immigrant and Visible Minority Women the following year. Two years after the creation of the Visible Minority and Immigrant Women's Committee, AGM keynote speaker Gloria Simms called for its dissolution, arguing that women of colour should be assimilated into NAC. The committee remains active, working as a caucus to ensure that visible minority women's concerns are clear and integrated throughout the organization.

Also in the mid-70's, as a result of the attendance of a NAC executive member at a

conference in the United States where sign language interpretation was provided, NAC began to grapple with the question of its accessibility to women with disabilities. Though a few women with disabilities had participated in the Strategy for Change meeting, subsequent annual general meeting sites appear to have been chosen for economic or political reasons and not because of their accessibility. (The minutes report a conversation in early 1975 between an executive member and a representative of the Secretary of State, NAC's major funder, indicating that "NAC's credibility as a national organization would improve substantially if the annual meeting were held somewhere other than Toronto." The meeting promptly moved to Winnipeg.) Significant barriers limited the participation of women with disabilities. Action femmes handicapées Montréal joined NAC and Pat Israel was elected to the executive in 1986, and NAC began to address the particular issues of women with disabilities.

It would be inaccurate to suggest that there were not differences, sometimes fairly significant, on questions of strategy and policy. Still, NAC's

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early years were reasonably harmonious. Unlike women's movements in the United States and Europe, both frequently torn apart by differences of opinion, NAC had developed into an organization capable of containing a variety of feminists and feminisms within itself. Questions of representation remained, to be sure. While many women were, or felt themselves to be, excluded, there was an impressive cohesion. As younger women and newer, and sometimes more radical,



feminists became active, NAC tackled an increasingly broad range of issues. *Status of Women News*, NAC's official publication since 1973, contained articles on such old feminist standards as abortion, childcare, violence against women and equal pay for work of equal value, but also on women and technology, and feminist spirituality.

NAC's fifth president was Lynn McDonald, a founding member and the first president of the Ontario Committee on the Status of Women. McDonald, like Macpherson, had been involved with NAC since its days as the National Ad Hoc Committee. A Torontonionian, McDonald had lived briefly in Nova Scotia and had represented that province on the NAC executive. She was a strong proponent of increased regionalization, and at her inaugural meeting as president served notice of her priorities for her presidency: election strategy, fundraising, "women and income and employment", and regional representation.

McDonald's two years in office were lively ones on the Canadian political scene, spanning three federal governments and two general elections. NAC was involved in both elections, communicating with all three parties to ascertain their positions on women's issues, obtaining appointments with the leaders, and coordinating activities in various regions. Changes in Ottawa signalled to McDonald and others the extent to which NAC's reliance on government funding rendered it potentially vulnerable to shifting political winds, and reinforced their commitment to broadening NAC's financial base. A number of fundraising strategies were explored, some successful and others less so, including an unexplained and ill-fated fortune cookie scheme. NAC's increased visibility brought about a growth in its membership, from 140 mid-way through McDonald's first year to 186 by the end of her second.

Just as NAC's visibility and strength increased, internal tensions began to dominate the dynamics. This "NAC knot" has occurred at a number of different moments in the organization's history. In this case the tension was played out around

disagreements about pension policy. McDonald was a strong proponent of a public pension plan at a time when a number of NAC executive members supported a more private plan. The sometimes acrimonious debate, though not entirely out of character for NAC, has tended to cloud the presidencies of McDonald and of her successor Jean Wood, seen by many as a supporter of a private pension plan. It has also obscured the considerable accomplishments of both women. Wood, for example, instituted a much needed personnel policy.

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Like many NAC stories, this one has several versions, and to attempt to take a position on it is beyond the courage of this author. It is clear that while the debate was played out in the pensions arena, there were other factors at play, from personal antipathies to different visions of the organization. Conventional analyses based on divisions of left and right, often favoured by activists and political scientists, are frequently not relevant to an analysis of NAC politics, and do not completely explain this situation. NAC entered the 80's with its executive mired in a conflict that saw McDonald endure a heretofore unheard of non-confidence vote and Wood plagued by a campaign to have her removed from office. The campaign was eventually called off. Wood chose not to stand for a second one-year term, and returned to England.



Meanwhile, preoccupied with and immobilized by internal conflict, NAC nearly missed the boat on one of the most important periods in contemporary Canadian women's history, the debates leading up to the patriation of the Canadian Constitution and the struggle by women for the inclusion of a solid guarantee of equality in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. NAC endorsed the Ad Hoc conference on women and the Constitution held in 1981. While many NAC women attended and were involved in the planning, the executive voted to send no official delegates.

With the organization reeling from the internal conflicts of the previous few years, NAC sought a president without allegiances to either side of the pension debate. Doris Anderson, the former *Chatelaine* editor and feminist heroine of the day agreed to stand. Angered by political interference from Lloyd Axworthy, the federal Minister Responsible for the Status of Women, Anderson had recently resigned from the presidency of the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women. She describes her election this way: "I was a compromise... I'd resigned from the Advisory Council so I was floating around with nothing to do. I didn't have a job. What I sure didn't need was a job with no pay, but I wasn't being offered anything else in those days." Anderson sent the combatants in the pensions debate off to settle it in the pensions committee, and set about cleaning house. She and her colleagues strengthened the committee system, clarified lines of responsibility within the executive, cleaned up the nominations process, instituted the idea of neutral chairs at the Annual General Meeting and fought to strengthen the position of the regional representatives. She also spearheaded a campaign to move the national office to Ottawa, arguing that an organization claiming to be bilingual and purporting to represent all Canadian women, including women from Québec, should not be in Toronto, and reminding women that it made sense for a group lobbying the federal government to be in Ottawa. The first year she raised the issue, she lost a vote at the annual meeting by one vote; the second year

she lost by six. Anderson describes this as one of the greatest disappointments in her time on the NAC executive. Her departure marked the end of an almost unbroken string of NAC presidents who had attended the Strategy for Change conference (the sole exception being Jean Wood) and ushered NAC into a new era.

Her successor, Chaviva Hosek, inherited a much stronger, and significantly less fractured organization than did Anderson. Hosek, who had served previously as NAC secretary and vice-president, took over the reins in the spring of 1984. The women's movement, still flush from its success in the 1982 Constitution debate in which women had fought for - and won - sex equality guarantees in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, had recovered its energy, and the country was facing another election. Hosek and her colleagues began to carve out a place for women. Articles started appearing about the gender gap among voters in the U.S., and journalists were subtly reminded of the tremendous - and to the mainstream media unexpected - success of feminists in 1982. NAC produced a widely distributed handbook for women on the federal election and, in an unprecedented move, organized a televised debate on women's issues among the leaders of three federal parties. NAC's public profile increased dramatically, as did the number of member groups, going from 200 in 1982, to 359 in 1985, to 458 in 1986. The message was clear: NAC, and women are a force to be reckoned with. NAC began to be invited to an increasing number of consultations by the new federal government, and having been invited in, fought to have a number of other organizations included in the consultation process. It continued to work on a wide variety of issues, including child care, unemployment insurance, employment equity, the de-indexation of family allowance, the impact of the federal budgets on women, responses to the Fraser Report on pornography, and new laws on street solicitation and on divorce. The final year of Hosek's presidency saw the formation of a Visible Minority and Immigrant Women's Committee and a Lesbian Issues Committee.



Lesbians have always been involved in NAC, as they have in virtually every facet of the women's movement, but for nearly fifteen years were largely invisible. Some discussion of lesbian issues took place, but usually couched in euphemism and in the context of amendments to the human rights code. Unlike the National Organization for Women in the U.S. which experienced a vicious debate over the place of lesbians in the women's movement in the late 1960's, there has been no public conflict in NAC. Lesbians were simply silent. It was, as one early lesbian activist in NAC has pointed out, as though the letter "l" had been lost from the alphabet. "L" was found at the 1985 AGM, when lesbians caucused and demanded that NAC take an active role in the campaign to have sexual orientation included among the prohibited grounds of discrimination in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and human rights legislation. A Lesbian Issues Committee was struck, a leaflet was produced, workshops have been held at each subsequent AGM, and NAC has taken substantive positions on issues of immediate concern to lesbians. The silence is being broken.

### ***Expansion of NAC's Visions***

The election in 1986 of NAC's ninth president, Louise Dulude, marked the first time the organization had a president from outside the Toronto area. Dulude is NAC's only francophone president to date. A lawyer and pensions expert recruited by Lynn McDonald in the heat of the pensions battle, Dulude had served on the executive since 1982, devoting most of her energy to policy development. Though Dulude is quick to insist that the credit does not belong to her alone, her period as president coincides with an expansion of NAC's vision of what constitutes women's issues and a strengthening of regional representation, the latter encouraged by the Women's Programme of the Secretary of State. The seeds of both changes had been sown many years previously. Dulude's executive took action on abortion, aboriginal issues, sexual orientation, affirmative action, pensions, the proposed law on pornography, child sexual assault, unemployment insurance, the federal budget, midwifery, child care, the rise of the new right and fathers' rights

groups, fiscal reform, free trade, refugees, and the Meech Lake Accord. Dulude, along with Madeleine Parent, worked with some success to increase the fairly dismal representation of Québec and other francophone women in the organization. When Dulude left office in 1988, membership had reached 554.

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In the fall of 1986 NAC announced in *Feminist Action féministe* that "we are finding some of the methods of operation which worked well when we were a small organization are not effective as we expand" and that it was launching a review of its operations. Among the issues identified for discussion were individual membership, better regional representation, continued growth, direct action, lessening financial dependency on the government, decision making, decentralization, and increasing effectiveness in achieving NAC's goals. For the next two years Organizational Review committees talked to women across the country. In 1988 they hired two sets of consultants to prepare reports on recommendations from Québec members, and changes proposed by members in the rest of Canada.

Delegates to the 1988 AGM accepted the key recommendations from both reports although there was considerable disagreement about how to implement them. The recommendations provide us with a picture of the structural problems. The organization needed to establish a process for setting annual priorities, develop comprehensive guidelines for financial and policy decisions, develop a more effective approach to the annual lobby, strengthen the regions, increase member



participation, clarify the management functions of NAC, and define the functions of the executive. Women from Québec said that "to ensure their meaningful participation" they needed, at a minimum: good quality simultaneous translation of AGMs, workshops at the AGM to initiate new members, simplified and clarified rules of order for the big meetings, a more democratic process, the opportunity to meet candidates for the executive, and bilingual social and cultural events.

Lynn Kaye's term as president began at this same AGM, the event that some have dubbed "the AGM from hell". Debate on organizational review was heated and at times nasty, pitting avid decentralists and those with a focus on "feminist process" against those who wanted the organizational review discussions to continue simultaneously with NAC's political work. Tensions within the executive over strategy and style, a membership impatient with the organizational review process, and a staff caught in a difficult unionization drive combined to explode. The media had a field day and declared NAC dead. A number of feminists wondered whether they might not be right.

As president, Kaye had to shift from her own goals to the more basic ones of keeping NAC together. She and her colleagues reiterated the executive's commitment to implement the organizational review recommendations. The staff who resigned were replaced, and a collective agreement was signed. Kaye also tried to move the organization from its focus on policy committees with individual spokeswomen toward the mobilization of large groups of women through campaigns such as the "Women Vote" campaign, designed to increase the participation of women in the federal election, and the "Get the Budget Back on Track" campaign which sought to raise public awareness of the negative effects of the federal budget, as well as campaigns against Free Trade and the Goods and Services Tax. NAC stepped up its coalition work and was among the founders of the Pro-Canada Network, now the Action Canada Network.

Kaye's presidency also coincided with two events of crucial importance to Canadian feminists, the Chantal Daigle abortion case and the shootings at the École polytechnique in Montréal. Daigle's case, in which a spurned former lover fought her right to an abortion all the way to the Supreme Court before the Court overturned Canada's abortion law, thrust NAC into the pro-choice spotlight. NAC had not played a prominent role on this issue for much of the 1980's, and the Daigle case signalled a renewed commitment to a high public profile on abortion.

Marc Lépine's murderous rampage of 6 December 1989 awakened Canadians to the deadly impact of misogyny and sparked a public outcry against violence against women. NAC worked closely with feminists across the country, particularly those in the sexual assault and shelter movements, to alert the public, the media and politicians about the devastating effects of anti-woman violence and the failure of society to adequately address it. In the months that followed, NAC campaigned with other groups to make 6 December a Women's Remembrance Day in memory of the 14 young women slain in Montréal and the numerous others who have died at the hands of men.

### ***Lack of Funds II***

In its 1989-90 budget the federal government initiated a series of cuts to the Women's Programme of the Secretary of State. That year it cut NAC's grant by 50%. The next year the government cut funding to women's publications and eighty women's centres across the country, many of which were NAC members. These centres lost all their federal funding and were faced with closure. Inspired by the women in St. John's, Newfoundland, who staged a sit-in at the local office of the Secretary of State and held Weiner roasts (in honour of Secretary of State Gerald Weiner), NAC worked with other national women's groups to help coordinate cross-country consultations and strategy sessions to fight for a restoration of funding. The cut to the women's centres was eventually rescinded, although the funds to the feminist publications were not restored.



### ***Regionalization and Diversity***

Judy Rebick, the current president of the National Action Committee, was acclaimed at the annual general meeting of 1990.

She ran with four main objectives: to increase the involvement of NAC in the Constitutional debate and to heal the divisions between women in Québec and the rest of Canada; to recruit more visible minority women into NAC; to strengthen the links between NAC and the labour movement and to attract more labour women to NAC; and to improve NAC's financial situation. She is convinced that the key to the organization's survival is regionalization and diversity. Rebick's high profile in the media and her experience in coalitions have helped to make NAC a household name and have strengthened the organization's position as a leader among progressive groups. Shortly after Rebick assumed the presidency, the crisis in Oka and Kahnawake erupted. NAC spoke out immediately and strongly in support of the rights of aboriginal people and worked closely with the Assembly of First Nations and other groups to coordinate a public outcry against the federal and Québec governments' actions. During the Gulf War NAC initiated women's protests across the country against the war, and Canada's involvement. In the current Constitutional talks, NAC is a significant participant in the lengthy process of shaping the Canadian Constitution. NAC has actively lobbied for new sexual assault legislation, strict employment equity legislation, and tough government measures to combat violence against women. It has supported aboriginal peoples in their struggles for self-government, sought to educate women about the dangers posed to them by the New Reproductive Technologies, and spoken out against suggestions that a new abortion law might be necessary.

### ***We Who Are NAC***

Twenty years after the Strategy for Change conference, the first large gathering of Canadian feminists, it is important that we who are NAC stop, look behind us and reflect. We have come a long way, as individuals, as women and as an organization. We have legal protections we only dreamed of and opportunities we barely imagined. A Canadian woman has been to space and three have been to the Supreme Court. A few more have been to Parliament and one leads a federal party.

We have grown as an organization from 31 groups to over 500. We are more diverse, and we are better able to work with and as women with disabilities, immigrant women and women of colour. Lesbians have always been among us; we are making NAC a safer place in which to be open. We have long supported native women's issues, and increasingly there are native women sitting at the executive table. We have full regional representation, and there are growing numbers of strong, active members from outside central Canada. Fully a third of the current executive are women of colour, immigrant women, aboriginal women and women with disabilities, and only 3 of 25 members are from Toronto. While some Québec groups have left NAC, the ties between us remain strong and we work with them in a variety of coalitions. We continue to work on what it means to be a truly bilingual organization. As we become more diverse, we are learning new ways in which to work. We are learning to share the leadership and to recognize barriers to participation. Many others of us are still underrepresented, and we are weaker without the voices of older women, of young women, of rural women and of poor women.

As we have become more inclusive, our understanding of the women's movement and of women's issues is changing. We are learning that racism is a women's issue, as is discrimination against women with disabilities. We are coming to recognize that the right to choose who to love is as fundamental as the right to choose whether or not to bear a child, and that homophobia is every woman's problem. We are seeing that as long as



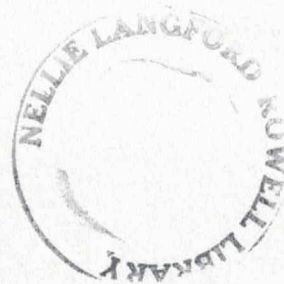
we live in a country where the average woman earns two thirds of what the average man earns, and where most women over 65 are destined to die in poverty, economic issues require our attention and we have a particular perspective on them. We are grappling with the interconnectedness of issues and seeing in coalitions the way of the future.

We are learning to be kinder to one another and more respectful of others' points of view. Some of us have experienced NAC as a nasty place and speak with bitterness of the trashings one woman says began at the first meeting. When asked what she had gained from being on the NAC executive, her colleague's reply was brief: "Scar tissue." Things are changing. We are coming to appreciate difference, to recognize that our strength lies in our diversity, and that there are many ways to be a feminist. Sisterhood is not about being the same, but about respecting difference, and about disagreeing without personalizing.

One of the greatest triumphs of the contemporary Canadian women's movement is perhaps that NAC exists at all. It is an organization unlike any other in the world. No other women's coalition has lasted for twenty years or represents the views of as many women. While we may be quick to point out who among us does not feel she belongs in NAC, we often overlook the extraordinary diversity within the organization, and fail to see the range of opinion and experience within our ranks. That we have acknowledged that what divides us is infinitely less important than what unites us speaks volumes about our commitment to one another. That we have been able to weave difference into a viable and respected organization is a credit to all of us.

#### A NOTE IN LIEU OF FOOTNOTES AND THANK YOU CARDS

*The reader has been spared footnotes. This article is largely based on NAC's own archival material, primarily minutes of executive meetings and annual general meetings, annual reports and Status of Women News and Feminist Action féministe. Some of this material is maintained by NAC. Other material is in the Canadian Women's Movement Archives. In addition, brief interviews were conducted with Doris Anderson, Moira Armour, Louise Dulude, Chaviva Hosek, Kay Macpherson, Lynn McDonald, Lorna Marsden, Madeleine Parent and Judy Rebick. Thanks are due to them and to Alice de Wolff, Martha McGloin, Nancy Adamson, Madeleine Parent, Kay Macpherson, Laurell Ritchie and Judy Rebick for reading drafts of the text. Thanks also to Chris Appelle, Pauline Rankin and Jill Vickers for sharing their research. Read their forthcoming book.*



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