

Meanwhile in Ottawa...

PAT HACKER

L'auteure se rappelle les événements qui ont mené à l'annulation de la conférence du CCCCF sur la Constitution et à la démission de Doris Anderson qui a suivi. Elle décrit la mobilisation des femmes à Ottawa et à travers le Canada qui ont participé aux séries d'événements et qui éventuellement ont organisé une conférence parallèle en février 1981 qui a réuni 1,300 femmes de toutes les régions du pays.

In 1980, Constitutional debates, although dry and confusing, even boring, were nevertheless present, like a scent in the air. The Charter of Rights and Freedom, however, was more attractive and discussions were going on informally within women's groups and organizations and, more formally, through the contact with federal and provincial governments by the clever and well-informed legal intelligentsia of the women's movement.

We were becoming increasingly aware of the impact and effect that a Charter of Rights could have for women. Increasingly the buzz was being felt by women across Canada and without fully realizing it we were poised at the starting block waiting for the pistol to fire. Collectively we hadn't quite formulated that thought and didn't know what it would take to set it off, or just what we would do. So, when Doris Anderson fired the shot from the

Sparks Street offices of the Canadian Advisory Council for the Status of Women we were remarkably ready for what would become the Counter Conference.

Things began to move so quickly that three days into the planning of the conference my journal noted that, "this constitutional conference thing is beginning to get out of hand." It moved in and took over our lives and quickly developed a life of its own, powered by the pure determination and outrage of women with an understood sameness of purpose and intention. Today we might say it was a "tipping point."

The call came sometime around the end of January 1981 from Linda Ryan Nye representing women in Toronto, including Kay Macpherson, Marilou McPhedran, Susan Vander Voet, Illa Driever, Ada Hill and others, most of whom represented women's organizations that we were in contact with. An Ottawa meeting was set and we gathered at Women's Career Counseling Service on Elgin Street in downtown Ottawa, a short distance from the Parliament buildings.

Our assets at the time included a place to meet where there were telephones, a photocopy machine, a kitchen, a living room with couches and chairs perfect for meetings, set in a women's environment, with 24-hour access and staffed by four

women with good connections to the women's community and to supportive women in Parliament.

Our connections with these MPs and their offices were personal, encouraging, and helpful; always mutually respectful. We were not unacquainted with the wonder of writing a question that we would hear asked during Question Period. These were still the times when we moved quite freely through the halls of Parliament. We could temporarily abandon our cars and enter the rear of the building, or from any other entrance, just by saying we were going to the office of Pauline Jewett, Margaret Mitchell, Flora MacDonald, or any other MP's office where we might have contacts.

We were "on the ground" in Ottawa, familiar with the territory and ready to move.

The rest of our assets were our fury and the personal empowerment generated by the insulting thoughtlessness and arrogant disregard of the Minister responsible for the Status of Women to cancel our conference. The history of women in Canada, and into the present, is punctuated by the actions of certain men who have bubbled to the surface to unintentionally and unwittingly empower women.

Immediately phone calls went out to supporters in government and the private sector inviting them to



From left to right, Flora MacDonald and Doris Anderson.

attend a meeting about “the Doris Anderson situation.” Doris had just resigned, in protest, from the Canadian Advisory Council for the Status of Women. Word spread quickly and 20 women showed up on a day’s notice. It would not be long before women who had never been politically active on behalf of themselves and other women began to appear asking “What can I do and where is the next meeting?” We were going to hold the conference anyway.

We were essentially leaderless and without structure. Spontaneous collective creativity, wit, and energy ruled. “Yes” was the word; no doubt, no uncertainty. As Nellie McClung said, “Never retract, never apologize, never back down, get the job done and let them howl.” We trusted one another because we had to; we depended on each other. There was no time to squabble nor for lengthy decision-making processes. We decided what had to be done and we did it.

Our liabilities included no mon-

ey, no time, no transportation, no organization, and the power and resources of government opposing us.

Many lessons were learned; that power can be seductive and there will always be a few women who will fall to its charms; that women are inordinately resourceful and that our skills are amazingly transferable; that we can be bold and daring.

Like-mindedness saw us organizing tasks, assembling phone lists of local and distant contacts, throwing out names of print shops and women who could do photocopying at their job sites and who had access to long distance telephone lines; identifying costs that we could see at the moment and beginning to collect money among ourselves. Someone said she could open the bank account so the money was given to her, although at the time we didn’t know her name. It was Jane Pope, an accountant. Who knew?

Money began to flow in through the efforts of Nancy Jackman and the support of the YWCA of Metro

Toronto. Mary Corkery advised us to commit to necessary expenses that we didn’t have money for; she said, “spend the money,” that the money would come. We believed her, and it did come.

Activating the press, identifying sources for food and coffee breaks in the conference rooms we had yet to claim. How many could come, 200? Who could be the speakers, how do we get them here? What are our positions and wording? Native women, representation from every part of Canada, billeting, receptions, childcare, registration procedures (Rosemary Billings calculated that if 200 women attended and each took three minutes to register that would take ten hours), audio-visual equipment, and lists of everything and everyone—there was a lot to sort through. If the “law of attraction” ever needed proof that it works, it was in those three weeks before the conference. Vaughn Jelleffe sat with her infant son sleeping on her lap and took phone calls all day and

into the night. What we needed came to us. Everything else in our lives took a back seat.

So, in three weeks from the cancellation of the conference and Doris's resignation, with no money or resources other than our determination and intention, we—1,300 grassroots women—got ourselves to Ottawa and into Room 200 of the Parliament Buildings for our own Constitutional conference. The prevailing sense and feeling was that we were making history; we were changing the rules that profoundly affect the lives of women and girls in Canada. The women themselves initiated, persisted, and achieved. It was a time of grace as well as action like the one shot David took at Goliath hitting him between the eyes and knocking him down.

It is just as well that we did not know that this was only the beginning of what would be a long struggle extending into years. As we—the women who followed Doris's lead and involved ourselves in the ongoing process of the Constitution and Charter—became more confident and less compliant, government and leaders became more wary and cautious. Well-behaved women seldom make history. We never knew how much we knew about women's ways of knowing. It was definitely a "coming of age" and a breaking out of the mould. And, we made history.

Pat Hacker lives in Prince Edward County where she remains engaged in political and spiritual activism on behalf of peace, women, and the earth, imaged female. Pat works as a hypnotist, a healer, a wedding officiant and with her partner Marie Frye produces Slickers ice cream.

Farewell to Patriarchy

(Tune - "Farewell to Nova Scotia")

*Original: unknown author (probably WWI)
Collected by folklorist Helen Creighton*

Lyrics by Linda Palmer Nye

Farewell to Patriarchy, that all male caste.
Let your armour rust and your weapons rot.
Women no longer stay, in our place out of your way.
You can stick it in your Ripley and believe it or not!

We are comin' round the mountain and we're comin'
round for power,
And we're seeing ourselves as the pres-i-dent.
And if you fight and you scream of injustice in our dream,
We'll be forced to remind you who's the 52.4 per cent.

Nous voulons vous faire face, vous décrire notre place.
Reprenez vos plans construits entre hommes.
Ouvrez vos yeux! Nettoyez vos oreilles!
Il est temps que notre voix se fasse comprendre –
et entendre.

So farewell to patriarchy, that all male caste.
Men, don't let the changes make you overwrought.
Oh no, don't shed a tear – that's too female my dear –
You just stick it in your ... Ripley and believe it or not!
Stick it in your Ripley and believe it or not!

Faith in First Ministers

(Late-1800s Tune – "Faith of Our Fathers")

Lyrics by Linda Palmer Nye

Faith in First Ministers living still,
Trading our rights, against our will.
Oh would that we could but abort them all –
Guilty they be of such chauvinist gall!

Rape of our rights and our equality,
First Ministers, a blight on thee.
Rape of our rights and our equality,
First Ministers, a blight on thee.

All MEN!