

# Snow White and the Witch Queen

## Feminist Means and Ends in Politics

Les femmes qui ont peur des femmes 'politiques' jouent peut-être à Blanche Neige.  
L'auteur de cet article lance un appel aux femmes pour qu'elles s'impliquent elles-mêmes et votent féministe.

In response to the traditional question 'What do women want?' many women are now giving a non-traditional answer—'power.' These women are tired of having their causes reduced to side-issues in men's election platforms. Tired of trying to raise the consciousness of every successive male office-holder who has power over the institutions they wish to change. Finally, tired of being in the position of suppliants to the throne of male authority for every reform to which they feel justly entitled. Women face the stark reality of their own powerlessness even when their bids for reform succeed. When the next crosswalk is required, when the next cutback in day care is made, when the next lot of poisonous waste is to be dumped, they see that the entire process will have to be gone through again. Each concession is wrung from the patriarchy—not on its own merits, it seems, but at the whim of godlike figures whose priorities are not those of women, and who are free to change their minds later.

One legitimate means of breaking down the male power structure in Canada is simply always to vote for women candidates. This strategy has many advantages. First, it may enable the women's movement to throw its support behind the (almost inevitably) one serious female candidate in the riding, and thus to become a political force to be reckoned with. Second, if parties perceive women as winners, they are much more likely to field female candidates and to recruit women as members of mainstream activities within their structures. Finally, if a woman is elected to office,

she may well break down some of the stereotypes that prevent voters from taking women seriously as power figures.

A good example of this process is the success of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in Britain. Of course, she was not elected party leader at a party convention in the North American manner (and it is unlikely that such a convention would elect a woman). But her position of visibility does help to break down the stereotype of the dewy-eyed, liberal, emotion-ridden woman. *It is important that right-wingers discover that they can vote for a woman.*

One of the main aims of the women's movement has always been to decrease sex-role stereotyping. We have argued that for most positions in our society sex is irrelevant, that there is no inherent reason, for example, why people with ovaries should do the laundry and people with testicles should run the country. When we push for affirmative action, however, we are told that excellence, not sex, should be the only criterion for choosing candidates to fill any position.

There is absolutely no evidence that excellence has ever played the primary role in hiring, firing or electoral decisions. If it had, wouldn't excellence in high places be overwhelmingly obvious? What is obvious is that those in positions of power in most western countries are white, male and relatively wealthy.

Sex, race and economic factors seem to be better predictors of success than performance (as witness the latest election results). What we propose, in asking for affirmative action, is to tip the balance the other way—towards the female, the non-white, the disadvantaged. We are told that this is discrimination, and cries of 'excellence' are heard in the land. Yet how are we ever to arrive at a society that is sex-blind and colour-blind in its assessment of excellence, if women and members of minority groups are never seen in professional positions or positions of power?

Unfortunately, in the case of Margaret Thatcher, press coverage that consistently focuses on her sex (the 'iron maiden' rhetoric) undermines the seriousness of her mandate. It also adds to her visibility *as a woman*—as a representative of women. I fear that if her term in office comes to be viewed as a disaster, it will be a long time before another party chooses a woman as leader. The argument will be, 'We tried one once, and it didn't work out.' On the other hand, if history views her favourably, she will be seen just as a good Tory, faithfully carrying out the policies of her party; that is, her sex will seem irrelevant.

The problem with sex-role stereotypes is that they are irrational. Rational means to dislodge them can never work, because they have their own crazy, Catch 22 logic. There have always been exceptions to all racist and sexist stereotypes, but the myths persist. If the rule is stated as 'No woman is fit for public office,' then it should be necessary to cite only one case (for example, Elizabeth I) to

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disprove the rule. However, there are ingenious pseudo-scientific theories to the effect that all monarchs are really men—at least honorarily. It is argued that women are too ‘soft’ to handle power, but when they gain power by ruthlessly suppressing the ‘softness’ that was supposed to have unfitted them for office, they forfeit their ‘womanliness’. Thus, they are not ‘real women’. The rule stays in place but it is interpreted to mean that ‘real women’ are not fit for public office. Myths are like that. They have a way of shifting. The myth of women and power accommodates both Snow White and the evil, powerful Witch Queen—two images meant to keep us in our place. What is notably absent from the myth is the entire range of human possibilities that lie between.

Carolyn Bird, author of *Born Female*, refers to powerful women in patriarchal society as ‘loophole women’, women who have made their way up through loopholes in the system. They don’t change the situation, nor do they often feel that they have a stake in changing it. As long as women are seen as novelties, they may feel particularly threatened by competition from other women, that is, other candidates exploiting the same novelty. One or two ‘token’ women in any cabinet are enough.

So how do we change the system? Making more women powerful and putting them in places of visibility is only an interim solution. Women must be seen as a power bloc, with a unified

set of goals and feminist votes to deliver or withhold from candidates who make these goals their own. A female MP, for example, who wins a nomination from a male-dominated riding association, whose campaign organization is bound to be male, and who views her constituency as made up of men and the votes they control (in their homes, offices, unions), is not likely to woo the woman voter. In this sense she is exactly like her male counterpart, although her disassociation from women and their concerns is much less likely to be casual and accidental. She may have calculatingly discovered that to play up the ways in which she acts ‘like a man’ is the best way to be accepted as a serious contender. She will say, perhaps, ‘I’m running as a person, not as a woman,’ as though the terms were mutually exclusive.

At the Women in Politics Conference held at York University on March 1, 1980, former Tory MP Diane Stratas made some remarkable statements. These included the predictable ‘I always presented myself as a *person*’ (as if there might be some doubt!), as well as more striking comments: ‘Don’t be a castrator. If your motivation is to castrate men, then like children and dogs they will sense it and you will meet brick walls.’

This had an old-fashioned ring to it. I had not been called a castrating woman, even obliquely, in many years. What was new was that a *woman* of proven political ability should now choose to make this unprovoked warning or attack on the conference audience. Continuing her remarks, Stratas made use of a rather unsettling metaphor: ‘You have to be able not just to stick the knife in but to turn it.’

Remarkable, for a non-castrator of men, children and dogs!

Yet Stratas is not the villain. She did see the Women in Politics Conference as important enough for her to come to it, sit on the panel and participate in all of the day’s sessions for virtually nothing. And throughout the day she did try, by her own lights, to de-mystify the political process and to provide practical advice. Even the Marxist-Leninists didn’t view the conference as important enough to try to undermine it. The only political party that showed up in any numbers was the Feminist Party of Canada. Are they the only party to consider women their constituency?

Getting women into office is clearly not enough. Breaking down stereotypes is not enough if the women we smuggle in through the loopholes then turn around and are anti-feminist to our faces. The question is, why did we ever think it would be enough? In devising revolutionary strategies, will we always fall into the single-solution trap? During the last century and well into this one, women felt that if they could only get the vote everything would be all right. Now we seem to believe that if we can only get women into power everything will be all right. We want women on white chargers to rescue us, now that we know men won’t do it.

But it is not enough, to amend a metaphor, to stick the key in, to get women into office. We also have to know how to turn that key, to get those women to work for us. We must never let ourselves believe that interim strategies will work as final goals, or

that our political duties begin and end at the ballot box. In some cases we may have to vote against an individual woman in order to win some ground for women as a group.

By voting only for women, we may reinforce the belief that women candidates and only women candidates are automatically interested in (and take a feminist stand on) 'women's issues' such as day care, equal pay, freedom from harassment and assault, civil rights, family benefits, welfare laws, reproductive freedom, nuclear proliferation, external affairs, labour, health, education and transportation—to name a few. If there is no guarantee that all women think alike on these issues, then why bother to put women in power?

The fact is that we are taxed with almost no representation. A revolution is in order. Why are we so afraid to take power? 'Power corrupts.' We don't want to lose our purity in the process of claiming power. But doesn't this sound a little bit like Snow White? What is wrong with power? The temptation to absolute power is notably absent for women in our society; therefore I think absolute corruption lies, along with poisoned apples, in the land of fairy tales written by men! What other revolutionary movement has been so timid about shouting and singing 'power to the people'? The alternative to taking direct power is to spend the rest of our lives as lobbyists, committee women, volunteer charity workers—manipulating men into doing what will benefit us, but for all the wrong reasons.

Recently, I was a passenger in a car driven by a visitor to Toronto. I was giving him instructions to the restaurant we had chosen for dinner. I would say, 'Turn left on College,' but he would miss College; then we would have to turn around somehow, but he would miss it again coming the other way if I wasn't careful and we'd go through it all again. I didn't want to be a back-seat-driver and I did want to give him credit for knowing some basic geography of a city to which he had introduced me years ago. Suddenly I heard myself talking to him, and I heard his answers, and I recognized the situation. I knew how to reach our destination, so no matter how nervous my driving made him or how bad a passenger he made, the solution was clear: I had to take the wheel.

We have to take the wheel. We have to vote for women. But we must make it clear to women candidates what we want from them and we must work for them, not just expect them to have feminist convictions when they have had no experience of solidarity and identification with other women. We have to organize as feminists and remind our elected officials of the programs for which they were elected. We have to infiltrate parties and bring groups of committed feminists with us, to demonstrate that there is a political advantage in bringing in the programs we want. We have to take part in boring constitutional committees within the parties.

At the Progressive Conservative national leadership convention at which Flora MacDonald was defeated, only one out of the six delegates from each riding association had to be a woman. This figure, intended to act as

a minimum, in fact acted as a ceiling on the number of women delegates. In effect, once one woman delegate had been chosen, many associations collectively said, 'Okay, we've got our woman; now who else?' One central Canadian riding stonily insisted that they couldn't 'find' a woman to be a delegate. It turned out that the delegate selection meeting had been a rather casual matter of inviting a few of the boys around after dinner. Most of the MPs, MPPs, senators, ex officio delegates and party brass were men too, so we were given the spectacle of the almost exclusively male convention of a 'national' political party choosing a leader who must appeal to an electorate of which just over half is female. Representative democracy? No way. That constitution can be changed, but it is not enough to mobilize only at election time. We must prove to political parties that they are out of touch with the people they are trying to represent and that this is the reason for the often tricky positions in which they find themselves.

We're lucky we have women's centres and women's organizations—as revolutionary cells, as it were—but if they become cocoons or political ghettos we may lose even the minuscule advances we have made. It is in these places that we discover our commonality as women, our allegiance to feminist principles and our devotion to feminist goals. But the means to those goals is power.

We may well disagree on the best tactics for achieving power. I think all and any tactics are entirely appropriate. But until we make it clear that we are voting as feminists, then avowed feminists will be conspicuously absent from public office and it will be many more generations before our goals are those expressed by our leaders. ☉