

Politics of Feminism

By ERIN GOODMAN

On March 7th, over two hundred women marched through the street of north end Halifax. They marched to celebrate their diversity, and to protest a society that's geared towards maintaining a status quo that oppresses women.

To some, the International Women's Day celebrations represented a unification of strength, as women's groups from all over Halifax and the surrounding region met to share their resources and relate their experiences.

To others, the gathering only accentuated the increasingly frag-

mented nature of the women's movement in Halifax. A workshop on "Women and Politics", staged by the NDP party of Nova Scotia, addressed a particular problem: the tensions between women devoted to partisan politics and women who are political within the women's movement.

Eileen O'Connell, a high school teacher and the NDP candidate for Halifax-Citadel, sparked debate with her comment; "I still feel a lot of the time that I haven't paid my dues in the women's movement." The Antigonish native, describing herself as "Unabashed partisan", doesn't deny the guilt she experiences for not working directly through the women's movement to aid disadvantaged women. But she resents the social pressure that forces women into the roll of nurturer

and supporter, while weaning them away from the traditional male field of politics. "Female guilt — I think that's one of the biggest dangers," she says.

Once woman attending the workshop expressed the concern that women working within partisan politics are buying into a male-dominated power structure, and foregoing their effectiveness in the women's movement to become ineffective members of political parties. Another participant from the Pictou Women's Centre feels she is more useful in politicizing women through her work than through partisan politics.

"If people are seduced away from the work they do in the movement," commented a woman who had dropped out of partisan politics after becoming

disillusioned with a political structure that favours men, "I think we've really lost as women."

NDP candidate Maureen MacDonald understands the resentment many women feel towards politics, having worked extensively with poor women disadvantaged by the system. "I see working with a political party as working for power — there's a certain crassness to that," explains MacDonald, who feels that there's a danger that women in politics will become like their male counterparts. But the years she spent trying to reform the system through the movement alone took their toll. "I got tired of lobbying."

Another concern raised at the gathering was the commitment of the three major parties to

improving the status of women in Nova Scotia. In response to the question, "Should women get involved in any political party?", some participants agreed on the grounds that any female representation must be beneficial in the face of an overwhelming male political majority. Eileen O'Connell violently opposed the affirmative position.

"I might agree with you if I felt confident that all political parties were striving for change in the quality of women's lives," she said. "I don't say elect any woman just because she's a woman. I think you have to look at what she stands for and whether she supports the women's movement." O'Connell defends accusations that partisan politics drain the women's movement by luring volunteers away from giving direct aid to women. "That's based on an unfair assumption that women are good at the same things," she rebuts. "I'm a good candidate, but I was a shitty organizer."

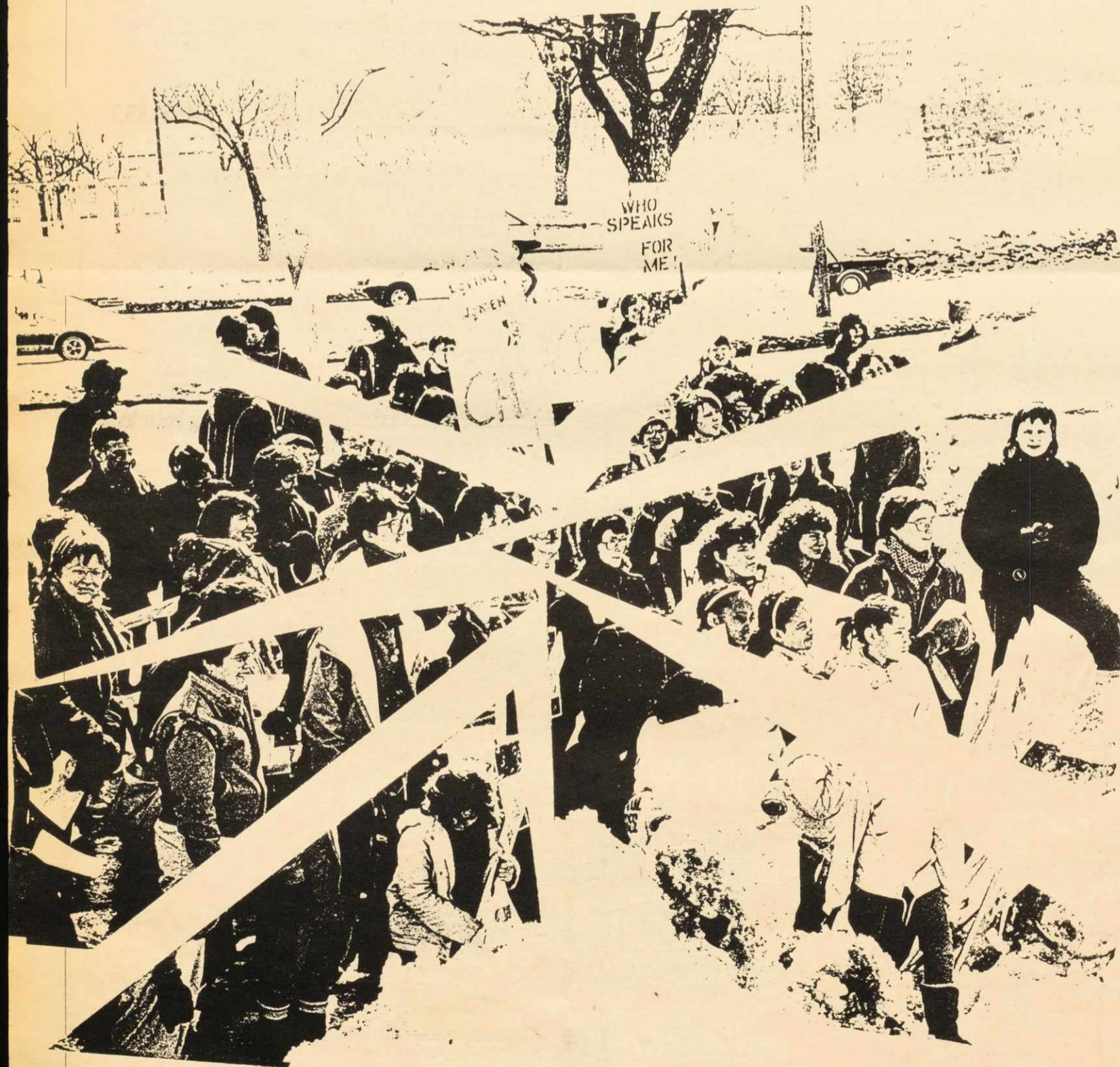
The apparent rift in social attitudes between political women and those who are political within the women's movement seems slight when compared to the clash between local women working for opposing political parties.

Extreme differences in political ideology are natural, and constructive when voiced to initiate social change. But women within political parties are often seen as being primarily responsible for the welfare of all women, and not merely for the interest of their political factions.

The question must be raised as to whether women in partisan politics are causing stagnation within the women's movement, by ignoring issues aimed at women's concerns. Policies favouring the welfare of women often prove unpopular to men within political parties and the voting population, creating a temptation for women wishing to further their political careers to avoid issues of controversy.

Mary Clancy is a lawyer, a radio broadcaster, a columnist, a teacher at Mount Saint-Vincent University and a member of the Executive of the Liberal Party of Nova Scotia. Above all, she is a feminist. And she's concerned that women within political parties are not using their public visibility to promote equality for women, therefore jeopardizing the efforts of the women's movement.

"I think that there are women in the political parties who are not feminists," she says. "And most of them are in the Tory party." But while she feels that there's a danger of "traditional" women being ineffective within their parties, she feels that the benefits of partisan involvement outweigh the costs. Commenting that "you can still maintain your political equilibrium in high heels", she believes that women should become involved in any political party simply to lessen



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