

Women seek the 52 percent solution

Judy Rebick is president of the National Action

Committee on the Status of Women (NAC),

a coalition of five hundred women's organizations

across Canada. In the face of a neo-conservative

political climate NAC plays a crucial role in pushing

feminist alternatives to the forefront of political

debate. In an interview with *Excalibur's*

David Black, Rebick discusses the new direction of feminism in Canada.

by David Black

David Black: Canadian feminism has seen federal government cuts to NAC and to community-based programs for women across the country, the failure of a proposed public daycare program, and other difficulties. Nonetheless, feminists continue to make themselves heard, as NAC's high profile in Canada indicates. What is the character of Canadian feminism at a time of high economic anxiety, and what role does it have in the national political culture?

Judy Rebick: The feminist movement is playing a leadership role in terms of groups which are disadvantaged in society or groups which are out of power. The movement itself is undergoing a profound transformation. Up until several years ago, the movement was primarily white and middle class, and had as its goal very defined gender issues like abortion, day care, and pay equity.

What's happened in the last several years is that, in the attempt to include women of colour, aboriginal, disabled and working class women, we have also understood that the agenda of feminism has to be much broader.

There's always been a socialist feminist current in the Canadian women's movement, a current which has been stronger here than almost anywhere else in the world. That current always argued that the women's movement has to make coalition with other movements for social change and have a broader agenda.

But what's happening now is that the whole of the women's movement is recognizing this. What we see is the movement becoming more and more active in areas of anti-racism, economic and anti-poverty issues, social issues like the national question and the constitution, and also beginning to make a radical critique of institutions in society. That's a critique which has always been there, but which hasn't been generalized in the way we're doing it now.

What's happening is that while feminism is not as visible as it has been in the past, the women's movement is much stronger because women have a much bigger role in mass institutions. Women are taking power inside these institutions—the media, the university, the trade unions, the aboriginal and Black communities—in a way that's more effective than if the women's movement existed outside these institutions. Issues that women have been historically and are presently concerned with—namely the violence and the abortion choice issues—are becoming much more a part of the mainstream.

How is that critique of institutions making itself known?

One of the central campaigns NAC adopted at our last annual meeting was something called the "52% Solution", a feminist alternative to the neo-conservative agenda. This was adopted by an organization which has five hundred member groups, including the YWCA and the Women's Committee of the United Church of Canada. This is not a radical membership, in the traditional sense

of radical.

Yet, the membership supports this program. And I, as a known radical, get very little criticism from the membership for the things I say.

That's because women are running up against this wall everywhere we are, and realizing that we have to go beyond the traditional belief that getting a few more women in power will bring equality. Or that legal equality—a significant achievement we won by getting the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1981—means we will go on forwards hereafter.

Our "52% Solution" program was developed because we found that even inside the various coalitions in which we participate—like the Action Canada Network (ACN)—oppressed groups didn't have a voice. NAC has a voice that's listened to at a national level because when we enter a room, we represent five hundred groups. But at a local level, women in those groups feel isolated and often dominated. We found we have to organize independently as women in order to influence the coalitions, something that's true of visible minorities as well.

The "52% Solution" argues that there is a global ideological current which has "hegemony" or ideological dominance in the world. That hegemony is the notion that global competition and profit for business is the way to guarantee prosperity for everyone, and that prosperity will mean good social programs. So far, what we've seen is that prosperity for business means impoverish-



ment for everyone else. We see that not only in Canada, but internationally.

The struggle to challenge that ideology is most powerful when it comes from the women's movement. That's because there is a competing ideology of women's equality that has been recognized at an international level through the United Nations declaration on status and equality for women. That equality is recognized, certainly in the western world, as a goal of society. As women, we can challenge this ideology more successfully than a lot of groups can. That's why we started the "52% Solution" strategy, and plan to move it internationally.

How does your work relate to the renaissance movement politics of the 1990s?

NAC has been doing new things in the social movements. For example, take the constitutional debate. We've argued that the labour movement, disabled people, and minority groups have to get more active in the constitutional fight, and that that participation has to be on the basis of a "three nations" position. Recognition of the aboriginal community as a founding people represents an alternative to any of the positions taken by the political parties. That level of leadership for NAC and the social movements is new.

People talk about the new coalition politics, with reference to the Action Canada Network, for example. But the first coalition-building happened between labour women and community women in Toronto. There was also the Solidarity movement in British Columbia. The Network was a product of those early experiences, and took it to a whole other level. Though the ACN started around the issue of free trade, we soon learned that free trade was part of a whole ideological agenda.

Beyond national coalition politics, there's starting to be an international meeting of minds around issues that is very new. The debate around free trade, with groups in Canada, the U.S., and Mexico meeting together, is very new. We're also thinking about a conference of women against the global neo-conservative agenda, where we would develop an international strategy for the women's movement.

We're way ahead of this in Canada. The women's movement in other countries has not yet got to this point. So Canada can play a leadership role, just as Canada is playing a similar role in the free trade issue.

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cated level of coalition politics in Canada, relative to almost any other country, partly because of the weakness of our social democratic party. In Europe, social movements and the women's movement particularly don't exist in the same way. A lot of that energy is directed toward the green and the social democratic parties. In Canada, those groups are more independent.

Women I've interviewed have characterized feminist politics as, first, motivated more by value statements or principles than dogmatic explicit policy and, second, able to make innovative connections between issues as a kind of parallel to coalition-building. How do you characterize feminist politics philosophically?

Women are fifty percent of everyone, so it's easy to make the connections. But I don't believe feminism is about principles, though I agree it's not dogmatic. Like the environmental movement, feminism operates according to a different theory of knowledge. Though that theory is not well-developed, in both movements knowledge comes from the base and not the top.

The traditional left view, whether you're talking about social democracy or Marxism, is that an elite on the top develops a line and brings it to the people. In the feminist movement, to contrast, we understand that knowledge comes from our experience, and then is developed into a program. For example, with the "52% Solution", we developed a woman's charter which we took from NAC policy and then put out to our membership.

What's going to come out of that process will be very different and much better than what we put in. This is not a consultation, where we hear what women have to say and then decide what goes in. We're saying to women that they can inform that charter according to their experience, whether they're rural or urban, visible minority or white women. It's not that we don't have a program, but that that program is constantly in process.

In an op-ed article in the October 1991 *Globe & Mail* about Senate reform, you offered as an alternative to provincial representation in that institution the idea of "communities of interest". How does that idea contrast with more traditional or liberal concepts of individual citizenship?

Increasingly, we're seeing our struggle in terms of one for collective and not individual rights. In fact, women's rights are often counterpoised to individual rights in society. Aboriginal and Black people are speaking of group rights too.

We're not rejecting the liberal notion of individual rights completely, since we still need them. But in 1990, collective rights has become the predominant issue, because you have a systemic and systematic oppression of groups which together form a majority in society.

The mythology of individual rights and their importance to democracy has been perpetrated on a population that knows very little democracy. In a society with such a huge gap between rich and poor, the notion of equality is an absurd notion when you take into account that division. We're challenging the idea that the protection of individual rights ensures equality, and believe that idea antithetical to the women's and aboriginal movements. Treating everyone the same in an unequal society promotes inequality.

As for the constitutional debate, the way that collectivities are being recognized is on the basis of provincial interests. But those interests are not those of the people, but defined in terms of the provincial governments.

Certainly, there are regional realities in this country. Being a feminist in Nova Scotia is different than being one in Vancouver. This notion that the provinces should have a say in Senate selection, for example, is about power politics and not about representation. The collectivity of women, of visible minorities, or of urban versus rural populations is not recognized.

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