

TOEING THE LINES: WOMEN AND PARTY POLITICS IN ENGLISH CANADA

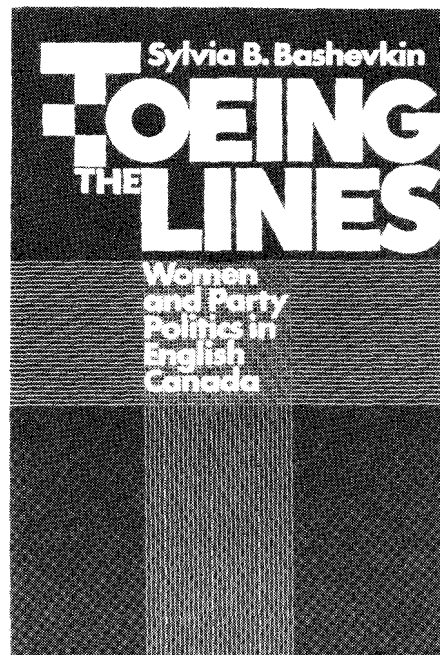
Sylvia Bashevkin. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985.

Barbara Crow

Much of our understanding of women's political involvement as citizens and as participants has been imported from the United States. It has only been in the last ten years that a small number of scholars and journalists have begun to investigate Canadian women's political experiences. In 1985, *Toeing the Lines: Women and Party Politics in English Canada* by Sylvia Bashevkin was published along with *Women and Politics in Canada* by Janine Brodie and *Women of Influence: Canadian Women in Politics* by Penney Kome, each of them offering new information and perspectives on Canadian women's political participation. These new studies are valuable especially in identifying the different patterns of women's political participation. Of note is an emerging awareness of significant differences in women's participation in the political system and as citizens between Canada and the United States.

In her book, *Toeing the Lines*, Sylvia Bashevkin has chosen to look at women's participation in party politics in English Canada. She argues that in order to present a comprehensive analysis of women in politics, one must move away from the current psychological and sociological analyses of why women's political participation rates are lower than those for men. One of the best ways of doing this, she contends, is to look at the history of women's experiences in the political party system.

Bashevkin relies heavily on Carol Bacchi's book *Not an Unreasonable Claim: Liberation Deferred*, an historical interpretation of the suffrage movement in Canada. Bacchi outlines two approaches to suffrage as developed by different feminist writers and women's groups. While one group worked outside party politics to ensure women's autonomy and rights as citizens, other groups — such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union — felt that direct involvement in the party system gave them access to the legislative system and in this way could ensure women's rights. Bashevkin argues that this historical division between the "autonomy" or "integration" of women's interests is still a division that can inform and explain women's participation in



English Canadian politics today.

By grounding her position in this particular historical debate, Bashevkin is able to look more closely at various aspects of women's political participation, politicization and partisanship. She also offers some new insight into the conclusions or myths created by political scientists about women and politics. One such conclusion contends that women are more conservative and traditional in their political affiliation. This they argue is a result of women's allegedly lower rates of support for the New Democratic Party. Re-evaluating the 1965 Canadian Election study and the 1979 Social Change study, Bashevkin finds that the lack of women's support for the NDP cannot be explained by the variables commonly cited — such as women's lower education or greater religiosity — but rather by the differences in generational attitudes, class and rates of unionization. This finding brings into question some of the methodologies used by political scientists in this area, and points out that many other factors need to be considered in providing a thorough and accurate understanding of women's political participation rates.

In terms of women and partisanship, Bashevkin tells us nothing new. Women are still underrepresented in the elite levels of party organizations and have less access to party resources. What is interesting about this part of her analysis, however, is her investigation of the internal workings of party organizations.

Prior to the Royal Commission on the Status of Women Report in 1970, the Liberal and Progressive Conservative parties had separate women's auxiliaries.

At this time women's auxiliaries performed mainly ancillary tasks such as clerical, communication and support work. After the report's recommendation that "women's associations within the political parties be amalgamated with the main bodies of the parties," the Liberal party replaced the auxiliaries with the Liberal Women's Commission in 1973. The Progressive Conservatives replaced their auxiliaries with the National Progressive Conservative Women's Caucus in 1981. Regardless of the parties' attempts to integrate women into important decision-making structures, reorganization has met with resistance and a number of criticisms. Some of the older women in the auxiliaries felt that they were being pushed out by younger party members who offered only a "feminist" agenda. Some women preferred their clerical and support roles. Other women however, believe separate women's organizations in party organizational structures are detrimental to their mobility into elite positions. Finally, others argue that the pressure to get women into elite levels has become more a function of sex than of ability.

Affirmative action programmes met with the same type of criticisms that reorganization of the women's auxiliaries did. In 1981, the Ontario New Democratic Party Women's Committee drafted an affirmative action resolution to address the systemic discrimination against women within the party organization. Two of the four objectives in the resolution encouraged equal representation of women in riding executives, and recruiting female candidates for strong ridings. The resolutions, however, were met with resistance. It was felt that positions should be given on the basis of merit and ability and not merely sex, that women were already equal participants and it was up to them to run for executive positions.

In the epilogue of *Toeing the Lines*, Bashevkin argues that sociological analyses explain why women are denied access to elite positions in two ways: "first, by defining women in a collective sense as properly outside of politics; and second, by perpetuating a masculine 'ideal type' of political activist." But Bashevkin does not explore the constraints women face in pursuing political careers, particularly around the issue of power. Many women still have difficulty dealing with the form and content of male power.

Each of the seven chapters provides a different critique and re-analysis of women's participation in Canadian politics.

Most chapters end with a set of questions meant to highlight the conclusions and concerns raised in the chapter. While certainly a good idea, I felt that Bashevkin's questions may have been subverted if they had considered their relationship to class and race.

Bashevkin's thesis — that women's political participation can be explained as a product of an historical tradition of women's independence of or integration with party systems — explains why Canadian women have been successful around single issues such as suffrage and sections 15 and 28 of the Charter of Rights. She does not, however, address why women are still pursuing these two separate routes. Women have developed successful political organizations independent of the party system. How can these independent organizations inform the present party system in terms of reorganizing to accommodate and encourage women's participation, particularly in dismantling

the hierarchical structures of party organizations?

Bashevkin offers an insightful analysis of the inner workings of women's organizations in the party system and we may hope that other women in party organizations will not feel so isolated when they see that their problems are not particular to their party. While Bashevkin claims that she looks at English Canada, I would qualify this by saying that her analysis is derived mainly from Ontario data. Very little of her discussion on party politics is informed by women's experiences in the Maritimes or the West Coast. Her emphasis on English Canadian politics is useful in providing a particular focus, but after reading the book, I felt that even a brief look at French Canada could have fleshed out her analysis. I was left with questions such as: what differentiates the French experiences from those of English Canada; what impact did the cultural revolution have on women's political

participation in Quebec; and most importantly, what effect did the establishment of the Parti Québécois have on women in politics in French Canada?

Bashevkin's analysis is successful in debunking myths around women's participation rates in party politics. This suggests that methodologies used to analyze women's participation rates need to be changed. I think her book would be useful in an introductory political science course to inform students about the history of the present participation rates of women in the party system. Her book could also be useful at higher levels to address some of the questions she raises.

The inevitable conclusion we are left with after reading Bashevkin's book is that women are still "toeing the lines," with little movement toward their participation as full and equal members of the political system. It will be a hard line to cross.

THE AMERICAN VICTORIAN WOMAN: THE MYTH AND THE REALITY

Mabel Collins Donnelly. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1986.

Myra Rutherdale

In *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History*, American historian Gerda Lerner observed that

it would be worthwhile to distinguish the ideas society held at any given age in regard to woman's proper 'place' from what was actually woman's status at that time. The two do not necessarily overlap. On the contrary, there seems to be a considerable gap between the popular myth and the reality.

Myth vs. reality is the central theme of this welcome new addition to American history and women's studies in which Mabel Collins Donnelly explores a variety of important issues ranging from American Victorian girlhood, menstruation and sexuality to marriage, motherhood, family, physical and mental illness, work and feminism. Through a nice blend of 19th-century literature, medical journals, women's magazines and personal letters and diaries Collins Donnelly successfully recreates life as it was for 19th-century working and middle class women by distinguishing between myth and reality.

It is no coincidence that Collins Donnelly chose to call her book *The American Victorian Woman*. Immediately when

one sees the word Victorian one thinks of Victorian morality and all that was supposed to have gone along with it including thrift and respectability. The typical Victorian woman is usually depicted as prudish, leisured and dependent. In a similar study on British middle-class Victorian women, *Silent Sisterhood*, Patricia Branca concludes that the Victorian woman as traditionally portrayed never really existed, at least in Britain. Collins Donnelly confirms that the Victorian woman did not exist in America either.

One by one Collins Donnelly knocks down the pillars upon which the mythology of Victorian womanhood were built. In her chapter on the "Amative Impulse" for example, we are told that women were to indulge in sexual activity only if they were married and then in moderation. The medical profession warned that too much pleasure during sexual intercourse would lead to the ripening of the ova or pregnancy. But Collins Donnelly tells us that in fact "some wives enjoyed their sexuality," and as a survey of middle-class women, taken by Dr. Clelia Mosher, demonstrated the women who were most sexually satisfied practiced some form of birth control.

Another popular notion associated with Victorian women is that they were continually in a sickroom. Clearly medical and particularly gynecological knowledge was unsophisticated and the maternal death rate was extremely high throughout the nineteenth century, but as Collins Donnelly observes "there is no

reason to think that Victorian women were any feebler than their forebears; their illnesses simply received more publicity in an age of cheap printing." Victorian women were no more feeble, and in fact, due to medical and scientific developments in the late nineteenth century like the Caesarian section and anesthesia, were less vulnerable than women had been in the previous century.

That the top priority of all Victorian women was to find a husband is another myth which Collins Donnelly seeks to destroy. Rather we are told that some women made the conscious decision not to marry particularly if they had career ambitions. Even more interesting is the revealing evidence provided to show that some middle-class widows actually enjoyed their new-found liberty after their husbands died. What emerges from this book is a new image of Victorian womanhood. We now see that in many respects women were in control of their destiny in the Victorian era. Rather than all women being acted upon by patriarchal society, some women were taking action. By the action of using birth control women were freeing themselves from the worries of further childbearing and childrearing. By choosing not to marry women were freeing themselves to hold a career. And finally by reading medical journals, although to us the ideas seem and indeed are obscure, women of the nineteenth century felt that they were being freed by their knowledge.

Although Collins Donnelly provides an