

Reclaiming woman-centered values

By CHRISTINA BALAS and ELIZABETH DONOVAN

While drawing the picture of a transformed society, Sheila Rowbotham sketches in the unique images and experiences of woman-centered values.

In the second of the three-part feminist lecture series, Sheila Rowbotham asked the question, "What do women want?" But for the packed house in the Rebecca Cohn auditorium, her talk offered more than questions and answers.

Rowbotham begins her search by quoting Hester Eisenstein's three possible directions that a feminist quest for the future can take. The three different paths were:

"The option of agreeing to compete in the male-defined world of politics on its own terms. The option of withdrawing from that world out of pessimism due to its essentially patriarchal nature; creating instead another world of female retreat. The last option, entering the world and attempting to change it in the image of the woman-centered values.

In Sheila Rowbotham's opinion, only this last option offers any hope for the majority of women. But it also raises a tricky question; what are these woman centered values?

She gives no simple answers. "Women inhabit different bits of social existence, and consequently our notions of what is woman-centered, and what is not, vary," says Rowbotham.

She says the definitions of woman centered values vary in the same measure that our cultural, social and political realities vary.

"In the 1930's and 40's, feminists were trying to raise the status of women as homemakers. The modern women's liberation movement stresses the oppressive aspects of family life, whereas South-African women consider the destruction of family life as one of the worst crimes of apartheid," says Rowbotham.

Each group defines its central values in opposition to the actions or values of the predominating culture which it feels most oppresses it.

"Our dreams of freedom come from unfreedom," says Rowbotham.

She believes the issues behind the woman's liberation movement are not created within a vacuum. They are conceived and expressed from present political thought.

Women face a dilemma in trying to find values that define their 'femaleness'. If the definition is too broad, it will result in a lack of



cohesiveness and concerted action; if it is too narrow, it will result in a self-imposed stereotyping, where deviation is heresy.

Rowbotham demonstrates just how women are caught in a Catch 22 situation.

In the 19th century, feminists defined their woman centered values as cooperation, caring, harmony and gentleness. Ironically, during the Victorian era, these values served to reinforce rather than transform male-dominated bourgeois world, says Rowbotham.

Rowbotham says the definition of woman centered values is a double-edged sword. It can be used by the predominating culture, as well as by women against themselves, in branding deviation and "Keep women in their proper place."

Once women have chosen to enter the world and affect changes in alliance with men, the question arises whether women can maintain their own ideas and visions without sacrificing these woman-centered values.

Speaking of women involvement in trade unions, Rowbotham asks: What politics are for women? Does it mean giving women the opportunity to learn to behave, think and act like men, do their jobs and adopt their committee rules?

This is surely a false equality, requiring only women change while men carry on the same, while women lose some of their "femaleness," says Rowbotham.

Another stumbling block for the self-determination of women is the fact that feminist thought, like any subversive ideology, cannot be

divorced from the values of mainstream society.

"After the tremendous upheaval of the Russian Revolution, young Communists envisaged a new proletarian culture, which broke completely from bourgeois culture. Against this Trotsky argued that a working-class culture could not be contrived in this manner. It had to draw upon the culture it opposed.

"If feminism seems to present a contesting culture, it too draws on the dominant male-defined world," explains Rowbotham.

Thus arises the problem: Which values do we keep, which do we throw out?

In order for women to have more say in their destiny, active participation is crucial.

"It is vital that feminist politics assert the values of women's existing social experiences, as a means of gaining space for women to determine in particular historical circumstances what they want to hang on to," says Rowbotham.

And she lives up to her message. When Rowbotham returns to England she'll be met with a backlog of work for the Greater London Council.

For women like Sheila Rowbotham, "the personal is political" is not only a slogan—it's a way of living. □

Sheila Rowbotham, writer, poet and playwright now works in London, England for the Greater London Council (GLC), a progressive body that resources grass roots projects for low income earners. Some of her best-known books are Woman's Consciousness, Man's World and Women's, Resistance and Revolution.

Tuition fees increase along with tractor parts says labour candidate

By WENDY COOMBER

McDonough attacked. Donahoe defended. Godfrey joked. Nieforth tried to relate his Labour background to the present education system.

The room was packed more with reporters and party supporters than with the students for whom the debate was intended. The questioners wanted answers; the answerers wanted votes.

Representatives from the four provincial parties debated education issues at a forum at the Students' Union of Nova Scotia (SUNS) conference held this weekend.

Alexa McDonough, provincial NDP leader, began by saying "In Nova Scotia today the [provincial] Conservative party has systematically undercut budgets to post-secondary institutions and taken away from student aid."

She held the provincial Tories responsible for not notifying students of their student aid, or schools of their operating budgets until halfway through the year.

Education minister, Terrence Donahoe, countered by quoting figures to support his government's "firm commitment" to students

He admitted that Nova Scotia was eighth in providing operating grants per student and in other areas "the dollars per student do not stand well." But, he said, for 1982-83 "our government's increase in operating grants ranks us first over all in the provinces," and Nova Scotia was third in the country last year for per capita operating grants and student aid.

John Godfrey, Liberal candidate for Halifax-Citadel, filled in for provincial Liberal leader, Sandy Cameron, who was unable to attend.

University is not for everyone, he said. According to Godfrey, to be a student one needed "basic raw intellectual ability" and desire. He said few people meeting this requirement could not get into school.

"It should be the case where the students in this room are the brightest and the best we can offer," he said.

Alfred Nieforth, a mainland member of the Cape Breton Labour Party, said education was "not directly in his field," but noted tuition fees were increasing, as were the price of tractor parts and mortgages.

"Down at the bottom where the ordinary people are," said Nieforth, "it's very sterile. There's very little filtering through."

When Dr. Om Kamra, a Dalhousie biology professor, asked the candidates if they supported more university funding, especially for research and development, Nieforth said he would not support it if it went to developing armaments.

"We need scientists to replant our ravaged forests, we need better livestock," he said.

McDonough said she wanted funding returned to the 1980 budget of 6.5 percent and the capping taken off Extra-Provincial Funding (EPF). She said she would also like to see funding for research set by the government and less by corporate donors.

Donahoe said government funding has expanded into other areas at such a pace that the demand on the public purse "has grown and, one might say, exploded."

He said his government has struggled unsuccessfully to increase funding for research and development, and has tried to get the federal government to reverse its decision to cap the EPF.

Geoff Martin, Students' Union of Nova Scotia Chair, asked the candidates how they would supplement student aid.

Donahoe said he would like to see the family contribution criterion eliminated. He also said his government was close to processing student loans by computer. This would mean getting them back to the students within two weeks.

McDonough said the ceiling on maximum aid should be lifted to \$54,000, family contribution criteria should be readjusted, and weekly-living costs should be increased to "correspond to reality."

The debate was organized and sponsored by the Students' Unions of Nova Scotia last Saturday. □

Special revision dates set for enumeration

Students who have not been enumerated are still eligible to vote in the Nov. 6 provincial election.

The elections returning office has set the following times as special revision days; Oct. 25 and 26, 11 am-1 pm, 2 pm-6 pm, and 7 pm-9 pm. Oct 27 3 pm-5 pm.

Students can then be enumerated at 1217 Barington St.