

Feminist Women in Canadian Politics: A Group Ideologically Divided ?

Manon Tremblay and Réjean Pelletier

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to explore the ideological diversity among feminist women in electoral politics in Canada. It shows that feminist political women form a diversified group: some are liberal but others are conservative. Certain feminists even support positions against what are known as traditional demands of the second-wave feminism.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article se propose d'explorer la diversité idéologique parmi les femmes féministes élues en politique au Canada. Il montre que les femmes politiques féministes constituent un groupe diversifié : certaines sont libérales alors que d'autres sont conservatrices. Quelques-unes soutiennent même des positions contraires aux revendications traditionnellement associées à la deuxième vague du féminisme.

INTRODUCTION

Feminism is based on the acknowledgement that "virtually across time and place, men and women are unequal in the power they have, either in society or over their own lives, and the corollary belief that men and women should be equal" (Arnell 1999, 3). Even if the search for *de jure* and *de facto* equality is one of the generally recognized goals of feminism and the feminist movement, one must not, for all that, conclude that it is united in thought and action. Feminism and the feminist movement are not homogeneous entities; they are animated by very diverse ideas, practices, strategies and organizations (Adamson, Briskin and McPhail 1988; Vickers, Rankin and Appelle 1993). This diversity reflects the wide range of women's collective experiences as they are modulated by their age, class, race or ethnicity, sexual orientation, place of residence, political persuasion, and so on.

This diversity also emerges in regards to electoral politics. For Young (2000, 54-81; 132-182), two phases punctuate the relationship between feminists and Canadian political parties during the course of the past three decades. From 1970 to 1985, the liberal or reformist tendency which was then the dominant voice within the feminist movement understood the importance of entering the political arena. Women for Political Action and the Feminist Party of Canada are examples of initiatives aimed at increasing the proportion of women in political institutions. The

movement adopted a multipartisan approach and maintained links with the three principal political parties which were then represented in the House of Commons. However, the various parties did not offer feminists the same opportunities. In this sense, the New Democratic Party of Canada (NDP), and, to a lesser extent, the Liberal Party of Canada (LPC), showed themselves to be more welcoming of the feminist movement than the Progressive Conservative Party of Canada (PC). As Young stated, "feminism was at best a nascent force in the Conservative party in the early 1970s," (2000, 146) and although Flora MacDonald was a candidate for the PC leadership in 1976, it was not until the early 1980s that the party seriously took into consideration feminist demands.

From the mid-1980s, a transformation of the structure of political opportunities, as well as the consolidation of socialist and radical feminists within the women's movement caused it to distance itself from the electoral scene and to adopt an apartisan approach. The 1984 Federal Election brought to power a fiscally neo-liberal government. However, the conservative Prime Minister Brian Mulroney showed a certain open-mindedness towards feminist demands (Bashevkin 1998, 38). Nevertheless, compared to the LPC and the NDP, the PC maintained a more distant relationship with the feminist movement (Young 2000, 162). Paradoxically, the 1984 conservative victory was also the occasion for the election of an important number of women to the House of Commons. This