

Why Feminism? Why Women? Why Now?

The Feminist Party of Canada

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The word we use to attempt to grasp the huge, tightly packed process in which the human race has occupied planet earth is the word History. History is everything that has ever happened. Clearly, we cannot know everything, so history is selective, and it is important to know who does this selecting. History is, we can see, a record of change in the lives of people and the fate of nations, a record of the transformation of earth by people and people by earth. We can see, too, that the selection of what is to be remembered or recovered or perhaps invented has been made by men: further, since at least the seventeenth century, men have understood themselves as makers of history. History is the record of man-in-his-world in which the status of women and female being-in-the-world is problematic. History, then, is the record of the relations of men with each other and with the natural environment, the story of Man and Nature. It is a record of struggle for personal and species survival, for the abolition of scarcity and pestilence and fear and insecurity. It is also a pursuit of dreams and visions and blueprints for change. History is the struggle for the control of conditions of being-in-the-world.

This struggle, as men have conducted it, has taken many forms but the dominant theme has been power, the power to control both the natural and human environment. Man has enslaved mother earth as private property, in the service of a few real men; he has tried to make Nature render up her secrets of life and growth and providence: he has struggled to manipulate the world to his designs. This harsh, sometimes noble, sometimes cruel struggle is the history of Man's quest for dominance in general and of each individual man's struggle for a tiny share of that dominance in his private life.

Intertwined with Man's project of dominating Nature are historically changing understandings of his own human nature. Man has been torn between the nature which he shares with every species and his own particular nature. It is in the struggle to define his humanity that he has worked historically to give his natural self cultural expression. The forms of these expressions are integral to the project of making history. They change, sometimes slowly, perhaps swiftly, often superficially, sometimes radically. But cultural forms do not simply succeed each other: they co-exist in ever-changing and often antagonistic ways at any given historical moment. The struggle with Nature

and the struggle for cultural expression of human nature appear historically as struggles between races, between classes, between individuals, between men and women. The struggle with nature for survival we call economics; for control, we call science. The struggle is to organize cultural definitions we call politics. Man makes, in history, an increasingly scientific political economy which attempts to deal with his struggle with his own dualism, his public social self with cultural needs and his private self with biological needs.

Women have evidently not felt this dualistic compulsion which has forced men to launch and persevere with the making of history. If they have, these efforts have been selected out of the historical record. Further, women have not been permitted to make history, for they have been defined by Man and by men as of Nature rather than of History. This is usually justified by women's natural function of child-bearing. But it may well be the case that the dualism which has been the motor of Man's history is primordial absent from female experience. Women and men must produce subsistence; only women labour to reproduce the species. In a very real sense, women are integrated with nature, they have a genetically continuous and coherent experience of being-in-the-world. Women have paid a high price for this sense of integrity of individual and species life, for it has clashed with male dualism and the compulsion to dominate, to wrench from history an integrity which Nature denies to men.

Yet for Man himself, the compulsion to dominate has also clashed with a male yearning for freedom. Man has struggled for freedom while he has transformed women's integration into imprisonment, into non-freedom. This yearning for freedom is part of the project to control Nature, to separate Himself from the biological imperatives and uncertainties of a nature which has death as its non-negotiable essence. For men, the discontinuity which death represents has always been more real than the

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continuity which birth represents. Men die and are born, just as women are, but they can give death and they cannot give birth. They have therefore tried to create artificial continuities, forms on incorporation and embodiment which represent integration and continuity and can be controlled. They have struggled to make these forms, these bodies politic which are more satisfactory than biological bodies, the location of their quest for freedom. The State survives the death of individuals, continues over time, gives expression to Man's varying views of human nature and creates the lived conditions of Man's triumph over Nature, over women, over death. The State, the public realm of political action, promises a place in which freedom can be pursued while harsh necessity is banished to the private realm where women and children cope with its imperatives, the realities of "mere" life.

History is therefore also the record of the struggle for freedom, and it has taken centuries to show that the tensions and contradictions in man's history-making doom his efforts to failure, a fact which his poets have always suspected. Yet this tragic destiny of Man is more than an epic work of art: it is a real live struggle of real live men with the Nature of Man and the Nature of Nature which only in our own times shows itself as ultimately destructive. Men who would dominate are dominated. Men who can kill are killed. There is, after all, nothing cosmic about the struggle for survival, for it can be, too, mean, petty, and vicious. There is nothing eternal about male supremacy or the suppression of women. They are historical and, indeed, the suppression of women is the suppression of the very principle of the integration of the historical world and the natural world. The suppression of this principle, played out over such a long time, is the triumph, ultimately, of destruction, of disintegration, of death now threatened to the species. It is this threat which transforms history from the succession of man's failures to the search for a new humanity which affirms life and integration.

This has only become visible and apparent in our own times, and for a number of quite straightforward reasons. One is that the control of nature now threatens the very survival of nature. The second is that, in his search for dominance and freedom, Man has created political and economic structures which enslave him and are now out of control. The ultimate artificial incorporation is the inhuman reality of the multinational corporation, far more mindless and unpredictable than Nature ever was. Man has not learned to control the proudest human inventions to which he lays claim, but lives in a world where the fire that warms and cooks has been transformed to an inferno in which matter itself disintegrates. A third factor is that the control of scarcity has left a quarter of the peoples of the world obese and the rest on the edge of starvation. A fourth factor is that women's reproductive function has been radically transformed by a contraceptive technology still absurdly primitive.

We live in a tired world, tired to death by its own history of fragmentation, domination, and the delusion of free-

dom. We also live in a world vibrantly alive with the hard-won knowledge that conservation and integration rather than profligacy and power are the keys to survival. Yet Man, that persistent, dogged, wrong-headed abstraction, separated by nature and the history he himself has made from the natural continuity of his species-being, contemplates his own destruction with eyes blinded by a vision of power which cannot understand the bloody evidence of its own impotence.

It is at this stage, when abstract Man, the conqueror of planet earth, is revealed as puny; real live men, born of women, dependent on Nature, integrated absolutely with the fate of all the species, shows himself as helpless in the clash of history which he has created; it is at this stage that women step forth from the shadows of domination to oppose the politics of death to the politics of life. Feminism is the political expression of the gestation of a politics of care and community which will replace the politics of conquest and chaos. It is a new politics, comfortable in Nature and in history, which both shares and rejects Man's politics. It shares the quest for human freedom without trying for a phony limitation of that freedom to the few or a separation of that freedom from the biological necessities which are the condition of livelihood. It shares the determination to make history, but makes that history in a spirit of co-operation amongst all the children of women and men and nature, rejecting the endless futile denial of our dependence on the natural world.

It may be that the division of labour by class and sex and the ideology of male supremacy were necessary conditions of the evolution of humanity from an animal to a human world, just as an enormously productive economic system was necessary to create the conditions of plenitude. It may be, but it no longer is, and the damage done to masculine humanity in this tortuous quest has been nearly fatal, and its times have gone. Feminism is the expression of a new epoch in the continuity which is history. Like all new political forms, it is in an early and unclear stage, just as liberalism was in 1640, or democracy in 1790, or socialism in 1870. Feminism conserves the strengths of these: the rule of law, the rights and freedoms of individuals, the integrity and equality of the community, the need for rational organization and distribution of economic productivity. It rejects the symbolism of the patriarch, the prostration before power, the solutions of violence to private and public problems. It struggles for rational political expression of an ethical polity and a just economy. It has no illusions about its difficulties, no doubt about its coming triumphs and a firm confidence in its historical necessity.

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FEMINIST
PARTY of
CANADA

First Public Meeting

WELCOME TO THIS HISTORIC EVENT

PROGRAM

Dedication to all the Canadian women, past and present,
who have made this day possible.

Readings by Jane Carnwarth and Sally Jay of the University
Alumnae Dramatic Club.

IT HAS BEEN SAID by Sheila MacIntyre

SEPARATION (excerpts) by Gail Fox

Music performed by Len Hoicka

Introduction Margaret Evans

Speakers
Laura Sabia
Angela Miles
Mary O'Brien

Open discussion from the floor

Follow up



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