

When Martha Met Goliath

Feminists and the State in Alberta

L. A. (LISA) LAMBERT

Cet article décrit les tentatives d'un groupe de militantes féministes qui ont tenté en vain d'utiliser les mots "violence faite aux femmes" dans leur bulletin mensuel plutôt que « Violence familiale», termes exigés par le gouvernement de l'Alberta et qui ont affecté les politiques subséquentes.

Prologue

On June 8, 2004 a small group of feminist activists in Lethbridge, Alberta wrote a letter to Alberta Premier Ralph Klein about his behaviour during a Public Accounts Committee meeting the previous month. The letter, with some background information, was sent via e-mail, to a few dozen women they knew. About 30 women sent letters to the Premier that day. This was the birth of *Martha's Monthly*. The following month the group chose another topic and generated another set of letters to the Premier. Now more than 400 women have become "Marthas" and the group has written 24 monthly newsletters. The co-founders of *Martha's Monthly* chose the name "Martha" as Premier Klein refers to "ordinary Albertans" in his speeches as "the Marthas and the Henrys." The co-founders were seasoned feminist activists and knew that Klein's use of this term reflected his neo-liberal ideology. By taking the name Martha, and adding the double

entendre of "Monthly," they predicted that Alberta women would respond positively to the feminist public policy analysis of *Martha's Monthly*. The founders, all from Womanspace Resource Centre, keenly aware of the subversive nature of their work, chose topics that engaged their readers while presenting a strong challenge to the mainstream version of political life in the province.

In March 2005, the *Martha's Monthly* team took on the issue of the policies of the Alberta government pertaining to violence against women. This paper reviews their attempt to engage with "Goliath" and reviews the steadfast refusal of the Alberta government to use the words "violence against women," choosing instead to use the term "family violence," and the particular effects this language has had on subsequent policies.

The *Finding Solutions Together* Report

The *Martha's Monthly* team used International Women's Day in March 2005 to highlight the "woefully poor resources" offered to women's shelters and other programs for women escaping abusive relationships. This edition of their monthly newsletter was the most broadly read and garnered the widest reaction. The newsletter pointed to some glaring omis-

sions in government policy about violence against women, specifically that all the policy documents in the last years has omitted the gender of the abused. This was not an isolated anomaly in which domestic abuse was de-gendered. Lois Harder quotes the last chair of the Alberta Advisory Council on Women's Issues saying that in drafting reports for government, "the feeling was very much don't use the word 'woman,' use the word 'Albertan' which means white middle-class men" (139). Those lessons were well ingrained because the authors of the *Finding Solutions Together* report from the Alberta Roundtable on Family Violence and Bullying (held in May 2004) all but eradicated the word "women" from the entire report. Indeed, the word "women" appears only four times in that 28-page family violence report.

The four references to "women" are overshadowed by the numerous references to families and children, youth, and elderly people who are abused. The issue of their gender has been obscured while in reports from other jurisdictions the gender of the abused is highlighted. Statistics Canada, for instance, reported that women accounted for the majority of victims (85 per cent). Why is gender obscured as a basis for analysis in the Government of Alberta document? The answer is that the Alberta government has been deter-

mined to remove any reference to gender from its language so that there exists no need to offer one group services not offered to another. If “violence against women” is replaced with “family violence” then services are not offered to “women” but to “families.” The difference is ideological, yet deeply ingrained in government documents.

The *Finding Solutions Together* re-

violence. Not once does the document refer to the fact that women should be free from violence, only that children should not witness it and the province should not experience violence. Compare the Alberta document to a recent book written by Lee Lakeman for the Canadian Association of Sexual Assault Centres in which she makes a much stronger statement:

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port is interesting in the use of language and style of language used. The first words are telling. “Family violence and bullying have no place in Alberta society. It’s time for action” (3). It goes on to say that this was the key message from a broad cross section of Albertans brought together for the roundtable. The first lines appeal to the common sense nature of so many people coming together and the expertise they brought. The call to action is also interesting as the highlights of this action seem to involve little *government* action, beyond creating an awareness campaign, establishing committees to advise the government, and expanding access to existing services. It concludes the highlights section by stating, “We can achieve the vision of an Alberta free of family violence and bullying” (5). This statement is repeated five times throughout the document. The position of the word “Alberta” suggests that it is the subject of the sentence. The province is the most important thing and it needs to be free of violence. This use of language is most revealing since it is women and children who are being violated but it is the province, a legal and geographical entity that cannot experience violence, which requires *freedom* from

We look to a future where women live in autonomy, peace, and freedom, without the hideous enforcer phenomenon of violence against women. (5)

In Lakeman’s statement, the word “women” is the subject and it is women who deserve to live without violence. What is so clear in Lakeman’s statement is that violence is a tool that is used to enforce women’s lack of autonomy, lack of peace, and lack of freedom. This analysis is clearly missing from the *Finding Solutions Together report* in which the root causes of family violence are seen to be the power and control behaviours of abusers requiring strategies which target “early childhood development and school age strategies with community” (7). There is never a mention of the inequality of women and the lack of autonomy for women that are at the root of the feminist discourse about violence against women. The *Finding Solutions Together report* clearly sees the root cause of violence to be other violence. The argument is: stop people from hitting each other as kids on a playground and we will stop family violence. The report focuses exclusively on the physical violence that the Alberta government sees links fam-

ily violence and bullying. This view of family violence is individualistic, focusing only on the individual and their response to anger. Such a perspective rejects the decades of feminist responses to violence from groups like the Alberta Advisory Council on Women’s Issues whose 1995 report by Linda MacLeod began with the statement: “Whereas domestic violence is a life-threatening gender-based crime” (2); or from feminists like Rosemary Brown:

In defining a violent society, we should go beyond looking at the physical and psychological cruelty and hostility that people visit upon each other, to include the social, economic and political ways in which harm is done to individuals and groups of people by social institutions and the state. (104)

The individualized perspective on violence sees the individual abuser as mentally ill (incapable of managing his anger), or it sees the abuse as a manifestation of marital problems (arguing gone out of control). These perspectives have been used for years as the basis for programs to offer anger management to abusers and marital interventions to couples. Such responses are almost always ineffective. A report from the Calgary Coalition on Family Violence in 1990 explained why:

The difficulty with many of these frameworks is that, in reducing wife abuse to a psychological problem, the social context within which violence occurs is ignored. Wife abuse is seen as an individual or marital problem only. This view does not address the social inequality of women which underlies violent behaviour towards them.... The roots of violence against women are imbedded in a society in which women are devalued and treated as inferior to men.... It is unquestioned patriarchal and tra-

ditional attitudes and values that permit wife abuse to continue. (Bhola and Nelson B-18).

The solutions to violence envisioned in the *Finding Solutions Together* responses are typically neo-liberal ones with emphasis placed on the provision of all services by family and community, with the financial commitment of corporations. One instance that was particularly glaring was around early childhood development and supports for parents:

Necessary supports [are needed] to ensure that the children come to school ready to learn and parents have the supports needed to help their children develop and fulfill their potential. (14)

The paragraph details the “vital information” parents need and the “referrals” that will be provided to them so they can “meet other parents and children.” There is no mention of the most obvious responses to coming to school ready to learn (breakfast and lunch feeding programs) or to helping children develop (access to quality, affordable, and accessible day-care). The action offered by the Alberta government is to set up Parent Link Centres to offer information and referrals. These are considered responses to family violence. Instead of understanding violence against women and children as a manifestation of the social and economic inequality of women and men, the government has offered abused women parent centers for them to receive information about how their children are not developing properly because they need a healthy breakfast!

The last point that needs highlighting with respect to the *Finding Solutions Together* report is the place of victims. As noted above, the gender of the victim has been removed from her and she has become, as Janine Brodie predicted, “neither raced, nor sexed, nor classed” (72). Nearly as bad, though, is her place-

ment as victim in the needs hierarchy of the government.

When family violence occurs, family members, children, abusers and victims, and everyone affected by the incidents, need timely access to services and support.... And it includes effective treatment and follow-up for both the victims and the abuser.

sentence, at the end of the Children’s Services section:

The additional funding over the three years will be directed to children with disabilities, child intervention services, child care services, improving community-based protection and prevention services, and supports for children and family members who

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(Alberta Roundtable on Family Violence and Bullying 18)

are victims of family violence or bullying. (20-21)

In this ordering of words it is jarring to find that victims are nearly last on the list when it comes to services and supports when violence “occurs” but first on the list for treatment. Victims are thus portrayed as needing treatment, along with the abuser, but as less needing of support and service as a result of the act of violence.¹ I have never heard of a victim of mugging being sent for treatment or the witnesses of a hockey fight being seen as more victimized than the player that was hit. Only within the context of so-called family violence is it seen as acceptable to put a victim’s needs last.

Other Documents from the Alberta Government

Since it is impossible to use one document to understand the government’s policy on violence against women, we can turn to an analysis of relevant sections of the Budget for 2005, including the core business plan, and the post-budget press releases. Budget 2005 Fiscal Plan was lengthy and detailed but, in terms of family violence, the only reference in the 56-page document was the following

The Budget draws little attention to the victims of domestic violence in this sentence and places the emphasis on “children and family members” rather than calling for services for women. This may be explained as a natural outcome of the placement of responsibility for funding programs to stop family violence within the Children’s Services ministry. In provinces that place responsibility for anti-family violence programming under the Justice Department or the Attorney General, there is very different language used to discuss family violence. For instance, in Ontario, responsibility for anti-family violence funding is in the office of the Attorney General. Spousal assault programs in Ontario focus on helping women to have legal resolutions and for men to accept responsibility for their assaultive behaviour. In Alberta, the decision to place family violence within the Children’s Services Department is significant, since it clearly places the emphasis on the child witnesses and the child victims of family violence.

The Budget 2005 Core Business Plan has, as its second goal, that “families will be safe, healthy, and

able to promote children's development." The strategy is to:

Implement a coordinated Provincial Response to Family Violence and Bullying with strengthened culturally-sensitive, community-based services, resources and supports for children and other family members who witness or are victims of family violence and bullying. Improve the availability and access to women's shelters. (152)

Again, in this brief statement, the needs of victims are secondary to the needs of those who witness violence. The final sentence is the only reference to shelters within the document and it seems to relate to the increase in funding that was released in post-budget announcements. On April 19, 2005, the Alberta government released a statement that funding for family violence and bullying would be increased by \$9.5 million (Alberta News Release 2005b). The portion of this that went to emergency shelters represented a seven per cent increase over the previous year. The overall budget had spending increases that totaled six per cent so the increase in funding to women's shelters was barely significant and did not represent a major commitment. In fact, *Martha's Monthly* newsletter in March 2005 had pointed out that the money allocated to fund nearly 500 emergency shelter beds for women was exactly the same amount as the money invested in "re-branding horse racing" to make it more appealing to young adults (see Alberta Gaming Report 91). The provincial government of Alberta has not shown a major commitment to ending violence against women, it has only funded a few extra beds.

On April 11, 2005, a news release announced a \$583,000 boost in funding to women's shelters with a statement from the Minister of Children's Services that :

Family violence is an abusive

cycle that affects the entire community. Women's shelters play a key role in helping women and children to end the cycle and begin their journey to healing. (Alberta News Release 2005b)

What seems most interesting in the announcement of April 11, 2005 was that Edmonton received only 3 additional beds and Calgary received none. Yet, the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters had shown that 85 per cent of the women turned away from shelters were in Calgary and Edmonton. The government's move to fund beds in other locations suggests they were not taking the advice of the Council and were not willing to make significant increases to the funding so as to offer services to those 3,800 women turned away from shelters.² And the focus, in Alberta, on shelters as the sole resource for women that are being assaulted is troublesome. The policy is that women need respite from the assaults, not protection from further abuse, and that is a function of the ideology behind the Alberta policy on violence against women. The Alberta government's ideology appears to be that abusive relationships are not products of a patriarchal culture and system but are simply relationships in which people don't know how to handle anger.

The literature on violence against women, though, paints a very different picture. The overwhelming explanation of violence is in direct opposition to the Alberta government's ideology of abuse. For instance, a YWCA Canada document explains why violence against women is not just aggression borne of anger:

Violence is a chosen response with a chosen target. Men do not usually attack their bosses, friends, sisters or neighbours when they get stressed out, only their wives or girlfriends. (Community Action on Violence Against Women)

Amnesty International has a project to stop violence against women, which cites the women's movement as having impacted the policy of governments who can no longer blame violence on private matters that require individual responses.

One of the achievements of women's rights activists has been to demonstrate that violence against women is a human rights violation. This changes the perception of violence against women from being a private matter to being one of public concern that public authorities must take action to prevent. (AI)

Yet, in Alberta, the government policy has gone from one which saw gendered victims in order to understand and critically consider the root causes to one which has de-gendered and de-raced the victim in a misplaced neo-liberal agenda to de-politicize feminist claims makers. It would seem that in the Alberta government's aim to minimize all claims makers to the state, they have rejected the last two decades of research into root causes of violence and returned to a time when violence against women was seen to be a result of individual problems or marital difficulties. The *Finding Solutions Together* report states "we need to get past the stereotypes" (6), which is a way of silencing the critics of the report who may point to the overwhelming evidence from feminist researchers that family violence is a gendered issue. By asking us to "get past" these "stereotypes," the policy silences feminist critics by pretending there is new "knowledge" to consider when, in fact, the objective "data" is nothing more than an ideological perspective, called neo-liberalism, which places all responsibility on the shoulders of individuals.

Martha Takes on Goliath

Against the backdrop of a de-

gendered and de-politicized landscape came the voices of *Martha's Monthly*. Letters from across the province were emailed to the Premier's office on March 8, 2005 but there was no response from the Premier. This should not have been surprising as only the first letters, in June of 2004, were responded to by the Premier. After that, the Premier had a Minister respond to the letters, often months later.

While the political response was lacking, the response from women, the media, and organizations was strong. The March 2005 issue of *Martha's Monthly* generated more new members, was republished in more magazines, on more websites, and forwarded to more people than any of the other newsletters before or since. Clearly, there is a public appetite for a feminist critique of Alberta government policy but there is very little opportunity for feminists to speak to the government. In their efforts to silence claims-makers, the Alberta government has silenced many of the voices of their people. At this point, the feminists of *Martha's Monthly* rely on volunteer labour with minimal funding as they attempt to take on Goliath. It could be argued that Goliath has won this round. But Martha is still going strong. She will be back to take on Goliath on the eighth of each month and her little rocks may eventually create the ideological change that is so needed in Alberta. In drawing attention to the removal of the word "women" from documents on violence against women, *Martha's Monthly* has aimed her slingshot at the target of neo-liberalism and does not intend to back down.

Martha's Monthly has recently received a small amount of funding, from Status of Women Canada to mechanize the computer listserv. Further information is accessible at www.womanspace.ca.

Lisa Lambert is a co-founder of *Martha's Monthly* and a graduate student at the University of Lethbridge in

Lethbridge, Alberta. She is frequent commentator on public policy in Alberta from a feminist perspective.

¹Even the word "occurs" is jarring as it suggests that violence happens in the same way that a snowstorm "happens," without conscious choice. Violence is not an occurrence but a tool of choice to control women. The use of the verb "occur" is inappropriate in the text.

²Considering the number of women denied access represents 70 per cent of the total accommodated, the seven per cent boost in funding seems woefully inadequate to meet demand.

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CAROL ROSE

after-shocks

you stay in my body
for hours
the after-shocks
palpable
like birdsong
or prayer
the landscape
under my skin
dissolving
to light
in ice-blue air

Carol Rose lives in Winnipeg and is working on a second collection of poetry.