The 20th Anniversary of the Waffle

The Waffle
and the
Women’s Movement

VARDA BURSTYN

Without any question, the Waffle was the culmination of the politicization of the 1960s, Canadian style. The events and movements that formed the international context for our radicalization were indeed extraordinary: the Cuban revolution, the Algerian war of independence, Ban the Bomb marches, the American Black civil rights movement - Freedom Summer, SNCC, Malcom, Martin, the Black Panthers - both Kennedy assassinations, Vietnam, the war and the anti-war movement, dodging the draft, SDS, the Yippies, the urban ghetto riots, May/June in Paris, the Prague spring, the Prague repression, the Chicago police riots at the time of the Democratic convention, where I personally saw for the first time what the armed might of the state really looked like. In Canada we participated directly and indirectly in many of these movements. But we confronted and were touched particularly by the indépendantiste movement in Quebec and by the crisis of national identity in English Canada, overshadowed culturally and stunted economically by the American giant to the south.

This was the context of profound ferment within which the radicalization of women occurred. In the early 1960s (many take 1963 as the benchmark year, and the publication of Betty Friedan’s The Feminine Mystique as the benchmark event) middle class women, mostly professionals, began to
call for change in women’s lives and status. Feminism was a dirty word in the early and mid 1960s, conjuring up images of sexually-pressed bluestockings and suffragettes, but it was an idea whose time had come (around once again) and there was no stopping it. As the analyses, ideals and goals of the progressive causes of the 19th and early 20th centuries (abolitionism, trade union rights, suffragism) provided the analytic frameworks and examples of activism which women then emulated in their own name during the first wave of feminism, so the context of the 1960s inflamed women’s political consciousness once again. And as the youth radicalization of the decade gained momentum, it was not only professional women like Betty Friedan who were involved, but younger women, students, and those associated with movements of more profound political opposition.

Sara Evans in her book *Personal Politics: The Roots of the Women’s Liberation Movement in the Civil Rights Movement* has documented this process with respect to American women. Because I was in high school during most of the 1960s, then left for the US at the end of the decade, I can’t chronicle the parallel development among university women at that time in Canada. But by 1969, when the Waffle manifesto came hurrying out of Winnipeg, there were vibrant women’s groups in many cities, on campuses and in student organizations, groups which brought together a new breed of women’s activists: “women’s liberationists” as we called ourselves to distinguish our more radical politics from those of main-stream, reform-oriented feminism. It was only in the 1970s that these groups would again divide - into socialist feminists and “radical feminists” with their respective differences in analysis, emphasis and strategy.

It was this current of feminism - women’s liberation - that had the greatest impact on the Waffle itself. This is because, though the Waffle regrouped many social democrats of some long standing, its energy and its style were profoundly marked by those of the New Left, and its activists were often the same people that had been, or still were (in the case of the New Democratic Youth) active in New Left influenced student politics. In other words, the Waffle became the conduit through which the radical wo-
men’s politics of the late 1960s entered and profoundly moved the NDP and, indirectly, many members of the unions affiliated to it. To telegraph the larger point, then, the most important impact the Waffle had with respect to feminism was in laying the ground work for what was to become a socialist-feminist current within Canadian feminism as a whole. That current may seem weak, amorphous, to us now, particularly in light of the work that remains to be done, the attacks on the women’s movement by the federal government, and the wholesale appropriation of the rhetoric and mantle of feminism by bourgeois women. But if we compare the consciousness of feminism within the NDP and the unions to that evidenced by Liberal and Tory politics, or, even more telling, to feminism as a whole in the US, where socialist feminism is an almost exclusively academic current, I think the point will be established.

The impact of the Waffle generally, and of Waffle women most specifically, on the NDP was very strong, both with respect to the NDP’s stand on issues of importance to women, and with respect to the changing the role of women within the party. Prior to the onslaught on the Party’s program led by Waffle women at constituency associations, provincial conferences and national conventions, NDP policy on women’s issues was bland and unobjectionable, shaped by a mild (not to say gutless) fifties-style social democratic rhetoric of equality which had little substance or meaning. Waffle women, with Waffle men supporting them often enough to register their presence as different from many mainstream NDP men, tackled the big issues: childcare (universal, for the first time); abortion rights (fireworks that still explode on a predictable basis); equal pay; quotas for women on party bodies; the right to caucus.

Because policy was debated at the grass-roots level as well as at centralized gatherings, and because delegates were elected to conventions on the basis of the policies they supported or opposed, women’s issues often took centre stage in heated, even bitter disputes at the riding level. Nor were Wafflers content to see policies adopted, then hung in the closet until the next convention. They demanded that these be highlighted in election campaigns, in the literature and
speeches of candidates; that NDP members and politicians raise them in the context of extra-parliamentary solidarity actions, that they call press conferences when abortion rights or daycare issues were being contested in the political arena.

What this meant is that the NDP had to come face to face with the way that women's oppression was expressed in its own ranks. This was a very difficult process and brought with it a lot of painful soul searching, confrontations between old friends and allies, and some very serious resistance from the party leadership. For example, as problematic as programmatic demands about abortion and childcare rights were to the party brass, the issue that occasioned the ugliest reaction was one of minimal quotas for women on executive bodies. For this was the issue that challenged, both symbolically and practically, the power of the established and male dominated leadership.

Women were then, as they had always been, the backbone of the party. But during the early 1970s, the major organizational vehicles for their participation was the 'ladies auxiliary'. This body raised funds, organized the get-togethers that were the social glue of the party, did mailings, cleaned the local party office, and worked tirelessly in elections, almost always for male candidates. The confrontation that occurred between Waffle women's liberationists and the party was not in any simple sense reducible to a Waffle-women/mainstream-party-men polarization. In most riding associations, Wafflers had to face the anger and dismay of many long-time party women, who felt that the new feminism did not represent their politics and that the style of this new feminism indeed, in some cases, threatened their established power base. For me, this was the difficult part of being a (Waffle) feminist.

I remember returning from the 1971 national convention at which the Waffle won almost a third of party support, to face the grim fury of the Beaches-Woodbine women's auxiliary. I had been waiting in line to speak on the debate about women's issues, and was being persistently baited by a steelworker bureaucrat (to me, with his pork-pie hat and middle-aged paunch, a caricature of a male chauvinist, to many of them, a man who resembled their husbands). In
terms that only those of us who lived through those years could now believe, he taunted me and suggested that a "good fuck" would help turn me from the error of my feminist ways. Finally, I turned on him with a few well-chosen feminist expletives, for which I received a little round of applause from others sitting near by. What I did not know was that CTV cameras were trained on me, and that my words (though not his) were broadcast live throughout the country. There was hell to pay at home. I was told that I had disgraced the riding association and betrayed the trust of its members, especially the women.

Even more difficult was the day, during the election campaign of my former husband, when the grand old lady of Beaches-Woodbine, a stalwart Scots left winger who had never allowed herself to be politically contained in the women's auxiliary, pronounced herself against the inclusion of abortion rights in his campaign literature because it would alienate the voters. These were the kinds of interactions that all of us faced in our day to day work and that test our commitment to women to the hilt.

I think, however, if we look at the way that feminism has served, since the exclusion of the Waffle, as a rallying point for the most progressive politics in the NDP, it's fair to say that Waffle women had a profound, long-term impact on the party. In the caucuses which Waffle women called at conferences and conventions, as well as in the riding association work, many women who were not particularly touched by other planks of the Waffle platform were drawn into discussing and participating in the women's stuff. And in every riding association where Waffle women worked, women who were first touched by the feminist issues began to re-examine other political premises and issues and found themselves radicalized on an even broader basis.

Women who had been radicalized by other issues in the 1960s began to look at their situation as women through politicized lenses; then by the early 1970s women who were radicalizing as women began to look at other issues through the lenses they had acquired as they became feminists. Many of these women stayed in the party when the Waffle women left. There they became voices of a socialist feminism (albeit
of the social democratic variety) and one of the few truly vital forces within the NDP. I think it was the politics that grew out of this phenomenon that has allowed the NDP to present itself as the party of women in the 1970s and 1980s.

Though the Waffle never truly constructed a substantial current within the trade unions affiliated to the NDP, it did have an important influence on a layer activists and leaders. Again, I think it’s fair to say that the impact of Waffle women on trade union women was one of the most significant legacies of that period. I personally addressed women’s and mixed union meetings in Oshawa, Hamilton, London, St. Catherines, Toronto and Windsor - the “big battalions of labour” as they were sometimes known, and I was not an especially active member in terms of labour movement participation. I was simply participating in a process that was unfolding wherever Waffle women were politically active. The meetings were often spectacular, especially in contrast to the tight, sometimes vicious politesse that reigned in riding association gatherings. I shall never forget what it was like to explain the notion of sexual objectification to a leering, whooping room of a hundred Hamilton steel workers, all male, while attempting to maintain both my dignity and political credibility. But the trying moments were more than compensated by the exhilaration of the women’s meetings: the laughter, the anger, the strategizing, the jokes — the sheer energy was a high I will never forget.

The women who organized and/or attended these meetings were among the ones who went on to found women’s caucuses and committees at local, provincial and national levels in the labour movement, as well as to fight alongside other NDP women inside the party. Today, when women’s committees are institutionalized, it is hard to remember what a battle royal it was to achieve the right to independent organizing and representation in the unions, what it cost those women, the risks they had to take, the pain of working side by side with men who opposed them fiercely. Along with others who joined them in the 1970s, and together with women in the NDP and independent socialist women, they came together to form the living core of socialist feminism in this country. Let me be clear: I’m not saying the
Waffle was responsible for this. But I am saying that, positioned as it was in the NDP, close to the unions, and expressing the new energy and politics of women's liberation, the feminism its members advanced was able to spark and fertilize key sectors and thus contribute in important ways to the growth of the English Canadian women's movement.

I am not the best person to make an assessment of the effect which feminism has had on nationalism, because I have not identified with, nor been active in the most nationalist of left wing circles over the years. (Indeed, when the Waffle itself split over what to do in response to the threat of expulsion that came from the party leadership in 1972, I stayed in the party along with a group of others, in part because we differed from those who went on to form the Movement for an Independent Socialist Canada in our evaluation of the progressive valence of nationalism in Canada at that time.) But so many of the theoretical debates we had, in those days and subsequently, became concretized when we were faced with the nightmare of the Free Trade Agreement, and I, like many others who had been critical of certain premises of Canadian nationalism, knew what had to be fought. I think it was during that fight that we saw how nationalism and feminism had become linked and intertwined. There were crucial contributions made by individual feminists. Particularly important of course, was Marjorie Cohen's book. But even more impressive was the popular mobilization of women's groups - in unions, among immigrant women, from the women's services, from every sector where women were organized - across the country. It was taken as a given that the erosion of Canadian economic and political sovereignty implicit in the deal would profoundly harm women; and that women were a central voice and constituency which national and nationalist politics had to address. In that sense, I think we can point to a positive legacy of mutual influence between feminism and progressive nationalism.

In discussing the impact and interrelation between feminism and the Waffle, I have tried to focus on the positive aspects of that legacy, the ones that remain with us today in English Canadian political life. But it's important also
to recognize what didn’t get done, to recognize the legacy that never was allowed to be. It was not easy to be a woman in the Waffle in those days, because coming to consciousness was often a painful process, and attempting to articulate the new understanding, to make men see what we were seeing, and find political and organizational vehicles to express all this was enormously difficult. Waffle women’s caucuses were often initiated because women realized they simply couldn’t make their political presence felt in mixed meetings - the men just talked us to death. Many of us were married to, or living with the same men we were confronting in our own political meetings, and this put a terrible strain on our relationships. There was no political consciousness of the oppression of compulsory heterosexuality, of the damage this caused in the lives of lesbians (and gays), and I think with real sadness about the lesbians who had to remain silent and closeted.

The other thing that still gives me pain when I think about it is the way Waffle women, particularly in Ontario, fought and polarized among ourselves in anticipation of the larger split in the Waffle that took place in the summer of 1972. In a sense, perhaps it was inevitable. We understood so little about the dynamics of both mixed and women-only formations; we felt so passionately about our politics; and feelings were expressed openly in the women’s caucus, whereas among men certain conventions of restraint prevailed. Political differences over the NDP and nationalism were displaced into the women’s caucus and succeeded in separating us.

For all that, the Waffle was the only political formation of any size, substance and vitality where militant feminism really flourished and grew. Waffle men, whom we often saw as narcissistic and resistant, nevertheless got up and were counted in debates in the NDP, and many of us felt a strong sense of camaraderie at those moments. Above all we felt a sense of potential, of energy and growth. We were all of us young, politically if not chronologically. We had never lived through mass radicalization of the kind the 1960s had produced; we were seized and shaken by women’s liberation; we didn’t have a non-stalinized, non-social demo-
cratic political leadership to show us how to organize — we were winging it, at times gloriously, but winging it nevertheless.

Because of this lack of experience, the interaction between us militants within the Waffle, as well as our sense of strategy and tactics within the party, was fraught with difficulty. In one's twenties, one is inevitably working out issues of personal identity (and most of us were in our twenties). We needed a layer of older, more experienced people to help us temper our personal, as well as political, choices. But we were making it happen, and the power of our momentum attested to the power of the social forces which our ideas and organizing represented. The premature death of the Waffle inside the NDP precluded fruition of the process that had been started. With its death a dynamic experiment in gender relations within a political formation came to an end. That formation, while not mass, was much larger than the 'groupuscules' of the far Left that grew to fill the political vacuum which the demise of the Waffle created.

Whether or not a greater understanding of strategy and tactics could have allowed us to remain inside the party for a longer period, developing our capacity for political leadership, winning larger numbers to the program and orientation ("extra-parliamentary action") of the Waffle, is a question we will never be able to answer. However, the singular lack of success of such projects in other countries with social democratic parties suggests this would have been unlikely. Nevertheless, the potential of that period was never realized. Today, feminism, environmentalism, and anti-racism form the trinity of issues to which any socialist party must give voice, in addition to the traditional issues of class politics. Now that many of us have been around for twenty or thirty years, I find myself wishing that we could apply what we have learned to the creation of a green socialist-feminist party. At this point, my desire remains a fantasy. But if there is a new momentum in the 1990s, I hope we can find ways of contributing what we have learned to political organizing and that a new radicalization will express itself in the impetus for a political party, be it a changed NDP or a new formation. For the example of Eastern Europe
shows again that, although there is no shortage of spirit and self-sacrifice among the people, organized political leadership is absolutely crucial if capitalism is not to triumph, over and over again. And crucial to that leadership is the integration of women and of feminism, an insight towards which the Waffle was working two decades ago.