

# Being Rosemary Brown

by Sandra Bit

Feminist writer, Rosemary Brown spoke to a large and enthusiastic audience Feb. 8 at the North Branch Public Library. Retired from B.C. provincial politics, Brown currently sits on the boards of the South African Educational Trust Fund, and The Canadian Women's Foundation. She has participated in national and international conferences on peace and human rights, is featured in the 1988 NFB film "No Way, Not Me," and hosted the 1987 TV Ontario six-part series "Women and Politics."

She is also involved with MATCH International a development agency which works with women in the third world. Her talk consisted of readings from her recently published autobiography *Being Brown*, interspersed with brief speeches on topics ranging from her childhood in Jamaica to her involvement with politics, civil rights and feminism.

## Women must fight oppression together despite colour.

Her talk revolved around the issues of racism and feminism. By supporting one, Brown felt, she was betraying the other.

"As a black person, I believed that every criticism they (the black community) levelled at the women's movement was correct. Yet as a woman, I knew that much of my exploitation and oppression would continue even if the colour of my skin turned white. I could not turn my back on the women's struggle, yet I did not enjoy being perceived as a traitor to my race when I spoke out about the sexism of the black male."

She spoke of her introduction to feminist theory through Betty Friedan's ground-breaking work, *The Feminine Mystique*, and her intoxication with the concept of sisterhood.

In her view, women must join together to fight oppression despite colour. As executive director of MATCH International, a non-governmental organization which matches the resources of women in the Western world with the needs of the women of the third world, Brown works closely with the problems of

women of all races, colours and creeds around the world. She emphasized that while many black women are unwilling to support the feminist movement because they are suspicious of its white, middle class origins, this fear and suspicion must be overcome if women are to eliminate the oppression that has restricted their freedom for so long.

As Brown explained in *Being Brown*:

What I had learned from feminism was that women's place had as much to do with the social and economic system as it had to do with race. I believed that black women had to take control of their lives, establish their priorities and pursue their goals. I also believed that an independent, secure woman had more to contribute to any struggle than an insecure dependent one, and that the battle against racism would be fought more effectively by women and men standing side by side as equals, than by an unbalanced, lopsided team of unequal partners."

For Brown, racism and sexism are intertwined. In her view, "if either the struggle against racism and sexism were won, the victory for me would be a 50 per cent solution. To achieve 100 per cent success both struggles have to be successful."

She described her first encounter with racism "Canadian style" when she came to Montreal from Jamaica as a teenager to study at McGill. She explained how difficult it was for her and other Jamaican students to discuss racial discrimination in Canada:

Part of the reason, I guess is because of the subtle and polite nature of Canada's particular brand of racism. We often found it difficult to describe to each other racist experiences because, except in the case of housing and employment, their form was so nebulous — a hostile glance — silence — being left to occupy two seats on the bus while people stood because no one wanted to sit beside you — being stopped and questioned about your movements by police in the daytime in your own neighbourhood — the assumption of every salesperson who rang your doorbell that you were the maid. How do you protect yourself against such practices? How do you tell someone to beware?

While there are no easy answers to the painful questions such treatment provokes in the recipient of discrimination, a sense of humour helps. "While it does not ease the pain of the victim, a sense

of humour may help to penetrate the racist mind," Brown said.

Outsiders and Canadians have serious misperceptions about the existence of racism in Canada. While it is alive and well, as is manifested in the current racial tensions in Nova Scotia, it is usually not as openly violent as racism in either the U.S. or England. Brown connected racism and sexism by emphasizing that both are hideous forms of oppression which victimize human beings in general, and women specifically.

## Historically, education fits people into slots

Brown's involvement in politics, as a member of the British Columbia legislature for 14 years, and her experience in social work and education have given her insights into the patriarchal structure of Canadian society:

"Most politicians are men who are largely ignorant of and unconcerned with the problems of poverty and violence women face, who have never considered women's concerns legitimate. 'The nation's business' was always assumed to be a male sphere, beyond the interest and capacity of women," Brown asserted. "Despite changing attitudes, politics continues to be a testosterone-driven arena, and male politicians continue to be uncomfortable with the changing role of women."

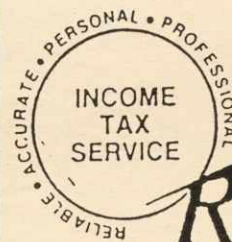
Brown insisted that before the

situation can improve for both minorities and women there must be drastic changes in education. "Historically, education was designed to fit people into

their slot, according to class, race and sex. If we expect education to change society, we

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