

The Last Obsession

ROSEMARY SPEIRS

Vers la fin de sa vie, Doris Anderson était obsédée par la réforme électorale, croyant que notre système de votation empêchait les femmes d'accéder à part égale aux sièges au Parlement. Elle militait pour une juste représentation utilisée en Europe et dans d'autres contrées qui élisaient un grand nombre de femmes. L'auteure apporte les détails de cette activité dans la dernière décennie de la vie de Doris.

In my mind's eye, I can still see Doris Anderson, in her doughty 80s, standing in the middle of a conference floor in Edmonton, hands reaching up as if to push.

"I feel as if decade after decade I have been hoisting a heavy rock of change towards the top of a steep hill, only to have it roll down again," said Anderson, evoking the famous Greek myth of Sisyphus, doomed to fail every time he got his stone to the verge.

With her untidy crown of white hair, still tall and vigorous, Doris Anderson in the last years of her life embodied the once-fighting spirit of what was now a recumbent Canadian women's movement. After an era of government cutbacks and social retrenchment, "feminism" was out of vogue among the generation of young women to whom the torch should have passed.

So, at that YWCA Women's Political Action Forum in Edmonton in February, 2004 our aging leader, with her Sisyphus analogy, challenged her audience to give the rock of women's equality one more push, and then another—but this time by focusing at getting to the very top, and seizing political power.

Forget the marches, and deputations of a past activist era. Doris was convinced getting more women inside Parliament was the answer. "Isn't it time women stopped holding up half the sky and began making at least half the decisions right down here on earth," she asked at the end of her 1996 autobiography, *Rebel Daughter*.

Electing more women was a theme of Anderson's long career in the media and public life. In 1971, annoyed by party leaders saying they wanted women candidates but

couldn't find any willing to run, Anderson used the pages of *Chatelaine*, of which she was editor, to mount a roster of 104 outstanding women willing to stand. The article created a sensation, but the parties didn't follow up.

Anderson herself ran for Parliament in the 1978 by-election in Eglinton. She was a late entry, promised future rewards for holding the Liberal party flag in a forgone contest. She was defeated, and later recounted how the promised reward of a good seat never materialized: she was, she said, offered nothing but hopeless seats by Liberal party organizers. After her flirtation with elected office, Anderson was turned off by party politics the way the boys ran things, and looked for ways to change the backroom system.

She found the reform she was looking for by travelling abroad, studying the situation of women in other modern countries for her 1991 book, *The Unfinished Revolution*, which she called "a labour of love ... born of frustration." Doris wanted to know why—to the embarrassment of their North American sisters—so many European women enjoyed superior childcare, maternity leave, equality in pay, and lower rates of poverty. She decided it was because much higher numbers of women were elected in these countries. Today Canada, which uses the so-called "First Past the Post" voting system, ranks 49th in the world with women holding 20.7 per cent of Commons seats. By contrast, the countries that rank at the top—with more than 30 per cent elected women—enjoy voting systems in which all, or some, seats are elected by proportional representation.

"Proportional representation works better for women because, instead of slugging it out with men for the best ridings, each party has to produce a list of candidates that is used to top up the number of seats won. Most parties, hopeful to look good, include a number of women, as well as visible minorities, on their lists," she explained in a guest column for the *Toronto Star* in May, 2004. She used words like "antiquated" and "out-dated" to describe



Doris Anderson with sons Steve (on the left) and Mitchell at a meeting of the Ontario Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, York University, 2006. Courtesy of the Ontario Citizen's Assembly directorate. Photo: Ben Li.

our FPTP voting system, which we share with the United States and England, two other countries where few women are elected.

At the time of the Edmonton conference, Anderson was president of Fair Vote Canada, a grassroots volunteer organization devoted to electoral reform. On Fair Vote's executive, she found similarly obsessed souls convinced, as she was, that voting reform would cure many of our political ills. She toiled at her obscure cause, elevating the issue with her fame, intelligence, and vast network.

In hindsight, we might ask what motivated this most happy of feminist warriors, accustomed to the big stage, to spend her last decade labouring for scarcely-funded volunteer organizations, lugging around posters and pamphlets, in pursuit of a cause which few Canadians understood, and which reduced even her closest friends to barely-restrained yawns?

"I never had the patience to sort through the various confusing and boring systems," confessed Michele Landsberg, Anderson's close colleague in journalism and feminism. Landsberg shared Anderson's enthusiasm for a proportional electoral system, but not for the struggle to persuade other Canadians to adopt a particular model out of the many used around the world.

Landsberg was a leading member of "Dames for Doris," the group that got together to celebrate Doris 80th birthday with a rousing party at Toronto's Royal York Hotel. That night Anderson revelled in the old glamour, as then

Governor-General Adrienne Clarkson and other luminaries lauded her seminal role in the women's movement of the late twentieth century.

But if the Dames, and other admirers, thought that Anderson could now afford, as she entered her 80s, to rest on her many laurels—and her numerous medals and awards—Doris did not. As President of Fair Vote she was a speaker much in demand, and she enjoyed the organization's increasing success. Altogether five provinces, including Quebec, British Columbia, and finally Ontario, had set up inquiries into the benefits of switching to proportional representation voting systems.

However, by this time, Anderson was regarding Fair Vote with growing unease. With her long background in the Canadian women's movement, Anderson found herself at odds with some of Fair Vote's leaders. For them, proportional representation was the answer to distortions in our present system that delivers huge majorities to winning parties even though their share of the popular vote does not justify getting so many seats. Doris too wanted legislatures that reflected voters' actual choices, but absolutely key for her was fairer gender balance, and an end to the white-male status quo in politics. She wanted proportional representation because she wanted equal numbers of women sitting in those House of Commons seats.

This difference in priorities eventually led to Doris's resignation from Fair Vote Canada. In late 2004, Anderson flew to Vancouver to address the B.C. Citizen's Assembly

that was considering alternatives to our present riding-based electoral model, First Past the Post.

Two proportional representation models were being considered by the Assembly of randomly-selected British Columbians. One, called “Mixed Member Proportional,” would have retained a majority of the present riding based seats, but added a minority elected off party lists. These proportional representation seats would balance the results according to the popular vote, and potentially by gender.

The other model under examination, the “Single

more women elected was unwavering, and her dislike of Single Transferable Vote for that purpose, just as staunch,” MacDonald wrote recently in a note to me.

Nor was Anderson ever entirely comfortable with Equal Voice, despite her declaration that she was happy to once again be among women who “got it,” and despite the generous support she lent to many of us. She suspected we were slackers in the proportional representation cause, because we were less single-minded and thought other measures might help women get elected too. She regularly called me on the carpet for a cross-examination aimed at finding

She could not bear the idea of being a figurehead president, instead of the organization’s intellectual leader. And she wasn’t ready yet to retire—“Why would anyone ever retire?” she asked me in apparent amazement at the mere idea—and threw her energies into Equal Voice.

Transferable Vote,” was the model destined to be adopted by the Assembly. When put to a vote last year in British Columbia, Single Transferable Vote failed by a small margin but will be the subject of a second referendum at the next provincial election. Doris was worried about STV, which is used in Ireland and Malta, where very low levels of women are elected. But, her attempt at a last-minute appearance was denied, and she was infuriated to find that the Fair Vote brief had been submitted minus what she considered to be key paragraphs about which proportional representation systems are preferable because they produce higher levels of female representation, and those which do not.

Angry at what she perceived as a lack of support for her presidency, she parted ways with Fair Vote. “I have resigned Fair Vote because of its wishy-washy statement about women and I won’t reconsider,” Doris told me in a telephone conversation in November 2004.

She could not bear the idea of being a figurehead president, instead of the organization’s intellectual leader. And she wasn’t ready yet to retire—“Why would anyone ever retire?” she asked me in apparent amazement at the mere idea—and threw her energies into Equal Voice, a mainly women’s organization for the election of more women, of which I was then chair.

The rupture with Fair Vote had wounded her, however, because she believed in the organization and its cause. She would wonder aloud why it is always so difficult for the women in any organization to get their priorities adopted. She maintained close relations with June MacDonald, a retired college teacher, whom she encouraged to stay on the Fair Vote executive, and with whom she shared a passion for “list size” and “district magnitude,” and all the arcane details of which proportional representation models best elect women. “Her love of voting system reform to get

out what Equal Voice had done lately to advance electoral reform. Why didn’t I mention proportional representations more prominently in every speech?

About the same time as her break with Fair Vote, Anderson met with members of Equal Voice’s Youth Chapter, at the home of chapter chair Louisa Moya. “There were about 30 of us there, all in a big circle in the living room. She talked about her life and the ongoing fight to have more women elected. She gave an overview of proportional representation, and her research into why it would result in more women being elected,” Moya recounted after Anderson’s death. “The meeting was electric and we hung on her every word.” Anderson and the young women drank red wine, and they made a “kitchen pact” that ten of the youth chapter members would run for political office in the next ten years. So far, two have done so, Moya says.

For the last months of her life, Anderson was consumed by the Ontario Citizens’ Assembly—like in B.C., the Ontario government had established an Assembly of 103 randomly-selected citizens, under chair George Thompson, to consider a new voting model for the province. Anderson felt this was a last chance to bring proportional representation to Canada—that if the Assembly recommended a new model—one that would help women be elected—and Ontarians voted “yes” in the referendum, the rest of the country would follow suit. A couple of months before her death, dragging an oxygen tank behind her and helped by her two sons Mitchell and Steve, Anderson got herself to a Citizens’ Assembly hearing at York University. Thompson said her appearance made a deep impression on the Citizens—that she had cared so much to appear in person to urge them to recommend reform.

On January 30, 2007, Anderson laboriously typed out a short submission to the Assembly, distilling decades of thinking about electoral reform. Her recommendation was

for a “mixed system,” in which a majority of seats would be elected in the usual way, but a minority would be elected province-wide, off party lists, balanced to include more women candidates.

So it was almost with disbelief that I took the call on the 2nd of March from her son Steve Anderson, who told me his mother had just died in St. Michael’s hospital. Weakened by heart disease, Doris had rallied time and again. Now she was gone before the Assembly had made its report.

A week before she died, however, Anderson had told me she was confident the Citizens’ Assembly would adopt a “mixed” system, as she had recommended. That part of her work—the brain-power part of making the case for a complex reform—was over and well done. On March 15, the Citizens made public their recommendation for a Mixed Member Proportional voting system for Ontario.

It was a brief victory.

During the public debate that followed, we campaigners for Mixed Member Proportional in Ontario often looked at one another and sighed, “If only Doris were here.” We were in a losing battle for electoral reform, and we knew it, and greatly missed Doris Anderson’s influence, and the difference her voice might have made. I know Doris would have been deeply disappointed on referendum night, when Mixed Member Proportional was soundly rejected by voters. But the next day, she’d likely have been back at it, telling us to regroup, still pushing her rock up the hill.

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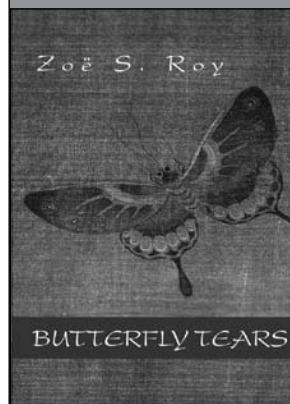
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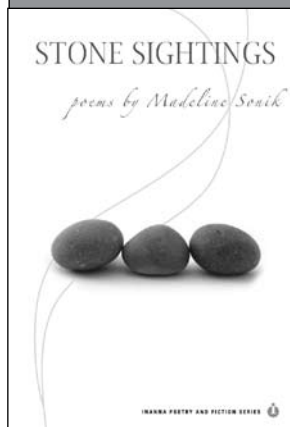
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