

Introducing the Feminine into the Body Politic—And Experiencing Its Allergic Reaction

By Anne Smart

Anne Smart, ancienne députée à l'Assemblée législative de la Saskatchewan, donne une perspective féministe des expériences qu'elle a vécues dans l'arène politique. Elle met l'accent sur ses compétences, ses deux—très différentes—campagnes de mise en candidature, bref, sur sa vie en tant que députée. Sa conclusion : on a besoin des féministes !

My decision to run for political office was a direct result of the federal election campaign in 1984 when the National Action Committee on the Status of Women sponsored the leaders' debate on TV and forced women's issues on to the political agenda. Many of us were galvanized by this event.

My friend and I discussed this as we campaigned for our local New Democrat candidate, a man claiming a strong social conscience but, as usual, with little understanding of, or even interest in, the importance of feminism. We decided feminists must become active in the Saskatchewan provincial election, expected in 1986, in order to continue the momentum created at the national level. We identified one seat in Saskatoon which might be winnable if one of us would run for nomination.

I was tired of begging men to take women's issues seriously. The idea of being on the inside, on the receiving end of such political pressure, and perhaps helping to open up channels of influence inside the Legislature was very attractive. Without thinking through all the implications (how could I when many weren't well known to women?) I declared that if my friend didn't run, I would.

Since that fateful day I have had experience with two nomination campaigns and spent five years as a member of the Legislative Assembly in Saskatchewan. I

will outline my qualifications, describe the nominations, and reflect briefly on my term in office. To do more requires an ongoing dialogue. This is just a beginning.

My qualifications for political office were pretty good, for a woman. True, I was a librarian, which unfairly conjures up a fusty image, but my unique job at the Saskatoon Public Library put me in close contact with many community groups and gave me regular exposure on local TV. The seat we targeted included the downtown area where many people, particularly seniors, knew me through my work. I had a Masters degree in Library Science and worked at the department head level. In 1984 I had received the YWCA award as Woman of the Year in Education.

For many years I had been a member of the NDP, volunteered in every election campaign, worked on the local executive committee between elections, become involved in the Saskatchewan New Democratic Women (an arm of the provincial Party), and been outspoken at provincial conventions. The fact that I had organized opposition to uranium mining and the nuclear industry in general, at a time when the NDP government under Allan Blakeney was promoting it was, I knew, a black mark against me in some circles but not in others, especially among grassroots New Democrats in that area of the city. My support for women's groups, particularly my willingness to speak out on abortion, had tagged me as a "radical feminist" but I thought being a librarian probably balanced that out quite nicely.

Overall my experiences in public life were not of the traditional establishment kind; being President of the Saskatchewan Library Association was the closest I got to that level of involvement, but I had been an active member or supporter of several progressive associations. I was supportive of labour and at times had

joined picket lines. I had many friends, mostly women but also men, and my second husband and I had been together for many years. Together we had bought farm land and were partners in a market gardening enterprise. Our interest in agriculture and our farming friends helped me to understand some of the issues facing rural Saskatchewan. I figured I had most of the bases covered, to use the spots jargon so often favoured by male politicians.

Prior to moving to Saskatoon in 1972 I had lived for years as a wife and mother, had experienced the difficulties of being alone all day with small children in a suburban house, had struggled to liberate myself from an oppressive marriage, and had suffered the incredible agony of my young son's death during open-heart surgery. Following my divorce I had lived as a single parent until my daughter left home. By 1985, when I turned 50, I had learned a great deal from these life experiences. I felt that, as a woman, I had something of value to contribute to political debate, and I wanted very much to see New Democratic women in the Legislature. There had been no women there during the Blakeney years.

However no official in the Party had asked me to run, and no one of influence in the community had sought me out. I now realize this was a strong signal that I would never make it into the inner political circles of a Party determined to form the government, which the NDP was in Saskatchewan in 1986, and even more so in 1991. Favoured candidates are deliberately chosen; they don't just emerge. A Party leader who hopes to be Premier or Prime Minister wants control of Cabinet and Caucus. Competition is fierce and juggling for position is paramount. If you haven't been chosen you can count on being ignored.

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Women picked for positions of power tend to be those who have a powerful male mentor or who have already demonstrated leadership in other institutions of social control or in established social organizations, and who have achieved a high level of recognition. It is a decided advantage to be respectably married, preferably with children. It is even better if these are old enough to be seen not to need mothering, or if there is enough money to afford a reliable substitute. Unfortunately most women with these credentials are not feminists. If they acknowledge women's issues at all they tend to dismiss these as "part of larger social issues" or as "people's issues," trivializing the fact that these concerns would never have been raised had women not suffered the problems and initiated the debates.

This may not have happened in the new NDP government in Ontario. As women so often do, many women had run in seats the Party never expected to win. That landslide victory was a complete surprise and gave women unexpected prominence. A political victory that is systematically planned, as in Saskatchewan, presents quite different challenges to feminists wanting to enter the body politic.

I found myself attending an executive meeting of the Saskatoon Centre NDP Constituency, to declare my candidacy for nomination, when my friend decided not to run. As a single parent here obligations to her young children made the whole effort far too complicated, as it does for so many women. I knew that I had support from Party members around the city, and wanted to put this popularity to the test. If I could win, with my credentials and reputation, I thought the NDP would have to take women's issues more seriously and that I might be able to make it easier for other women to run in the future.

The first, and most crucial, step into the political arena is to win a Party's endorsement by winning their nomination. Many women over the years have tried this and lost, therefore more has been written about this than about the actual experience of being in the Legislature. However because it is such a vitally important step, and I have been through two very different nominations I want to reflect on what happened to me.

My strategy the first time I ran for nomination was to declare my intention to run and see if anyone picked up on my offer. A few days later I received a phone call from two younger members of the executive asking me to meet them over lunch. Their questions were probing and extensive, but they made no commitment. Several days later I had another lunch meeting with two other young people, same process. Then I was contacted and told that a group of them were willing to work for me. They had liked my responses to the issues they raised, and were excited by the possibility that a woman who shared their ideas might be their candidate. I realize now how lucky I was during that first campaign, surrounded by a group of enthusiastic, energetic younger people, both men and women. Older NDP members, many of whom were women, were pleased to see them involved, and were prepared to accept our assertion that it was time to have women in the Legislature.

There was only one other person seeking the nomination. He had been the MLA for the area before his defeat in the 1982 Tory sweep, and was seen as a good member, but it was time for a change. I began to feel confident I could win. Looking back I realize how politically naive I was. It was by no means certain that the NDP would form government. Men who want political power tend not to get involved unless they sense victory. I

was a relatively unknown person to the Party brass and, because I was a woman and the former MLA was a well liked middle-aged man, no one expected him to lose. He was a decent person and the campaign was fair and friendly, which often isn't the case. I won the nomination by a good majority, in spite of last minute efforts by his supporters, among whom was Roy Romanow, to influence people on his behalf. I then went on to win the seat in the 1986 election, a bitter sweet victory which saw the NDP make a strong come-back, winning the popular vote but failing to form government. Three women had been elected to our Caucus, myself and two younger women.

Five years later, after the constituency boundaries had been drastically changed and I was forced to seek my second nomination in another part of the city, the scenario was quite different. Although by that time I was a sitting MLA, and by Party tradition not to be challenged, a young male lawyer who had long had political ambitions decided to run against me. It was a good NDP seat and he sensed victory. His involvement in the Saskatchewan Young New Democrats gave him a base of support, as did his professional and family connections. He had lived in the area all his life and attended the local university. More importantly he was a member of a prestigious law firm that handles many labour disputes on behalf of unions like the Steelworkers, the United Food & Commercial Workers, and the construction trades. Drawing on this support he mounted an aggressive attack.

I am an outspoken opponent of uranium mining and the Steelworkers union represents the miners, many of whom live in this west-end constituency and fly north to work in the mines. Although this issue never surfaced for debate during the campaign there is no doubt that I was one

of the anti-nuclear candidates the union, and the pro-nuclear power base in the Party, wanted to defeat. Being forced to run in this new area put me right in their line of fire.

There was strong support for the idea that the constituency should be represented by a blue-collar worker but people were quite content to throw their support behind a young lawyer who was anything but "blue-collar." The key to this allegiance was the connection to the labour law firm and the perception that the unions' interests would be well served by someone who owed his victory to their support.

This experience reminded me why it is that people are worried about the power of some unions within the NDP. They can muster an ugly show of force at times, and one which tends to be extremely sexist. I doubt that this is any different from the force exerted by the collusion of business interests in the other political parties, just more blatant and direct. Women seeking office in working class areas will have to take this into account and curry favour somehow which is not easy unless they, too, have connections to union bosses. My experience suggests that this situation will continue to create a dilemma for feminists for some time to come.

My pro-labour reputation did garner me support from some private sector unions and two of their members were my nominators. I also knew that I had support among white-collar public service unions. But public service workers, who are mainly women, are not vulnerable to the kinds of pressures that can be brought to bear on private sector unions. Some union members were told they would not get work unless they voted for the man.

When people asked my opponent why he was running against me he asserted that it was his democratic right to do so, and that I "could always go back to the library." He emphasized the fact that he had been a member of the Saskatchewan government's Advisory Council on the Status of Women during the Blakeney years which made his attack on me even harder to take. Meanwhile his supporters were telling people that "women are getting too much power," and that it was time to "stop the women." I was described as "too old," a "radical feminist," a person too concerned with "fringe groups" such as those on welfare and those who are gay. How easy

it is for men to give lip service to feminism but to act entirely different. I predict this will be a growing phenomena as men try to capture the "politically correct" image with no intention of following through with politically progressive actions.

Of equal concern to feminists must be the argument my opponent used that it was his "democratic right" to run against me. In her thought provoking book, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, Catherine MacKinnon points out the problems feminists encounter when confronted by such liberal individualism. It penetrates our thinking and informs the structures of our systems to such a degree that to question it is to be seen as attacking democracy itself. But to insist on "democratic rights" in the context of political opportunity is only valid, I would argue, if everything else is equal, and in the case of men against women the deck is already stacked so heavily in favour of men that no equality exists to begin with. Hence the importance of affirmative action, however difficult to implement.

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I recall the reaction I received to an article about me that was published in a local weekly newspaper while I was an MLA. I was asked what I would like to be doing in five years time and I replied that I was looking forward to helping younger women become more involved in political activity. A middle-aged man who was a member of the executive of Saskatoon Centre NDP, and who had had a long career in a position of power within the public school system, attacked me angrily for implying that I would not help young men and accused me of discrimination against them. This same person became one of the people who worked for my defeat when he saw the opportunity to do so and I suspect, because of his status in

the community, his word carried a lot of weight.

It was also disappointing, but not surprising, that some women who call themselves "feminists" worked against me. These are women who have bought the old adage that "politics is a dirty game." They were willing to be led by a woman who, while calling herself a "feminist," is known for her brutality to other women, especially those who challenge her, as I have done on occasion. They were prepared to play dirty, probably to protect their personal support within powerful male networks.

There was evidence that memberships were bought for people by my opponent's supporters but attempts to get the nominating convention postponed in order to deal with these irregularities were rejected by the Party on the grounds that it would be too complicated to do that at the last minute. I had agreed to an inquiry process but then Party officials made statements to the media before this inquiry could submit its report. In my view the agreement had now been broken so I, too, made a public statement. In speaking out this way I severely jeopardized whatever status I may have had within some Party circles. However I earned the support of many people who appreciated being alerted to the problem. There was much discussion of what could be done to make nominating campaigns fairer, especially for women. This is a crucially important issue to address, but women wanting their Party nomination processes to be cleaned up face a daunting task. Our concerns are dismissed because "politics is taught," but really what they mean is that's the way they want to keep it because that's the way they win.

On principle I had hoped to work with a team of people in the new constituency but I found it too hard to pull together a powerful campaign in that area of the city. Many of my supporters were too busy with the usual pressures in our lives; relationships, jobs, care-giving, personal needs, household duties, and work in our own organizations all leave us little time to make such political involvement a priority. In hindsight I realize that women must organize using every friend and connection they can muster, and women who care will have to drop everything else to assist a woman they want to see in office.

Never, ever, take victory for granted. Although I visited most of the current NDP members in the new area, and received strong expressions of support for the work I had done over my five years in office, many failed to come out to the convention and I went down to a crashing defeat.

Women who want to hold and keep office in the political system, as it currently exists, must never assume that the way it works for men will be the way it works for women. I was told that I was safe as a sitting MLA. I wasn't. Nor was I safe as one of only three women, out of twenty-six New Democrats, to be elected in the 1986 provincial election. I had defeated a former PC Cabinet Minister, captured some of the Liberal vote, and was acknowledged to have done a competent job as an Opposition critic for consumers' issues, science and technology, libraries, housing and seniors' issues during my term in office. All this was to no avail against a young male lawyer bent on a career in politics.

As a socialist I believe we need to have working people represented in politics but seeking political office is so much easier for those who are financially well-off. Some women's groups contribute token amounts but much more needs to be done to provide financial assistance, or to decrease the costs of being a candidate. I was earning a larger salary than most women in Canada and had some savings but these were quickly used up. Candidates are vulnerable to pressure to contribute more money to both their Parties and their campaigns than anyone else on the team. All this plus costs for clothes, travel, childcare and convenience meals can lead to large debts. I know some women who have suffered undue financial distress.

In Saskatchewan our Labour Standards Act requires an employer to grant an employee leave of absence to campaign for election and further leave for a term in office, with a guarantee of employment again when the term is over. I hope other provinces have similar legislation for without it many women in the paid labour force face a grave risk of losing their job if they become candidates. After being defeated I was able to return to work, but I suggest this legislation needs to be even stronger to give us adequate protection since very few of us are self-employed or independently wealthy.

A large part of political activity involves winning popularity contests. Once elected it is important to keep a base of support. This means focussing on Party members and constituency work. A woman new to the "game" should ensure that she chooses constituency workers who know the rules. Most women don't yet have the experience to do this wisely, and for many feminists political maneuvering and manipulation are anathema. Our tendency is to condemn the whole process and retreat. Since politics

day in the Legislature I discovered that there was (and still is) no washroom for women MLAs. There was an impressive oak door with a sign saying "Members Only," which should have meant me, but the place was full of urinals. The Legislature was built before women won the vote and we were not expected to be there. Obviously the few women who had been elected over the years were unable to get the structure changed. Never in my wildest dreams did I expect to be dealing with such a basic issue. There were times when

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is one of the strongest bastions of male privilege it is easy to get discouraged.

Feminists who get elected must be prepared to be under intense and constant observation both by other elected members and by the public at large. Younger women face scrutiny as sexual objects. Older women try to hide their age. How to "dress for success" and define the feminine, as we might like that to be understood, in an arena where a woman is still an oddity, presents major challenges. We were acutely conscious of the criticism levelled at one of the two PC women Cabinet Ministers who wore gaudily decorated sweaters and "looked awful" on TV. We wore tailored clothes. When we three NDP women sat together at our Caucus meetings we were told by the Chairperson that we were "too powerful." We were advised to spread out among the twenty-three men who, of course, were seen as the non-threatening norm.

It was made clear to us that we were welcome only if we consented to make ourselves invisible. And, as an older woman, I was the most invisible. One time a news conference was planned on a topic which I thought was in my critic area but one of the younger women was assigned to speak to it instead. When I questioned why, I was told it was because they wanted "a woman" to do it. Hard to believe, but true.

I was caught between being too visible and being invisible, a contradiction that was frustrating and stressful. On my first

being in the Legislature felt like being at the Mad Hatter's tea party.

Moreover I discovered that the rules of the game did not give me the authority to speak officially on the issues which most concerned me. Each member in Opposition is given certain critic areas and strictly confined within parameters which have not been defined by women. When I tried to make a statement to the media on an issue concerning women the newspaper told me point blank that they would not report my remarks because I was not the Critic for that area. Even if I participated in public rallies I rarely got coverage unless I was there as an official representative of the NDP. This did not always happen to male politicians who stepped outside their boundaries; it was more a phenomena of the invisibility of a woman in the political arena.

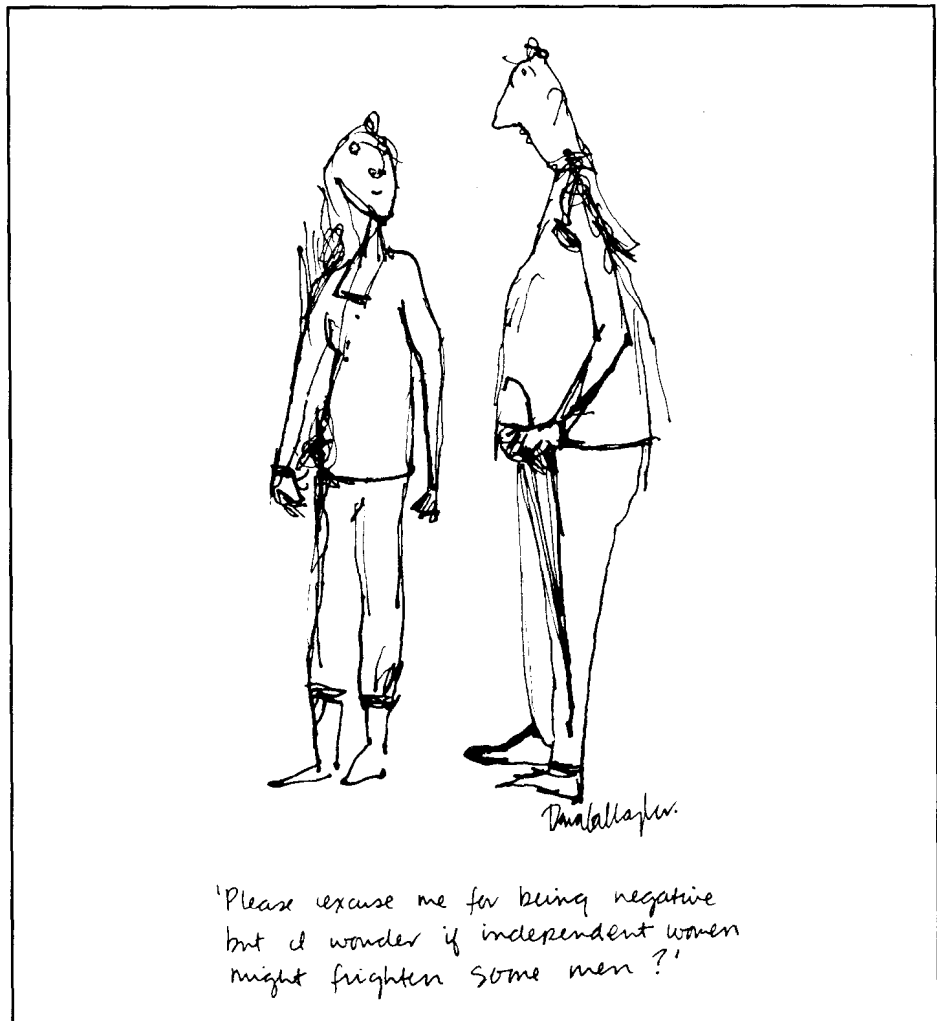
It was also a blow to realize that women's groups were not interested in contacting me to discuss their concerns. I was always welcome at their conferences and public meetings but I was not used effectively as a conduit to the other members. In part this was because I was not named as the Critic for women's issues. One of the younger women played this role meaning she was the official contact person between the public and our Caucus. Unless she raised the issues for discussion we were often left in the dark. Another reason for this isolation was the fear among women's groups of being seen as politically partisan if they devel-

oped too strong a liaison with the NDP. They were lobbying the PC government but often failed to include all their supporters inside the Legislature as part of a legitimate political process. Towards the end of our term in office, when it became apparent that the NDP would likely form government after the election, we did meet more regularly with women's groups. But those of us who took the time to make these meetings a priority were those who were already strongly sympathetic. Most of the men, unfortunately, did not attend.

Perhaps this was because Roy Romanow, as Leader of the Opposition, had established a women's advisory committee which developed a relatively comprehensive report. However it failed to include the concerns of older women in spite of being urged to do so. The reason given was that some of the women on the committee were older. But they were not women connected to the senior citizen groups nor were they women who identified themselves with older women's concerns. The end result was continued invisibility for older women.

In his public speeches after being elected Premier Roy Romanow gave only fleeting reference to women's issues, burying them inside the phrase "women's-issues-which-are-part-of-the-larger-social-issues-which-we-all-care-about." There are now eleven women in a much larger NDP Caucus. Three are Cabinet Ministers, the rest back benchers. Only a few will openly claim to be feminist. They may have the support of some progressive men but with a bankrupt provincial treasury women's issues will still just simmer on the back burner.

So what was the point of being in the body politic? I'm not entirely sure. I had wanted to be credible and to be taken seriously and instead I had to spend my energy struggling to survive. I know that as a member of our Caucus' administration committee I was directly responsible for getting women on our staff hired and promoted above the rank of secretary. The presence of women MLAs put an end to some of the sexual harassment of women staff. In a major task force report on social services I was able to focus attention on the specific problems of women living in poverty. I did a great deal of work with older women as the Critic for seniors' issues.



Dawna Gallagher

But given the hierarchical nature of our political system, and the circles within circles of both elected and non-elected people who control the political process, it is terribly difficult to imagine ways to make the political arena a place where women can work, especially women who hope to raise new issues, to present different perspectives, to create social change and to work as colleagues, not as rivals. I do not mean to suggest this cannot be done, only that it will be a long time coming. Proposals for fundamental changes must be developed out of honest and clear analyses of the way power operates in our political system. Political life is lonely and frustrating. It is also one of the most important challenges facing Canadians today. Feminists will have to find the time and the energy to tackle politics in sufficient numbers to be supportive of each other. Government has a tremendous amount of power in our country. It pro-

vides the public services which many women value. I believe we must be involved even if it means personal sacrifice. However there are compensations; friendships to cherish and much to be learned. Those of us who have been there must tell our stories, trusting that we have something of value to offer others.

Reference

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