

Of Lions and Mice: Making Women's Politics Effective

Pour l'auteur, la politique consiste à influencer le gouvernement dans son choix de personnes ou de politiques. Les femmes s'impliquent dans la politique mais cet aspect leur échappe à elles-mêmes ainsi qu'à la société en général parce qu'elles s'intéressent aux problèmes locaux, féministes et non-partisans. Cette politique, apparemment stérile, peut devenir féconde à mesure qu'elles développent leurs contacts avec des femmes tenant des postes d'autorité publique. Il serait bon d'accroître le nombre de femmes dans de tels postes et de maintenir le contact entre elles et l'autre groupe.

The original topic of this article was how women can get into politics. Such a topic at least implies that women are not there now. But in fact a very large number of women are involved in 'action intended to influence the government in its selection of personnel or of policies.'¹ Women are central in literally hundreds of efforts to do things like getting a crosswalk put in or an expressway stopped, obtaining day care or family planning facilities, or protesting nuclear testing or violence. Two Irish women even received a Nobel Peace Prize for their attempts to stop the Irish Civil War. Certainly women vote as frequently as men in Canada and certainly they provide the free labour that keeps all political campaigns going.

Yet when women do such things, it is not seen as politics. The Peace People's Nobel Prize is somehow grouped with Sister Teresa's as a reward for feminine activities such as comforting the dying, which are marginal to the activities of the real world. Furthermore, although fellow prizewinners Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho would be proud to claim the title of politician, Mairead Corrigan and Betty Williams would agree in rejecting it.

The political activity of women is thus *invisible politics*, invisible both to themselves and to the rest of society. And the real problem is to make it more visible, and thereby more effective.

We can do this only if we first understand why it goes unrecognized. There seems to be four reasons: the location of women's political activity, its subjects, the nature of the groups involved, and its outcomes. That is, women's political activity is *local*, concerned with *women's issues*, *non-partisan*, and *apparently ineffective*.

Let us start with the location of women's politics. This is local in two ways. To begin with, it is at the local levels of government, such as school boards and municipal councils, that elected women are found in the highest and the most rapidly increasing proportions. These are after all the most accessible jobs, often within walking distance of home. And home is still where something over half of all adult women are to be found. Furthermore, such positions are in fact part-time, as well as very low paid. Part-time and low paid work means women's work. The volunteer labour on which parties and pressure groups depend is of course not paid at

all. Both provincial and federal politics tend to be more pricey and, ultimately, more remote (though we might note that at the crucial base level both are necessarily local).

However, even in electoral politics, local does not necessarily mean insignificant when we talk about what are misleadingly called 'levels' of government. It is true that practitioners and analysts alike still agree that the prestige and the desirability of elected positions increase as they move out of the neighbourhood. The percentage of women involved decreases at the same rate. Most commonly, that correlation is interpreted to mean that as power increases, the role of women decreases. But we would do well to question the hierarchy that puts governance of a province like Prince Edward Island ahead of the governance of a metropolitan area like Toronto, which has a larger budget than that of many middle-sized countries. The career of Chicago's Mayor Jane Byrne is another reminder of the significance of the municipal route she followed, from a 'woman's job' in consumers' affairs to a situation of power superior to the dreams of most politicians, male or female.²

Outside of electoral politics, in the realm of women's action groups, we do characteristically find many small local organizations. In Canada, although the policy focus is often nation-wide, tradition and geography produce a structure that is most often only a very loose federation. Although the National Action Committee on the Status of Women has constructed a coalition of about 150 organizations, like its historical predecessors it stands or falls as the locals flourish or fade. Many of the constituent groups still look very much like the sewing circles and charitable associations that started 19th century women on the road to political activity. Such groups still meet in churches and school auditoriums, lacking the flavour and smell of the boys' backrooms. Amateur and informal, these are not the ambition-driven networks of conventional male politics. Nor do their members seek the hard currency of cash and careers. Yet they are unarguably political, for impact on government policy and personnel is what they are about.

Obviously related is the question of the issues upon which women's political activity focuses. We are looking now at differences of interest that separate males and females in all sorts of politics, and at issues where there seem to be real

Naomi Black

and enduring differences between the opinions of men and women. This is where we can identify the 'social' or 'women's' issues. They begin with questions related to the family, such as education, health and reproduction. Next come women's rights. Finally, there are issues so large they seem to transcend politics, such as war and peace and civil morality. Women seem to take all such topics far more seriously than men do. But they deny that such an interest is political, and men agree with them. For instance, French country women answering a survey in 1978 agreed that they would 'militate' to have a family planning centre set up. But that, they said, was not a political but a 'social' issue. They managed to ignore the long (political) struggle in France to make the mere mention of contraception legal. They also managed to overlook the role of government funding in the operation of the centre they wanted.³

The issues that concern women thus manage somehow to be seen as marginal to politics. If they are not too trivially domestic and social, they still evade the usual bases of both agreement and disagreement. In fact, one of the hardest struggles of women's organizations has been to have their concerns taken seriously. The inclusion of women with protected minorities in the United States was originally a malicious joke intended to hamper approval of the entire measure.⁴

Such responses are understandable (if hardly praiseworthy). The demands of women's politics often call in question the bases of the recognized contests of political life. Equal pay for work of equal value is basically not compatible with a system where union and management dispute shares in profit while both rely on the unpaid work of women in the home and the underpaid work of women in the workplace.⁵ Nor is a simple preference for peace compatible with the delicate system of the nuclear balance of terror. Therefore, it is not seen as 'political' to put in question the equity of wages or the stability of deterrence.

Thus, the issues that differentiate women in politics (or are perceived to do so) put them outside the borders of politics as normally conducted.

Such issues also put them outside partisan politics as such. In a mass democracy, change does not come from some sort of spontaneous outcry of the population. Rather, it occurs when some group can show that it has a significant level of support, worth the attention of the parties that are the channels for policy disagreement. If such a group is united, it will be able to get its concerns on the agenda for discussion and, possibly, action. Otherwise, again understandably, rulers and would-be rulers happily play one faction off against another. Women's groups tend to be in disagreement. Most seriously, even when they agree that certain ignored issues are important, they disagree about preferred solutions. Abortion is a good example in point. Here women's groups disagree violently. As a result, the established parties can agree on one thing — that this is an issue unlikely to produce anything for them but trouble.

In short, the cleavages between parties do not seem to coincide with the natural cleavages between women's groups and around women's issues. This is a partial explanation, perhaps, of women's greater reluctance to identify themselves with given parties or to support the party system. What have the typical party divisions of left/right, liberal/conservative to do with strong feelings that abortion matters, or with the disputes and ambivalences about the best public policy regarding it? When we add to this the fact that the parties are still far from welcoming to women candidates or even to women with a policy interest, we can see that women, as a group, can be

seen to be deeply non-partisan.

This brings us finally to the question of the outcome of women's politics — their apparent ineffectiveness. Statistics can drive us to despair as we contemplate the current situation of women in the workplace, with wages something like 60 per cent of men's and the gap not narrowing. More generally, the continuation of all forms of sexism, of rape and sexual harassment, of media exploitation and violence, of corruption and pollution, of violence and war, can leave us thinking that women's politics have been close to totally ineffective. If we want to feel even worse, we can note how we have failed to achieve the more specific goals the National Council of Women of Canada set for the first election in which women voted (almost 50 years ago).⁶ Or we can look at the number of women in Parliament, now in 1980 up 40 per cent from the last election to the magnificent total of just under five per cent. At this rate, we would *never* have more than 28 women's representatives.⁷

No wonder that veteran Canadian feminists such as Laura Sabia alternate between rage and gloom these days. No wonder a new feminist political 'party' now sets as its goal the elimination of 'competition and chaos,' a disavowal of even the sort of invisible politics I have identified here.⁸

Yet, I said 'seeming' ineffectiveness. And by this I mean that, if we look more closely at the actual situation, we will find a basis for hope and for optimistic predictions.

Let us begin by reminding ourselves how extraordinary the goals of women's politics are. Equality on the basic level of male-female relations would represent the most complete revolution the world has ever seen — the end of patriarchy. We know of no historical society in which such equality existed. Modern industrialized society in particular is dependent on a whole range of structures supported by analogies and ideologies that assume male domination. Yet it has been possible for us to legislate egalitarianism in the central realm of work. In a society with a practical as well as an ideological commitment to obedience to law, this represents an extraordinary transformation. When we despair of symbolic or token change, we forget the importance of the pictures in our heads. And we overlook the role of women's politics in producing societal change.

Even in more conventionally political terms we have come a considerable distance. Let us again take women MPs as a sort of lazy shorthand for women's role in politics. These visible politicians are both the tip of the iceberg and the end of a chain of action. It is worth remembering that at the very fewest such women still serve as role models, indications to other females that such a career is possible and to male party officials that a woman can indeed win. Even the myth that women will not vote for women is dying its deserved death; defeated MP John Rodriguez complained after the recent elections that Judy Erola had unfairly mobilized the 'housewife' vote against him to support her as a woman.⁹ This is important as an indicator of a possible growing solidarity. Even more important may be a few other facts about the current (14) women MPs. To begin with, none of them are 'legacies', present in office because they are wives, widows or daughters of male politicians. Second, the women elected since 1972 represent the vast and growing majority of all women who have ever served in Parliament in Canada. It thus looks as if there is a new trend of independent women politicians. In absolute numbers, they seem to have passed some crucial level, so that they are no longer oddities and freaks. They are now too many to generalize about easily, too many for the non-expert even to remember names. In no party caucus does a single, solitary soul (female) have to brave it out. It

is, at last, a far cry from poor Agnes Macphail, spotlighted and miserable in her home-designed blue serge.¹⁰

It is not clear how many of these women are or regard themselves as feminists. But, as the example of Ms. Erola suggests, they are increasingly involved with women and with women's organizations. To cite two examples, among established MPs: New Democrat Pauline Jewett was closely associated with the founding of the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women and with the Women's Studies Programme at Simon Fraser University when she was President there, and Liberal Aileen Nicholson drew her main funding and organizational support from women connected with the Ontario Committee on the Status of Women and the National Action Committee on the Status of Women. More generally, a vast mushrooming of voluntary women's organizations, responding in large part to the recommendations of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, scrutinizes and leans on these and the other women MPs. And there is evidence in the careers of such women that they are increasingly responsive to so-called women's issues. Conservative Flora MacDonald has been the best Canadian example here, as she turned to women for financial and other support of her bid for leadership of her party. In her case we can also see a growing interest in 'women's issues,' such as the situation of women employees of the federal government.

This bears out the suggestion of an important American study of effective women state legislators, which found that women politicians were virtually forced to become involved with women's issues and women's groups. Such women were not allowed to disregard anything relevant to the group they were assumed to represent — other women. At the least, women legislators had to make conscious decisions and take deliberate effort if they wished to disavow responsibility.¹¹ Again, in a Canadian context, one is reminded of how Monique Bégin had to justify her refusal to take on the Status of Women responsibility along with the Ministry of Health and Welfare. No man would have needed to!

What this seems to mean is that, in relation to politics, women do in fact form some sort of group, with a distinctive style, distinctive goals and some sort of identity with their visible representatives. The characteristics of women's politics are thus likely to continue. In the aggregate, it does seem that women respond similarly to men in the same situation. But, politically speaking, they are not in the same situation. What women want *as women* and not as human beings subject to pressures of age, health, race and religion, are things that put them into competition with men. When resources are limited, any call for a change in priorities is competitive. For men, the issues that matter for women as such are not salient — are not on the agenda for consideration. A famous study of community politics explained this in terms of the power of 'non-decision'. The most powerful are those who can keep issues from getting out into the open where they must be decided.¹²

The chief failure of women's politics is thus its failure to be visible. This is another way of saying its issues are not on the agenda for choice. The major goal, therefore, must be to make the issues visible. This translates into the need to increase to the maximum the number of women in the public, recognized sectors of politics. Feminists or not, such women are likely to become aware of the special situation of women. Media, colleagues and public together will repeatedly pose the questions, force the identity. And the local, women's-issues-oriented, non-partisan women's groups can do an enormous amount to make the meaning of this identity clear. However sympathetic, men cannot share

the awareness of disadvantage; their identity is with the group which benefits from the current system, whether they desire it or know it or not.¹³

Florynce Kennedy has a story about mice and lions. It ends this way: what would frighten you more, she asks, a million mice coming into a room, or one lion? This is a jeer at the likely impact of an organization of powerless women. And her moral was to work to strengthen individual women.

But people of all sexes are much more like mice than like lions. Men are powerful only because the system works for them, most significantly in taking seriously the issues which matter to them, in linking status to success in relation to such issues. I am arguing here that in the invisible structure of women's politics we have a network, of mice again if you like, that can give support and standing to visible representatives that could be effective within that same system.

We have a sort of substructure. What we need now is an agreement, not on outcomes, but on crucial issues. And we need more representatives linked into the substructure with which, in any case, they will be forced to identify. ©

¹ This definition is from Sidney Verba, Norman Nie, and Jae-On Kim, *Participation and Political Equality* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

² For a study of the Daley machine in Chicago which shows something about how Jane Byrne entered politics, see Mary Cornelia Porter and Ann B. Matasar, 'The Role and Status of Women in the Daley Organization,' in Jane Jaquette, ed., *Women in Politics* (New York: John Wiley, 1974). Byrne appears in fn. 58, p. 107. A more recent article gives a rather hostile account of the beginning of her term in office and her background: Eugene Kennedy, 'Jane Byrne Hard Times In Chicago,' *New York Times Magazine*, March 9, 1980.

³ From a study now in process, conducted by Janine Mossuz-Lavau and Mariette Sineau.

⁴ See Jo Freeman, 'The Politics of Women's Liberation,' (New York: David McKay, 1975).

⁵ I owe this idea to Nadine Winter. See her paper 'The Impact of Women's Interest Groups Upon Equal Pay Politics in Ontario,' presented in November 1979 to the Third Annual Meeting of the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women.

⁶ Reprinted in Ramsay Cook and Wendy Mitchinson, eds., *The Proper Sphere* (Toronto: Oxford University Press Canada, 1976).

⁷ The rate of increase is for each Parliament now about two-thirds the rate of the previous increase; from three to six women MPs was 100 per cent followed by six to 10 (66%) and 10 to 14 (40%). The projected changes would thus be roughly the following percentages of increase: 26%, 17%, 11%, 7%, 5%, 3%, and 2%. By this time there would be 28 women in Parliament, and the next election would see no more added. But, as I say, there is no reason to think that this rate will continue to decline.

⁸ See the statements of both Laura Sabia and Marg Evans (for the Feminist Party of Canada) at York's Women and Politics conference, as reported in the *Globe and Mail* and the *Toronto Star* of March 3, 1980.

⁹ Reported in the *Globe and Mail*, March 5, 1980.

¹⁰ See Rosabeth Moss Kanter, 'Women and the Structure of Organization: Explorations in Theory and Behaviour,' in Marcia Millman and Rosabeth Moss Kanter, eds., *Another Voice: Feminist Perspectives on Social Life and Social Change*, (New York: Garden City, Anchor Books, 1975).

¹¹ Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, *Political Woman* (New York: Basic Books, 1974).

¹² Peter Bachrach and Morton S. Baratz, 'Decision and Non-Decision: An Analytical Framework,' *American Political Science Review* 57 (September, 1963).

¹³ Of course not all feminists or even all women will agree that having women in situations of authority will help the cause of women. Virginia Woolf stated eloquently the problem of cooption, and the hopes of avoidance through the continuation of female solidarity, in *Three Guineas*.