

Feminist Party of Canada

Patricia Carey



Mary O'Brien

There were women wearing white gloves and pill box hats; women in army fatigues; women with children; women with the wire-frame student look; even a sprinkling of men. What linked them was a common interest in founding the Feminist Party of Canada. Altogether about seven hundred people gathered in Toronto on June 10 to discuss the need for such a party. This was not your typical political event. There was no hoopla, no rock bands, no streamers and no scantily clad cheerleaders psyching the audience up for the main attraction. Instead, the warm up was subdued and moving in its simplicity.

The panel, introduced briefly without catalogues of credentials, mirrored the cross section of women in the audience. Margaret Evans, the moderator, is the Vice-Principal of a Metro Toronto school. Laura Sabia is a veteran activist in championing women's causes. Angela Miles is a young woman beginning a university career teaching Women's Studies. And Mary O'Brien, a nurse for twenty-five years, and always a socialist, is now a white-haired academic with a dream.

Margaret Evans anticipated the question on everyone's mind: how can women from every political spectrum unite around a single political party outside of the political mainstream? She outlined the background to this historic meeting and charted the arguments which decided the organizers in favour of a political party rather than only a political caucus.

Those women who have held office in established political parties, she observed, have maintained very low profiles in lobbying for and articulating issues of concern to women. Whether their motive has been self-preservation or loyalty to the *priorities* of their male-dominated and male-focused parties, their public endorsement of issues such as improved day care facilities, improved social services for welfare and single mothers, family law reform and equal pay legislation and equal employment opportunity has been, at best, modest. Those women who are committed feminists who have tried to run for existing political parties, are almost never offered safe seats. (Witness Doris Anderson and Kay MacPherson). Those women who bank on organized political caucuses to effect changes in mainstream party politics would do well to recall the lack of impact the Canadian Labour Congress's support of the NDP had on either Broadbent's policies or electoral success.

The records of male politicians are, clearly, nothing to write home about. No federal party will touch abortion. Day care facilities have decreased in each of the last two years. Social benefits and services to women were the victims of government cutbacks. Women's affairs are buried in the portfolios of the Secretary of State and the Ministry of Health and Welfare. Promotion of women to middle and senior management in the Civil Service is shameful.

Evans closed her remarks with a statement from Fiona Nelson, slated to speak at the meeting but unable to attend. Nelson remarked that because no existing party has yet represented her concerns or politics, she has always resorted to voting for her local candidate on an *ad hoc* basis. A murmur of recognition went through the audience. Evans concluded that because the established parties have had the opportunity to propose changes and haven't, and because a political caucus will only enable women to pressure male-stream parties into token reforms, feminists need their own party. She invited the three panellists to respond to this imperative.

Laura Sabia identified the obstacles facing such a party. She said that although she would be happy to be proven wrong, she doubts that feminist issues alone are sufficient to carry a party, she doubts women alone can raise the millions of dollars required to launch an effective political campaign, and she suspects that this party might divide rather than unite women. The obstacles before us needed to be addressed. But did Sabia sound defensive because a new phase in women's history is questioning the past, a phase in which she was central? She seemed to pull rank on us. Her tone was almost patronising, implying that we, without her experienced perspective, were innocents, unwilling to face the realities ahead of us.

Angela Miles generated a more positive response because her remarks emphasized our shared experiences. She argued that every woman in the country has had her attitudes toward herself altered by the Women's Movement. The direction of our economic, political and technological progress now dictates that women must channel the personal changes they have undergone to effect similar changes in society. A feminist party built on such personal experience can not only aim to end the patriarchal separation between the public and private spheres, but embrace both self-professed feminists *and* those women who say 'I am not a feminist but . . . ' and who then proceed to rhyme off the policies and programs consistent with their personal experience which define the egalitarian feminist ideal.

Mary O'Brien picked up on Miles's reference to history — to her claim that the Women's Movement is now entering a new phase. O'Brien argued that feminism is the most radical, wide-spread and revolutionary movement of our time because it is an inevitable product of history. Liberalism in the 1640s, democracy in the 1790s and socialism in the 1860s were revolutionary visions which were dismissed by the ruling elite of their times but are now considered natural historical evolutions. Similarly, feminism is a historical imperative whose time has come. Women not only can, but must, replace the politics of violation — war, nuclear power, economic exploitation — with the feminist politics of integration. Implicitly answering Sabia's reservations, O'Brien admitted that to women trained to be practical, it might seem that all we who have hopes for this party can celebrate is a vision of the future uniting us. Vision alone, she said, is not enough to carry us forward to the realization of our goals. But without vision, we will go nowhere. 'Come share my dream,' were her final words. Nearly seven hundred women rose in response and stood up for that dream.

The dream will be translated into policies and platforms at the founding convention of the party this coming winter or spring. Women and men wishing to help shape the party's policies, to attend the founding meeting or to take out an interim membership should write:

The Feminist Party of Canada
P.O. Box 322
Maple, Ontario

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