

High Noon at the Cow Café

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L'auteure se rappelle la formation du comité ad hoc qui a rapidement été établi après la démission de Doris Anderson du CCCCF pour réagir à l'annulation de la conférence sur la Constitution et pour aller protester à Ottawa.

Doris Anderson, President of the Canadian Advisory Council for the Status of Women had called a conference on the Constitution to discuss equity rights as an essential concept to be included in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom. The date was set, the conference confirmed, I'd packed my bag and was going to be on my way to a meeting that would validate the inclusion of equity rights for women. After all, in Ontario we had Affirmative Action programs in most of the Ministries and in Colleges and Universities. The equity issues we had been fighting for since the 1970s would obviously be enshrined in the Charter of Rights. It was towards the end of January. It was cold.

Suddenly Lloyd Axworthy, the Minister responsible for the status of us—the status of all Canadian women—cancelled the conference! And Doris, who had an uncanny intuition for the right response, quit. The news hit the press rooms and when Linda Ryan Nye got wind of it she immediately called

Kay Macpherson, who was, as we all knew, President of the Voice of Women. It was bad enough to have a man responsible for our status cancelling a conference organized by Doris Anderson, but Doris's resignation from the Council signalled how serious the situation was. It got every woman activist up in arms. And in those days we were all activists—no matter what you did as mother, wife, lawyer, journalist, teacher—if you wanted equity for women you were an activist. So the phones started ringing all over Toronto and Ottawa.

Linda Ryan Nye called a meeting at the Cow Café, on John Street in Toronto; she worked in the building across the street and knew that the Cow could hold us—no matter how many came. But it was short notice—“Be there at 12:00 noon,” she suggested. The word spread. No one knew how many could meet so quickly to respond to this crisis. My phone started ringing at 10:00 that morning—first Kay Macpherson then Laura Sabia, then Marion Colby-Lynn. By noon there were twelve of us around a table in the Cow Café—agitated, committed, and angry! The words flew: questions, comments, meal orders all rolled into a clarion call for action. “If we're going to organize ourselves into a group that will respond to this, we have to have a name.”

“What are we ordering for lunch?” “Who wants a salad?” “Who are we?” Kay, who was always practical and low key, said: “That's easy, we'll call ourselves the Ad Hoc Committee.” Over lunch and notebooks, the new Ad Hoc Committee (of the Cow Café) went to work and decided the course of action we needed to take. We agreed that it was no good to write a response as nothing ever comes of written protests. “We'll have a counter conference.” Yes, everyone agreed, a Counter Conference. There had to be a parade of women. “But not just in Toronto,” said one. Another reminded that this was a Canadian issue—every woman in Canada needed to know. Still another raised the issue of finding a place in Ottawa—“It's essential we have a meeting space and we've got to get it fast.” Kay said, “I'll phone Maureen McTeer,” and she did, but got no response at Maureen's line. Laura said, “I'll phone Flora MacDonald.” She went to the pay phone in the café (wearing one of her signature smart hats, this one with a clutch of feathers on the side) and came back quickly. We stopped talking and looked at her, so hopeful that she'd reached Flora. But no, she just needed more quarters! Around the table, the backpacks, leather bags, and purses opened and out came all the change we had. I gathered the mound of quarters and



Ad Hockers, third on the left is Doris Anderson. Second on the right is Pat Hacker.

went with Laura back to the phone booth.

Laura got Flora MacDonald on the line right away. She explained we had organized a group in Toronto to respond to the cancelled conference but that we wanted to expand, to take the protest to Ottawa. Where could we get some free space if more women joined us? Flora (a very loyal member of the opposition and a good feminist) asked Laura how many women she expected would turn up in Ottawa. Who knew? “Do you expect a busload,” she inquired. Laura turned to me and asked, “Can we get a busload?” I said, “Tell her we’ll get two!” Flora, just like that, said, “I’ll get the room.” Triumphant we returned to the group, who were now ordering their desserts.

We had a room, we had a committee, all we need now were two busloads of women and a date. When to do this? It was the end of January; we knew we had to move quickly. Someone suggested two weeks and

then it was set, Valentine’s Day, February 14th—an inspired date for a sweetheart meeting with the boys on the hill.

Now all we had to do was get the two busloads, a minimum of sixty women! How do we do this fast? Kay said, “We’re all members of NAC (the National Action Committee on the Status of Women) so the NAC offices are open to us. We’ll meet there tonight and start addressing envelopes.”

That night, five or six of us sat around the table at the NAC office, pulling addresses from the files and preparing the notice that had to be printed and sent out that night. Furiously folding paper and stuffing envelopes, we discussed strategy, politics, guessed numbers, and talked about Doris—nobody else could galvanize us into action like this. What a catalyst she was. We all felt the empowerment in organizing, in getting behind her. There was a buzz in the room, a rush that

carried us forward. Some of the Ad Hoc Committee members were already organizing with other grassroots women’s groups—especially with the women in Ottawa who would be vital in the organizing of this conference.

The atmosphere in the room was electric. We were showing Lloyd Axworthy that *we* were responsible for *us*; we didn’t need a Minister. We raised questions about daycare, wheel chair access, accommodation, registration. How to and who could look after so many details? We were all plowing through our piles of names when Laura Sabia came across an address for Happy Valley Labrador. “Can we expect a woman to come from Happy Valley, Labrador? Isn’t that a bit much?” There were lots of laughs but an immediate response from around the table was “Yes, we can! Every member of NAC gets the call!” So Laura just folded the letter and licked the envelope shut. In this way women

across Canada, from cities to the remotest villages were included.

It was a heady affair for all of us and a watershed experience for me. When we turn our anger into action we can shift things—even major things like a new Constitution for Canada.

The next worry was the mailing cost. Kay Macpherson reminded us that NAC didn't have any funds at all. Laura laughingly responded, "They don't even have a wet sponge pad—here we are licking every envelope." The problem for mailing was a real one—the pile of envelopes was getting high. "How are we going to pay for the stamps?" It was Laura who volunteered and said she'd pay for the stamps, but refused to lick them. Hundreds of envelopes were in the mail by the next day.

The Ad Hoc Committee was a reality. Its members would continue to work and make the Counter Conference in Ottawa a reality. An amazing day. One that began at 10:00 a.m. with a phone call and ended at 10:00 p.m. with the makings of an historic conference underway. It will always be a landmark memory for me. On February 14, 1981, over a thousand women crowded into the Parliament Building in Ottawa to have the conference that Doris Anderson knew was essential.

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Constitute!

(1959 Tune – Rompin' Ronnie Hawkins's song "Mary Lou")

Lyrics (two verses and chorus) by Linda Palmer Nye

Constitute!
They're sellin' diamond rings.
Constitute!
They're offering pearls and things.
Tell 'em you want your rights – every one of them
enshrined.
Tell 'em you got both eyes wide open this time.

Well I went to the Minister Responsible for Me.
You remember then it was Lord Axworthy.
He smiled that smile and he shook those curls;
Said you leave it to me I'll look after you, girls.

Constitute
Sellin' diamond rings.
Constitute!
Offering pearls and things.
We told him we wanted our rights – every damn one of
them enshrined;
Told him we've got both eyes wide open this time.

It was 1981 and they were at it again;
Every single Premier and our favourite PM.
They talked and they traded till they all could agree
They'd just leave out the natives and destroy equality.

Constitute!
They're sellin' diamond rings.
Constitute!
They're offering pearls and things.
Tell 'em you want your rights – every one of them
enshrined.
Tell 'em you got both eyes wide open this time.

Linda Palmer Nye is a feminist, based in Toronto, who writes feminist songs to encourage our sense of humour—and feed the fire in our bellies—because both are essential ingredients for a successful revolution.