

A View From Then and Now

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L'auteure réfléchit sur ce qui a pu contribuer aux succès de Doris et partage quelques anecdotes qui captent un peu plus de la dimension humaine derrière la scène dans le monde bureaucratique, une chose que le public ne voit que rarement. Cet article adresse quelques questions pertinentes aux Canadiennes qui devraient réfléchir face aux engagements du gouvernement fédéral et "aux rouages des femmes de la nation" alors que nous allons toujours de l'avant.

Elsewhere in this Journal issue is an article describing the accomplishments of the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women (CACSW) while Doris Anderson was its President: I refer readers to it for a considered treatment of that subject. Furthermore, since the events around the CACSW and the constitutional reform in 1980-81 as I experienced them have been well set out—especially by Penney Kome (in her book *The Taking of 28*), Anne Collins (in her article “Which Way to Ottawa?” in the Holiday 1981 issue of *City Woman* magazine), and Doris Anderson herself (in *Rebel Daughter: An Autobiography*)—I will not go into those again here. Rather, I intend to present reflections on what contributed to the successes that I believe Doris achieved, together with a few anecdotes that may capture more of the human dimension behind the

scenes in bureaucratic work—something that the public rarely sees.

Finally, I will suggest some pertinent questions for Canadian women now to ponder, regarding federal government commitments and the “national women’s machinery,” as we go forward in today’s circumstances.

It might also be beneficial at this point to set out the context of what the international jargon terms the “national women’s machinery” in Canada at that time:

- the Coordinator’s Office, Status of Women Canada (SWC): was (and remains) the government’s “department” with overall responsibility for so-called “women’s issues,” its head being equivalent to a deputy minister;
- the Women’s Program, Department of the Secretary of State, was the source of funding to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) for efforts promoting the equality of women in Canada;
- certain government departments had Equal Opportunity for Women units, while Labour Canada had specific programming related to women and work;
- the Human Rights Commission could address sex discrimination in employment under federal jurisdiction;

- the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women (CACSW) was an independent body, reporting to Parliament through the Minister responsible for the Status of Women. Comprised of “members” who were government-appointed, it was one of several such councils then funded by the federal government. It is important to note that the CACSW had a dual mandate—informing not only the government but also the public. And during the short-lived Progressive-Conservative government of Joe Clark, Doris had succeeded in getting its budget substantially raised, thereby enabling an increase in the CACSW’s staff and research.

When I arrived in Ottawa in July 1980 to take up the new position of “policy assistant” to Doris Anderson, then CACSW’s President, I was quickly impressed by the bustling nerve centre I had entered. Doris was about to leave for Copenhagen as a member of the Canadian delegation to the United Nations Conference, mid-way through its Decade for Women (1975-85). The tenth anniversary of the *Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada* was approaching. The CACSW’s ground-breaking

publication on wife-battering was still causing a stir. And the recently re-elected Liberal government of Pierre Trudeau was planning to “patriate” the Constitution, with a proposed Charter of Rights. In the face of this, the CACSW was continuing with an ambitious research program on a range of issues. Doris herself was both in demand by the media and actively pursuing outreach “ad-

wracking in their demands of time and energy, they were also the most rewarding and exhilarating of my career. Coming from a background of collaborative endeavours in the (voluntary) women’s movement, I experienced a somewhat similar working environment with my new CACSW staff colleagues, who were augmented at times by specialized expert consultants. For example, I recall Doris

her own writing, Doris was scarcely proprietorial despite her credentials: once she handed me a text she had drafted with instructions to “fix up this deathless prose.”

The level of public communications on the Constitution by the Advisory Council—press releases, briefs, research reports, speeches, etc.—meant that Doris’s public face was more evident than ever in those

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vising” opportunities with government bodies as well as individual politicians.

If the CACSW in mid-1980 was a hive of activity, Doris as its President was anything but one of those women in power circles who merit the title of “Queen Bee.” Having assembled a group of talented and hard-working women in the newly-expanded staff, Doris set about strategically tackling issues on which progress could be made in the near term. Of course, women’s rights in the proposed Charter loomed large on this agenda, as a special parliamentary committee was preparing to hold public hearings. While others debated the government’s way of proceeding and provincial governments protested, Doris viewed the situation with a cold eye: there *would* be a Charter, and thus the issue was *how* women were to have their rights guaranteed in it, if they were to avoid the drawbacks of earlier legislation, whose effectiveness had been limited by inadequate language and lacklustre judicial interpretation. She deplored the lack of attention to women’s rights in the nascent public discussion, whether by parliamentarians or the media.

While those months of work on the Constitution were for me nerve-

assigning two of us to prepare a document over a weekend. As this was before the coming of computers and e-mail, we two met in the deserted office on Saturday and Sunday, arguing our way even through meals and coffee breaks before finishing a draft for Doris’s editorial pencil on Monday morning. And at the height of the effort to produce the best Charter wording to recommend to the parliamentary committee, I remember a session with legal experts when by mid-afternoon, the prolonged and intense concentration gave way to a light-hearted sketching of a “spatial view” of the ideal Charter, complete with a Shakespearean female justice character’s touch—“mercy as the gentle rain from heaven” cascaded downward, gently bathing all below. With her business background and lack of direct involvement in what we now call “second wave feminist” groups, Doris at times seemed puzzled by our ways of operating. But if she expressed concern, she was usually mollified when prevailed upon to assess things by their ultimate results. I also believe that this experience of a more “collectivist” feminist approach stood Doris in good stead in her time as President of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC). As for

heady days. Walking through the hallways in the office could sometimes be a health hazard, due to the proliferation of media equipment and associated electrical cords, as Doris was frequently being interviewed. But while she was a magnet for the media, Doris was also adept at networking behind the scenes. In some cases, she may have been drawing on her own substantial journalist’s contacts with influential women. But she also seemed able to consult widely among people from a variety of different constituencies, not all of these necessarily compatible in their views, interests, and loyalties—labour unions, professional organizations, academe, social advocacy groups, etc. In addition, Doris—as well as some of her staff and other Council members—relied on discreet, informal contacts with some key women in the bureaucracy who were willing to exchange information and perspectives on the political issues and temperature of the moment. One element in this was the proximity of the CACSW to Status of Women Canada; during Doris’s tenure, the two organizations shared a floor in the same office building, which had a restaurant downstairs. This led to often fruitful contacts of varying kinds between the two sets

of staff. However, in the contentious days when Doris was perceived as having squared off with then-Minister Lloyd Axworthy, the atmosphere was more tense. I recall one lunchtime when Doris, surrounded by staff, sat at one table while the Coordinator of Status of Women Canada watched from across the room as one of her senior staff approached Doris to shake her hand in support.

Looking back on those days and observing what has gone on since at the federal level in terms of our “national women’s machinery,” what observations would I make about the reasons for Doris’s success?

First, let me consider Doris personally, in light of what I have outlined above. As is suggested by her quick reading of the implications for Canadian women of constitutional reform and the proposed Charter, she had what appeared to me to be a rare combination of far-sightedness and pragmatism. She was often ahead of the herd, seemingly with well-extended antennae finely tuned to further horizons. It could also be argued that her participation in international conferences, supplemented by personal travel, helped her to appreciate the diversity of, but also the commonalities in, the situation of women globally. As for her networking and capacity to form alliances on specific issues, I wonder how feasible this would have been for someone with a lesser reputation for being even-handed and open to at least listening to a variety of perspectives, even when she ultimately could not accept them all. Regarding her relationships with bureaucrats, she understood the need to respect their privacy, if those who were receptive to new information and arguments were to remain so. Overall, I found Doris to be remarkably clear-sighted. She had an uncanny ability to hone in quickly on the fundamental core of a complex issue, and then to communicate this in a straightforward manner that could be easily grasped by the general public. I still find it difficult to

judge how much of this might have been attributable to her experience as a journalist, or whether it was perhaps more a temperamental tendency. At any rate, it resulted in that elusive quality I would call “good judgment.” But the seriousness with which Doris took her work was also tempered by her sense of humour, which was signalled in her ready smile and hearty laugh. Humour was an element in her sense of proportion and unflappability, even in the midst of general uproar. It also contributed to her penchant for delivering quotable quotes.

No matter what, “women’s issues” play themselves out in the daily lives of individuals, and they did so in Doris’s own case: it is well known that she encountered limited educational and work opportunities, lower pay, and the lack of child care, as well as few decision-makers who were proponents of women’s equality. For Doris, it was not enough to deal with such barriers just for herself; if an issue resonated with her, she thought that the proper response was to seek remedial action from which other women would benefit as well. She articulated to a wide audience that the gendered patterns of the time were far from being a natural state of affairs—they could and should be changed. And there was the connection with “second wave feminism”, with its mantra that “the personal is political.”

Now let me turn to placing Doris in the context of that era, i.e., around 1980 in Ottawa, and especially to the prevailing relationship between “civil society” and government. It could be argued that this took a particular form at that time. Let us recall that the international Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was a new creation (1979), while Canada had had its Royal Commission on the Status of Women a decade earlier. In one sense, the CACSW was in the tradition of the Royal Commission—a government-appointed

body of respected persons and associated experts that legitimized the need for action on issues negatively affecting the lives of women. Each of these bodies commissioned technically water-tight research and took thoughtful recommendations to government decision-makers in a manner which they could readily understand and from which they could frame action in the form of laws, policies, and programs. Furthermore, a network of women’s advocacy groups, as well as provincially appointed councils, had emerged to press for implementation of the recommendations coming forward.

If I may be permitted a brief digression here: during that period, Canadian women were still awaiting a female appointee to our highest court. In 1979, NAC had commissioned a medallion by noted sculptor Dora dePedery Hunt, to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of women being deemed “persons” under *The British North America Act*. NAC reserved the first medallion for the first woman Supreme Court judge, and it happily fell to Doris in her 1982 role as NAC President to make that presentation to Madame Justice Bertha Wilson. With characteristic modesty, Wilson agreed to a quiet luncheon, for which some NAC executive members duly gathered at a Chateau Laurier Hotel restaurant. Among them was NAC past President, Kay Macpherson, fresh from a well-publicized rebuff at the American border while en route to address a rally in front of the United Nations building in New York. (With her history of peace and socialist activism, Kay was apparently on a list of politically undesirable aliens; Canadian government intervention ultimately resolved the situation.) When Kay recounted her adventures, Wilson, an immigrant from Scotland, chuckled and in her brogue, told her own similar story: she had been temporarily detained some 20 years before at an American border crossing, where her heavy accent had made her suspect

as a possible Soviet spy. Amusing as such anecdotes are, they remind us that certain political attitudes have a way of being recycled.

Since that time, there have been some notable advances for Canadian women—still more representatives on the Supreme Court, reform in laws on sexual assault, increased participation in higher education and certain professions, etc. Yet many women feel that at best, progress has levelled off, and the current working environment is less encouraging. What are some of the factors that have influenced this situation? I would include the following:

- the massive influx of communications technologies, which have increased the speedy access of citizens to far-flung sources of information, as well as to their government representatives;
- the emergence of new forms of government “consultation”: for example, calling representatives of all groups deemed “stakeholders” to one-off meetings, or appointing short-term advisory groups whose “members” are sometimes viewed as owing more to political loyalties or expected viewpoints than to qualifications;
- evolution in the relationship between government and “civil society,” including a tendency in government to treat groups which do advocacy as no more than “special interests,” as well as tighter terms under which groups may receive government funding;
- a trend, including within the public service, to high employee mobility, which can reduce the fostering of ongoing relationships across organizations.

More concretely, during government reorganizations, the CACSW was disbanded, with its research functions being folded into Status of Women Canada, along with the Women’s Program. And successive

Progressive-Conservative and Liberal governments appointed party loyalists to head Status of Women Canada, with predictable impacts on that organization’s credibility in the bureaucracy. Meanwhile, if attention is being paid to women’s concerns in federal-provincial discussions, it is largely invisible.

What, then, are questions that those seeking equality for Canadian women might want to consider today? Let me suggest a few here:

- Why is Canada so stagnant on women’s representation in our national legislature (about 20 percent, i.e., ten percent below the recommended target), while other countries forge ahead, including some in Africa which are rivalling the northern European leaders? The formula for success seems to be a combination of “proportional representation” and “affirmative action.” Yet with each annual ranking, Canada continues to drop lower on this international indicator of women’s progress.
- What is happening to Canadian government commitments on the major “international instruments” for women, such as CEDAW and the United Nations Platforms for Action? For instance, how systematically is gender analysis now performed and reported on, in the development and implementation of Canadian laws, policies, and programs? And what human and financial resources are devoted to this?
- Why is the profile of Status of Women Canada, the hub of our “national women’s machinery,” so low—and deteriorating under ongoing resource cuts?
- What is the relationship of the above to the slow pace of progress in issue areas such as child care, despite repeated promises for action? And on the economic front, why are we still seeing a sizable “wage gap” and a stub-

born level of female poverty?

In her last years, Doris focused more and more on the importance of bolstering the participation of women in positions of political decision-making. When questioned about her seeming interest in “power,” she would reply that her interest was really in “change,” not power *per se*. She spoke of feeling fortunate in what had been possible for her in her own life, as well as of the advances for women that she felt she had helped to catalyze. She always gave much credit to women mentors such as her early teachers, as well as to the women who worked with her, either in her career or in the women’s movement.

The Doris whom I will miss greatly is this Doris of the ever-restless spirit and voice, exclaiming in her plain-spoken way, “There are a lot of things we could be doing a lot better.”

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