

Conversation

with Angela Miles

June 10 of this year may prove to be a major landmark in Canadian history. On that day, 600 women and a smattering of men gathered in Toronto to form a new political party, the Feminist Party of Canada. One of the founders of the Feminist Party is Angela Miles, a lecturer at Atkinson College. Excalibur's **Lydia Pawlenko** spoke with her at a conference sponsored by the party last weekend.

What in your life made you a feminist?

I've always been concerned about the inequalities in society and the poor quality of people's lives on a general international level, including the developed western industrialized nations. I was quite active around a lot of political issues in the radical movement and student movement in general. For me, feminism is really the integration of myself as a woman with those concerns for changing the world in progressive ways. Feminism allows that kind of integration that I found was lacking in other areas of radical politics.



Bryon Johnson

Why was the Feminist Party of Canada established?

Well, I think the women's liberation movement and the kind of activities going on for a long time, with the kind of experience women have gained, has been very important in developing a kind of culture that is female, and building connections and networks and so on. This has allowed us to go to a new phase where we want publicly to affirm feminism and to have a feminist presence in politics. We've been there... we've been pushing... we've been having pressure groups... we've been struggling. But as far as a vocal, high level profile in political life, we haven't been there. Now we're at a point where we can begin to build that presence without leaving behind or denying our commitment with integrating the personal and the political, the public realms and the private, and our commitment to transform politics. We now have the strength, so that in getting involved in the narrow political realm we don't have to be frightened that our vision and basic values will be destroyed.

Is it possible for the Feminist Party of Canada to work within the present Canadian political system?

Well, I would say that the Feminist Party of Canada wants to change the system. The Feminist Party is very, very committed to major transformations in our society. The Feminist Party also sees itself as primarily building the movement, building the power to do that. We want to have a high profile. We want to be accessible to women. We want to express feminism as a sisterhood in that way.

Do you foresee a time when women in Canada will be united to the point of placing the Feminist Party among the ranks of the major federal parties?

To see us as the fourth major party is to distort to a certain extent our intentions. A focus on the parliamentary sphere, while that may at some point make up one aspect of our practice, is not the

defining aspect of the party. We are a social movement and we are building with other women in the women's movement, a powerful mass presence of people — feminists — men and women who are concerned with the kind of human centred changes that we're concerned about. The people in the Feminist Party clearly put a priority on that. They want to build that solidarity of women across the kinds of divisions capitalism and patriarchy have imposed on us. Now, that may or may not be possible. We may not make it, but the people who have joined the Feminist Party put a priority on attempting that. We think that it should be possible theoretically. We think that women can, in fact, unite around a very radical perspective, across those kinds of divisions. We hope that the feminist party will be an expression of that and will help that happen.

Do you think it is possible for women to gain equal status within this system?

The 'system' as you call it, the structure of our society now, is based and built on inequality of all kinds, not only male and female. Its essence is the unequal distribution of power and of goods. It's a contradiction in terms to talk about equality within this system for any group of people. So I think that to expect that to happen would be a mistake. I think it's possible for women to struggle around specific issues and to work to be less disadvantaged in specific areas before there's a total change. It's important to work around insisting on women's rights in all sorts of areas and doing what we can to improve the lot of women. I wouldn't say we have to go for all or nothing.

What kinds of women became involved in the movement?

Different kinds. Some women felt themselves to be like men—to be equal to men and to be capable in the male world. They did public speaking and were involved in male kinds of radical politics. At first they thought that women's liberation might be for other women out there who were oppressed, who needed it. They then came to understand that in order to operate equally in the male world they didn't have to separate themselves from other women and to deny, to a certain degree, that they were women. Then there is the other type of woman who felt herself to be limited and has lived a life relegated to the female sphere. She came to the movement with somewhat different preconceptions. What happened in the women's movement was those women finding each other and all being strong, active and autonomous together, whatever the background.

Is there a difference between feminism and women's liberation?

I don't think there is one. The women's liberation movement is the term that was used to refer to the social movement of our time — which is women. Feminism is the word that refers to the philosophy of that movement and the politics and values of that movement. Feminism's expression in the world is the women's liberation movement.

What do you see as the basis for male/female differences, in a non-biological sense?

Men and women have, from time immemorial, lived different lives. They have been involved in different areas of life, had different areas of responsibility, different concerns, and different degrees of power. The areas that women have been active in and concerned with have been defined by men as marginal, immaterial — unimportant details peripheral to life. I would say that our different experiences of life and our different activities, including the fact that women have women for mothers, and men have opposite sex mothers, have quite a significant effect on the psychological development of the two sexes. They are not inevitable, not biological, but nevertheless go much deeper than simple training.

Is it inevitable then that women will share a different perception of politics?

Women today are quite different as people from men in terms of our concerns, our ways of being in the world, our construction of reality and the qualities we bring to the way we shape our political activity and our involvement in the world. I think that the kind of characteristics and qualities that women bring to that

struggle are very significant in the kind of role women can play in the development of a new kind of progressive politics — a politics that is concerned with changing ourselves as people even as we try and change the world.

The Feminist Party seems similar to the now-dismembered Women Against Violence Against Women group in terms of demanding action fast.

The Feminist Party of Canada is something different. Something more widespread, something much longer term and something larger. WAVAW's main concern was not to build those links and those networks. It was to be vocally, clearly and loudly opposed to, and drawing attention to, the kind of violence against women which is endemic in our lives. Now, they had a different notion of the function they were performing. That kind of thing is important but the aims are different from the Feminist Party of Canada's. Nevertheless there are a number of people who were in WAVAW who are in the feminist party.

Do you ever wonder whether your party might sound a bit too radical to appeal to most Canadian women?

I think that if the feminist analysis of what's wrong with the world and our lives is correct, then it will speak to women. Since I think it is an accurate interpretation of the world, and reflects values which will speak to people, then it will speak to women and people in general. This is difficult because the media has a power that we at this point lack. Often times what stops the message from getting through is that it doesn't reach people well, or that it is not radical enough, or the spirit doesn't speak to people. I think that radicalism often doesn't appeal not because it's radical, but because there are aspects of it which don't speak to people out of people's experiences.



Bryon Johnson

How have Canada's leading feminists reacted to the formation of your party. Laura Sabia did not seem too enthusiastic, from what was reported in the press.

Laura Sabia has wished us well, but has doubts about whether it's feasible at this time. I suppose that feminists may wonder. I can't think that a feminist would say it would be terrible if this were to happen. But I can imagine that some feminists would think it was not much of a possibility at this point. The times suggest that we have to move on to a new phase and have to be developing new kinds of political organizations to reflect a new stage of struggle. By and large, most of them would wish it well.

Do you accept men into the Feminist Party?

Yes. It's a feminist party as opposed to a party of gender. The political perspective, values and aims of people are what determines membership. That was a decision that was made politically.

How many members do you have at present?

I would say about 300. Most of them are in Toronto, although we have members in 40 cities across Canada.