

# Representing Older

By Anne Smart

When I was elected as a Member of the Legislative Assembly in the Saskatchewan provincial election of 1986, I was fifty years old. For five years I represented the constituency of Saskatoon Centre, an inner city seat that included the downtown area of the city. Because of the nature of the housing available to them, most of my constituents were either in their twenties, or in the fifty-plus age bracket; the majority of them were women. I was one of the older members of our New Democratic Party Caucus. After an election in which the NDP won the popular vote, but failed to win enough seats to form government, I became – as a New Democratic MLA – a part of the Official Opposition. For these reasons, and perhaps because I became a grandmother on the day I was sworn into the Legislature, I was designated as the Opposition Critic for Seniors' Issues.

During both the nomination and election campaigns, and during my term in office, I met with many older women, both individually and through their seniors' organizations. I travelled extensively around the province, attended conferences on the concerns of older people, studied the issues of aging, and addressed seniors' issues in the Legislature.

The experiences I had were rich and varied, interesting and challenging. On the whole they confirmed the descriptions and analyses of aging offered in the literature by the experts. But going door-to-door as a candidate in an election meant encountering women face-to-face in their own homes, women whom I would never have had the privilege to meet in any other way. I heard, and saw, much suffering. There were times when I retreated to the solice of my own space, weeping. Statistics which I had heard so often as an active member of the women's movement became real people. Soliciting their support created a strong sense of obligation on my part to bring their perspectives into the political debate.

I acknowledge that politicians in general are regarded with a good deal of cynicism, some of which is justified. There

are people in political office mainly for personal power who treat their voters as pawns in that game. Our political system itself is structured to create detachment from the community in which those holding public office live and work, especially if the geographic area they represent is large or dense. In order to foster "objective" decision-making, politicians are often advised not to espouse "special interest groups." On the other hand, as politicians we were expected to represent our constituents and, in Opposition, to carry out assignments in our Critic areas.

These contradictory demands were very frustrating. We were advised, for example, to adopt a "breezy" style on the doorstep. The idea was to take as little time as possible with each person in order to "cover the territory" and, I suspect, avoid painful confrontations. I couldn't do this easily. I was more plodding and deliberate. It was important to stop and listen. In the end I, too, "covered the territory," but along the way I learned a great deal.

Perhaps it was because I was an older woman that women took me into their confidence with such trust during the campaign and afterwards. Or it may have been because I represented a political party which has a better record for progressive social policies in Saskatchewan, especially among those old enough to remember the early days of the CCF. Perhaps it was because I was already known to many women through my involvement with several community groups pressing for social change. Whatever the reasons, older women in particular shared their concerns and struggles. Their experiences confirmed what I already sadly knew, and was later to encounter in my own political defeat: that the combination of being a woman, and being older, puts a person near or at the bottom of the social spectrum. We live in a society that, unfortunately, does not value older women in spite of the fact that we have given so much, and still have so much to offer.

Yet there were good times too, and many examples of indomitable women, tough and compassionate into very old

age. I was surprised, frankly, that so many women who were much older than I am were supportive of more women being in the Legislature. Just ten years earlier I had campaigned for an older friend who was running for City Council and been told by many older women that she should not be seeking public office because her place was at home looking after her family (her husband, since her children were adults). My impression was that the majority of progressive-minded older women had either lived on farms and been involved in the early farm movements, spent some time in the paid work force, had never married, or had been widowed and forced to make significant changes in their lives. A good many were supportive of a woman's right to have access to abortion services and I learned about their early struggles to get birth control information. They spoke to me with much more honesty and openness than they would with a male politician. "I would never talk to a man like this" was the way many women expressed it.

As I knocked on doors, and later met with older women in their communities across the province, their individual stories formed part of a mosaic, remembered and treasured, creating an overview pointing to new directions for social and economic policies. These encounters provided me not so much with new knowledge, as with new insights and understanding, a heightened sensitivity to the realities of women's lives.

The first major issue I was confronted with was the need for adequate housing. Several questions must be answered by older women as their circumstances change. "Where will I live?" and "what can I afford?" are obvious. Equally important are safety, access to essentials like groceries and health care services, transportation, and enough funds for needed home repairs and services. In downtown Saskatoon, as in most cities, women live in highrise apartments, in government subsidized housing, in older homes turned into revenue suites by land speculators, in tiny apartments located above stores, and

# Women in Saskatchewan

in small homes hand-built by their original owners. In the rural areas, once they are widowed, older women usually move off the farms and into the nearest town or village. Staying within their own ethnic community is important, especially if English is not their primary language. Aboriginal women face even more difficult problems as they age, often forced to move into towns from northern Saskatchewan or from the reserves. Few services are provided in their native languages. They are far from loved ones and usually very poor. A great deal needs to be done to improve their living conditions.

Meeting our housing needs is difficult. Our Canadian "free enterprise" philosophy gives high priority to private investments and private ownership of property. Government support for co-operative housing projects has been dropping steadily across the country. Government housing policies — and therefore public funds for housing — are controlled at both the federal and provincial levels of government and depend on co-ordination between the two. Housing provided to aboriginal people is poor in quality to begin with, and often quite inappropriate for their particular needs. Change is slow, and often not in the best interests of those with limited incomes. As a result, many women of all ages and backgrounds suffer from a lack of adequate housing since women form the majority of those who live in poverty.

Women often live in rental accommodations. After their 1986 victory in Saskatchewan the PC government removed the final remnants of the rent control system brought in during the NDP government of the 1970's. Rents escalated. Although there was still a weakened process in place to grieve these increases, almost all judgments were made in favour of the landlords. Many older women were driven out. Some moved to the edges of the city, far from necessary services and the more supportive resources available in the downtown core. Those women suffering from heart disease or other degenerative conditions struggled painfully to relocate

themselves, often single-handedly. I heard from several of them and tried to help, but as a member of the Opposition there was little I could do. These experiences left me solidly committed to the benefits of rent control programs.

Memory flashes back to the campaign in 1986. At one door I was ushered into a one-room apartment by a woman who was just moving in. Her kitchen area was behind a curtain, her bathroom down the hall to be shared with strangers. She spoke to me softly, with tears in her eyes. She had been a business receptionist for nearly 25 years and was still appropriately dressed for the job. She was certain that her sudden lay-off was the result of her employer considering her too old to be retained to deal with the new computer technology being introduced in the office. She was still a long way from sixty-five, her pension would be very small, she had not had any luck finding another job. This was the cheapest place she could find in a hurry. How was she going to manage?

The Saskatchewan Human Rights Code forbids discrimination on the basis of age, but I felt little hope that she had the stamina to go through the process of grieving her treatment without a great deal of support. An advocate system for women would be helpful. In the next five years I was to meet many other women who had been badly treated by their employers.

At another door I met a woman who had been deserted by her husband at age sixty after years as a homemaker. All she had was a meagre amount of social assistance, ill health, and no hope of finding paid employment at her age. Other women in similar circumstances were baby-sitting for whatever income they could collect. Matrimonial property rights, while an important issue in a farming province, obviously don't help those many women whose partners have no property to start with.

In a "bachelor" apartment block I encountered a woman in her fifties who had come into the city from a farming community. To my horror she had just sunk her life-savings of \$6000 into a ten-month

computer training program at one of the many private vocational "schools" that opened up in the city under the encouragement of the PC government. These so-called schools were having a field day promising people instant employment in a variety of exotic occupations. Few opportunities actually materialized, even though the government was providing students with government loans to attend. Needless to say, I hadn't the heart to tell her this — but I remembered her story, along with the others, and used them as content for the debates and discussions I participated in both inside and outside the Legislature.

I still believe that the voices of women must be heard in the political process that so directly affects our lives. I became involved in partisan political activity as my way of working on the edge between my knowledge of individual problems and the implementation of general policies to address these problems. Sensitivity to individual situations, including one's own, can help to build compassionate understanding — a quality desperately needed in the creation of good social and economic policies. Holding in one's heart and mind the realization of the lives of women creates the courage needed to confront those policy-makers who ignore these realities.

One such reality is our need for safety. In Saskatoon Centre a number of small homes were individually built by their original owners, many of whom are now quite elderly. On the doorstep of one home I noticed the curtains parting and a face peering out. Slowly a frail woman well into her eighties opened the door. She welcomed me inside, then told a harrowing tale of having been mugged and tied up by young men who stole her TV and other possessions before leaving her bound and alone. She never opens her door now if the caller is a man she doesn't know. A widow, she wanted desperately to stay in her own home. Because it had been paid for when it was built, her housing costs were not high, as long as her property taxes did not increase exorbitantly. Sell-

ing her home, if she could find a buyer, would not net her much income and, if she did sell, she would have to spend that money before she qualified for subsidized housing. As I knocked on other doors I realized that she was not alone in facing this situation; there were many others.

The high level of unemployment led to frequent break-ins in the cities, even in subsidized places. Burglars gained access in spite of security systems, and terrorized people by entering their apartments. One

protection for people.

Another serious result of these cutbacks is the lack of funds for health care services, particularly the provision of home care support. Conservative government policies meant user fees for a variety of services were introduced and then increased substantially over the years. In conjunction with this, a great deal of emphasis was put on volunteer services and the promotion of volunteerism. This means that those women who have family nearby

who was single and had no family members to help her, had not been able to get her eyes tested for nearly a decade! She was too frail to travel by bus, too shy and proud to ask for assistance, and there was no optometrist or optical services in that community. When I questioned the president of one of the service clubs about this, I was told — adamantly — that the club would not cooperate because the business community was hoping that enough pressure for such services would eventually encourage an optical service to be established in that town. So, in the meantime, that older woman, and others like her, were unable to get the services they needed; they were virtually prisoners in their home town.

Most of the members of those service clubs are younger men. To them, the older women with their special needs are insignificant, even invisible. The same is true of younger men in government circles. I found myself becoming an advocate for those who are older, raising their concerns whenever the opportunity arose. I learned to question even more strongly the assumptions of our society's "conventional wisdom."

Take, for example, the idea that it is family members who must provide most of the care for those who are disabled. This concept can be quite hurtful, even destructive, for older women, especially those whose husbands are several years older and in need of extensive care as a result of a stroke, heart disease, or senility. It is difficult for a woman in this situation to accept help without feeling guilty. Putting a mate into a respite bed in a nursing home, in order to get a few days' rest, can be very hard to accept. It can be seen as not being willing to do one's duty as a wife, even when one's own health is being jeopardized by the demands of providing adequate care twenty-four hours a day.

I raised this issue when talking with groups of older people. Women didn't say much publicly, but they came up to me afterwards to acknowledge privately that they agreed with me. Many felt trapped in their own homes. I talked with one woman whose husband, now in his nineties, was homebound and watched TV all day, but was angry and frustrated if she tried to go out for a break. I met another woman, in her seventies, who was being pressured by her family to provide care for her mother-in-law, in her nineties, who still

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elderly woman woke in confusion in the middle of the night thinking her son had come to visit. Fortunately she wasn't harmed, but money was stolen throughout the building before the man left. Many women lived in fear.

Older women have been vocal opponents of changes that were made to the legislation controlling young offenders. These changes are considered progressive by those concerned for the well-being of those who used to be labelled as "juvenile delinquents," but they are not popular with the elderly. It is important to understand that an improvement for one group in our complex society can be perceived to impact negatively on another group. Even in rural Saskatchewan, in communities of only a few hundred people, older women felt they had to stay in after dark (five o'clock in the winter) to avoid the danger from young men drag-racing their half-ton trucks down the main street of town.

Physical security is an issue for all of us; it is particularly important to us as we age and become more frail. Solutions are not easy to find, but the problem must be addressed. Unfortunately the current moves by the federal government to reduce transfer payments to the provinces, and the tendency of the provincial government to reduce grants to the municipalities, hurt women in many ways at the local level. One result is that there is not enough public money to provide adequate

to help them are more likely to enjoy a better quality of life than those whose families have moved away. Asking neighbours for help is difficult for many, and the neighbours themselves become burnt out and resentful. Older men living alone often tend to benefit more from community concern than older women (invitations to dinner and donations of baking, for example), probably because it is assumed that women have better home-making survival skills than men do. However, when it comes to transportation, older women are far less likely to have access to a car than older men, and a sidewalk full of snow is a major obstacle for many of us.

Two towns of similar size in Saskatchewan provided an interesting example of the conditions that can develop when emphasis is put on volunteerism and local autonomy, as opposed to government sponsored programs available as equitably as possible across the province. In one town a local service club raises enough money to rent a car which is donated to the senior citizen centre for seniors to use. An older person needing to travel to a doctor's appointment or any other activity can book the car and arrange for a driver if need be. In the other town the local service clubs all refused to provide such transportation, on the grounds that it would encourage seniors and their drivers to shop in other centres rather than use local businesses. One older woman I met there,

lived alone nearby and was beginning to wander. Other family members were busy at paid jobs: it was the seventy-year-old woman who was considered to be “free” enough to do the work of volunteer caring — no one in her community appeared to think otherwise. Retirement planning is only for men; women are the caregivers, and in the eyes of society must continue working at this volunteer labour as long as the need for our services persists.

Once the need is no longer there, life does get brighter for some older women. In the government-built and subsidized senior citizen highrises women proudly showed me through their apartments, which were decorated with photographs of children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. They pointed out their access to running water, heat, and other amenities they never knew as younger women. Those who still enjoy good health and are sociable are busy with many activities and have formed supportive circles of friends close by.

Others don't adjust quite so happily. Women who have devoted their whole lives to their families sometimes find it impossible to relate to the world outside their homes. They suffer terrible loneliness, but haven't the social skills to reach out beyond their shyness and fear. And I remember one older woman who showed the boxes of earth under her bed — a garden she was planting because she was so homesick for closeness to the soil.

For older women the changes inflicted on them can be overwhelming. I received a call from a woman in tears because she had had to put her husband in a nursing home and now the authorities were pressuring her to “get a divorce.” This made no sense but when I investigated further I discovered that she was being urged to sign a paper declaring “involuntary separation.” This meant that, in the government's eyes, she and her husband would then be treated as single persons; as such they would be entitled to more money from their old age pensions. To her it meant she was abandoning him, being forced into divorce — an intolerable concept after so many years of marriage. She was financially strapped and the increasing costs for nursing home care gave her no choice.

I learned that this was a common but much resented practice, exercised as a way of “helping” seniors to cope with the growing costs of health care. Whenever I

heard the Conservative government promoting itself sanctimoniously as the protector of “families,” I thought of her and I was angry.

However, other forms of government grants are often higher for couples than for single persons, yet it is often older women living alone who need more money, not less, if they are to continue maintaining a home. Many older women have never learnt to fix a dripping faucet or change a furnace filter. Expecting them

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■

to learn to do these chores in their old age strikes me as unrealistic. Providing such services to seniors as part of a government program could be a great help and a good investment towards the well-being of older women. It could also be a way to provide some protection from the excessive pressure of door-to-door salesmen who find older women such easy targets for exploitation.

The senior citizens' movement is growing stronger across the country. Many of its leaders are women. As in the women's movement, there are divisions. Class status plays a major role. It is true that some seniors are quite wealthy, and their interests are often not the same as those whose income is the basic Old Age Security and Guaranteed Income Supplement. While many seniors are healthy and strong, others are not. Physical changes, such as loss of eyesight, hearing or mobility, make it harder to struggle on with the normal demands of surviving in our society.

Yet in spite of the many challenges facing them, I found older women most concerned about the conditions facing younger women. They are aware of the needs of single parents, the effects of high unemployment, the oppressive effects of poverty on those just beginning their lives. Some have different value systems than younger women and some are very critical of different lifestyles, but I found many of them willing to listen. I enjoyed warm support from a great many women

for the work I hoped to do on our behalf.

Unfortunately electoral boundary changes introduced in 1988 destroyed the constituency of Saskatoon Centre by dividing the area up among three other seats. I was forced to seek the nomination in an area which contained a very small portion of my old constituency and a very large New Democratic Party membership of blue collar workers. To them I was “too old.” Although I was known as being supportive of working people, and have

often walked the line with strikers, that wasn't enough. I was a “radical feminist” and “women were getting too much power.” It was important to “stop this trend.” Their candidate was a young man, a lawyer in the firm that handles the legal work for several of the unions. For several reasons I went down to a crashing political defeat in seeking that nomination, and was therefore unable to run as a NDP candidate in the recent provincial election that returned an NDP government in Saskatchewan. Too old — at fifty-five!

But that's another story. The work, for all of us, continues...

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*In 1987 Anne was one of four MLAs who participated in the New Democratic Caucus' Task Force on Social Services and helped develop their policy recommendations in a report entitled “Neighbours in Need: Our Right to Security and Dignity.” In 1989 she contributed policy recommendations to the New Democratic Party's “Hunger and Poverty” report.*

*She received the YWCA Woman of the Year Award for education in 1984. Issues of concern to women continue to be one of her top priorities.*

SHARON NELSON

Learning By Hand

1

We do not think much  
about the cells of the skin of our hands,  
the cells of the skin of the fingers of our hands.  
We do not mourn them  
as they are shed and washed away,  
as if our hands were free  
agents separate instruments,  
our hands that touch everything,  
*the clean and the unclean,*  
as if it were separate from ourselves  
as if we could remain untouched  
by what our hands touch.

2

What our hands know  
we know  
whether or not  
we know that we know.

Hands may forget  
their cunning;  
hands do not forget  
that they once possessed  
cunning.

Our fingers may swell,  
become misshapen;  
the small bones  
rebellling against alignment,  
the grasp not what it was,  
not what it was at all.

Things slip  
away from us  
out of our fingers  
as if by miracles:  
we had it *here*  
in our hands  
an instant ago.

Fingers bent,  
warped as wood left  
wet too long,  
once plucked the child  
out of harm's way  
plucked pinfeathers  
plucked  
the mote out of an I  
pluck now  
at the small balled bits  
of well-worn blankets  
washed too many times.

*Is that what we come to?*



Chery Holmes, *One of the Forgotten*,  
oil on canvas, one panel of diptych,  
22" x 28"