

## ARTICLE

*Women Rally for Action 1976: Politically Engaged Feminism in British Columbia*

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Abstract:

This article situates a 1976 feminist rally in Victoria, British Columbia, *Women Rally for Action*, within the context of Canada's national feminist movement. The rally was a legislative lobbying event aimed at the newly elected Social Credit government and their cuts to the social services that supported gender equality in the province. By tracing the development of the second wave feminist movement in Canada and in BC, this article explores how the organizers of the BC rally employed a national feminist strategy of organized political pressure. In doing so, they worked towards the politicization of the women's movement on a national and provincial level, and developed an invaluable framework for future women's organizing in BC.

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You think now that we're into '76  
We should go home and pretend it's all fixed,  
Your posters and conferences just didn't do  
We won't stop our fight until sexism's through!<sup>1</sup>

On March 22, 1976, during the first session of the British Columbia Legislature under the newly elected Social Credit government, hundreds of women came together on the front lawn of the Parliament Buildings in Victoria to participate in a legislative lobbying rally called *Women Rally for Action*. The rally took place during a lively decade for feminist organizing in Canada. Canadian feminists, unlike their neighbours to the south, often worked within established, formal processes during their efforts to receive recognition from governments. The politically engaged feminist initiatives that took place at the federal level in the 1960s and 1970s laid the foundation for the broader Canadian feminist movement, and consequently the *Women Rally for Action* event, which followed the model exemplified over the preceding decade by women across the country.

In 1966, women's groups representatives from across Canada formed the Committee for the Equality of Women in Canada (CEWC) to lobby for a Royal Commission that would look into the status of women in Canada. Their organizing through recognized government channels resulted in institutional responses, including

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<sup>1</sup> Protest chant from *Women Rally for Action*. Women Rally for Action, *The Rally Story: An Account of the Planning, Organization and Enactment of Women Rally for Action* (Vancouver BC: Press Gang Publishers, 1976), 7, Victoria Women's Movement Archive, Special Collections & University Archives, University of Victoria, Victoria, British Columbia.

the Royal Commission on the Status of Women (RCSW) in 1967, the implementation of a Minister for the Status of Women in 1971, and the creation of a Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women (CAC) in 1973. In 1972, the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC) was formed out of the CEWC. The NAC's goal was to encourage the federal government to implement the policy recommendations found in the RCSW's report. In 1975, the year the United Nations announced would be celebrated as International Women's year, the federal government announced it would redouble its commitments to gender equality. However, many Canadian women felt that, given the lack of action, the proposed measures were no more than empty promises.

In British Columbia, feminist organizers faced pushback from Premier W.A.C. Bennet and his conservative Social Credit government, who had been in office since 1952. When Premier Dave Barrett led the New Democratic Party (BC NDP) to power in 1972, feminists felt their demands were at last heard, as the party worked earnestly towards gender equality in British Columbia. In their short three years in office, the BC NDP created an expanded Human Rights Code against gender discrimination and established the 5-member Provincial Status of Women Office. However, in December of 1975, the Social Credit party was re-elected under the leadership of premier Bill Bennett, the former Social Credit leader's son. On January 18, 1976, just two weeks after the official end of International Women's Year, Bennett announced his plan to implement significant cuts to social services and education across the province, turning his back on both the BC NDP's support of the women's movement and the federal promises surrounding International Women's Year. The new budget planned to eliminate the Provincial Status of Women Office,

terminate the Department of Education's Special Advisor on Sex Discrimination, disband the community Advisory Committee on Sex Discrimination, and cut funding for transition houses, rape relief centres and women's groups.

Outraged, representatives of women's groups from across the province came together at a meeting in Vancouver to plan their next steps. In her recollections of the group sentiment on that January day, one organizer stated: "We were there because we were angry. We had had enough of the tokenism of International Women's Year; we had had enough of waiting and hoping for government recognition of our legitimate concerns."<sup>2</sup> Over the next two months, women from across British Columbia conceived, planned, and carried out *Women Rally for Action* – at the time described by the organizers as "the most comprehensive legislative lobby ever held in British Columbia."<sup>3</sup> Acting under the umbrella of the NAC, the organizers fought the human rights violations they saw happening within the BC government using the established national feminist strategy of organized political pressure. Additionally, through organizing within the British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW) umbrella group, they aimed to include the voices of all women in the province. In the process, they helped to politicize and unify Canada's national women's movement, and developed infrastructure which supported the struggle for gender equality in both British Columbia and all of Canada.

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<sup>2</sup> Women Rally for Action, *The Rally Story*, 7.

<sup>3</sup> Women Rally for Action, *The Rally Story*, front cover.

## **Historiography of the Second Wave Feminist Movement**

The popular narrative of the second wave feminist movement in North America has portrayed a white, middle class, and culturally American space. In this narrative, grievances were aired, and gendered hierarchies were addressed, but without much substantial change at the policy level. Feminist scholars have since disrupted this homogenizing narrative, bringing to light both the intersectional diversity of the movement, and the lasting and real changes that were made. Further, some of these scholars have drawn attention to the unique approaches each western nation brought to its feminist movement.<sup>4</sup> In this scholarship, the stories of Canadian feminists have not been frequently analyzed. Perhaps this is because small-scale, coordinated political action does not make for a story as popularly engaging as the radical movements found in the densely populated United States. Primary source analyses of organizational materials from Canada's second wave feminist movement indicate that, in contrast with the anti-establishment rhetoric of their American neighbours, Canadian feminists found success working within the structures of government to effect policy change. They organized within various regional women's groups affiliated with the larger organizational structure of the NAC to make real policy change. The Canadian women's movement was substantial in its institutional and organizational strength, commitment to political process, and ability to effect broad changes at a government level.

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<sup>4</sup> For comparative histories of the second wave feminist movement in Canada and the US, see: Constance Backhouse and David H. Flaherty, ed., *Challenging Times: The Women's Movement in Canada and the United States*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt81bsh>

Comparatively, a 1977 editorial from Victoria's newspaper, the *Daily Colonist*, titled, "Our quiet feminists," characterized feminist organizing in the US as violent and using "what might be described as male tactics."<sup>5</sup> The article quoted Kay Macpherson, then president of the NAC, as saying: "Our method is slower and not so spectacular [...] We devise ways of pressuring people in power to make whatever changes are required to improve our situation."<sup>6</sup>

Scholarship on feminism in Canada illuminates two distinctive features of the Canadian second wave women's movement. Firstly, there tends to be an emphasis on a unity of womanhood (though, distinctly, English Canadian womanhood) across economic and ideological boundaries.<sup>7</sup> Feminist scholars note that the Canadian movement was divided into three ideological positions – liberal, left, and radical – but that unlike in the United States where these

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<sup>5</sup> "Our quiet feminists," *Daily Colonist* (Victoria), 14 July 1977, 4. <http://n2t.net/ark:/13960/t9287ss3k>

<sup>6</sup> "Our quiet feminists," *Daily Colonist* (Victoria), 14 July 1977, 4.

<sup>7</sup> White, English speaking women were overrepresented in Canada's national feminist movement, particularly within the NAC. As Meg Luxton explains, the NAC's central role in forming Canadian feminist discourse was both a strength and a problem in that it perpetuated a white middle class narrative. *Women Rally for Action* aimed to be inclusive of all women in British Columbia. For intersectional Canadian second wave feminism see: Meg Luxton, "Feminism as a Class Act: Working-Class Feminism and the Women's Movement in Canada," *Labour / Le Travail* vol. 48 (Fall 2001): 63-88. <http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/11t48art02>; Lynne Marks, Margaret Little, Megan Gaucher, and T. R. Noddings, "'A Job That Should Be Respected': contested visions of motherhood and English Canada's second wave women's movements, 1970-1990," *Women's History Review* vol. 25, no. 5 (2016): 771-790. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2015.1132876>; Jennifer Mills, "Conferencing as a Site for the Mobilization of Black Feminist Identities in the Congress of Black Women of Canada, 1973-1983," *Journal of Black Studies* vol. 46, no. 4 (May 2015): 415-441. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0021934714568456>

boundaries were clearly defined, Canadian women tended to respect what Jill Vickers calls a tradition of “integrative feminism,” whereby “quite radical women and groups in Canada were willing to work with quite traditional groups in these formative years, just as they were willing to accept funding from the state for their projects.”<sup>8</sup>

Secondly, Canadian second wave feminist history has been notably pro-institutional and political in its analysis. Scholars of the American second wave movement tend to focus on its ideological core, whereas those writing about the Canadian movement focus on its institutional core. For example, Sara Evans, a scholar of the American feminist movement, describes its dominant ideology, namely, “the personal is political,” as its anchor.<sup>9</sup> Conversely, Canadian scholars Nancy Adamson, Linda Briskin, and Margaret McPhail argue that in Canada, while the central ideologies of “the personal is political” and “sisterhood is powerful” formed a “powerful ideological core,” this was not enough, and the support of institutional structures was necessary in order to make significant societal change against the oppressive forces of patriarchy.<sup>10</sup> Jill Vickers, a Canadian feminist political scientist, notes that in the United States, one could be “denied the designation ‘feminist’ because

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<sup>8</sup> Jill Vickers, “The Intellectual Origins of the Women’s Movements in Canada,” in *Challenging Times: The Women’s Movement in Canada and the United States*, ed. Constance Backhouse and David H. Flaherty (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1992), 42. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt81bsh>

<sup>9</sup> Sara M. Evans, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century’s End* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 4.

<sup>10</sup> Nancy Adamson, Linda Briskin, and Margaret McPhail, *Feminist Organizing for Change: The Contemporary Women’s Movement in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988), 198.

of one's acceptance of ordinary political process and structures."<sup>11</sup> In contrast, when speaking of feminism in Canada, scholars like Vickers and Nancy Adamson focus on the changing social opportunities that were offered through politicized action and the institutional organization of the NAC. Canadian feminist history has highlighted the second wave feminist movement as notably more ideologically unified, politically charged, and pro-institutional, and British Columbia's feminist organizers shared these attributes. The 1976 *Women Rally for Action* legislative lobby in Victoria displays how the women of British Columbia worked within these politicized pressure efforts of the wider Canadian women's movement to have all women's voices recognized.

### **Feminist Political Organizing in Canada**

Canada's second wave women's movement became widespread during the creation of the *Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada* in 1967.<sup>12</sup> Due to lobbying from two feminist groups, the Committee for the Equality of Women, and the Federation des femmes du Quebec, then-Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson initiated an examination of the status of women in Canada to address the sexism and gender inequality that was pervasive across the nation.<sup>13</sup> The Commission was chaired by women and worked to include the voices of women from across the country. By the very nature of a

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<sup>11</sup> Vickers, "The Intellectual Origins of the Women's Movements in Canada," 42.

<sup>12</sup> Monique Begin, "The Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada: Twenty Years Later," in *Challenging Times: The Women's Movement in Canada and the United States*, ed. Constance Backhouse and David H. Flaherty (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), 24. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt81bsh>

<sup>13</sup> Begin, "The Royal Commission," 28.

Royal Commission being a public inquiry into a defined issue, it was open to the advice and concerns of the broader public, and the concurrent development of a new Canadian feminist movement during this period meant that many women had a great role in shaping the final report. On December 7, 1970, the *Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada*, which included 167 recommendations for updating the legislative system to address issues for Canadian women, was presented in Parliament.<sup>14</sup> The *Report* would pave the way for progress in gender equality for decades to come, though the earliest federal response was the creation of the first Minister for the Status of Women in 1971.<sup>15</sup> In 1973, the federal government further responded by establishing the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, which, as political scientist Christopher Manfredi explains, “had the task of amplifying and transmitting the demands of women’s groups to government.”<sup>16</sup> Monique Begin, who was the executive secretary for the Commission, argues that this interaction “played a key role in creating and accelerating the process of feminist evolution in Canadian women’s associations.”<sup>17</sup> This meant that most Canadian women’s associations in this era were, to some degree, feminist organizations. Begin explains that this “help[s] to explain the

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<sup>14</sup> Canada, “Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada.”

<http://women-gender-equality.canada.ca/en/commemorations-celebrations/royal-commission-status-women-canada.html>

<sup>15</sup> Canada, “Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada.”

<sup>16</sup> Christopher Philip Manfredi, *Feminist Activism in the Supreme Court: Legal Mobilization and the Women’s Legal Education and Action Fund* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004), 19. <http://n2t.net/ark:/13960/t4mm60p5b>

<sup>17</sup> Begin, “The Royal Commission,” 35.

powerful role played by the NAC in its interaction with the federal government in later years.”<sup>18</sup>

The NAC had been founded in 1972 by members of the CEWC who were frustrated with the lack of forward action within the RCSW.<sup>19</sup> They originally submitted a report to Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau as the National Ad Hoc Action Committee on the Status of Women in February 1972, noting that a year had passed since the release of the Report of the RCSW, and explaining that they were writing on behalf of the “many more thousands of women in Canada who since that time [had] joined the ranks of those concerned with the status of women everywhere.”<sup>20</sup> The report shared their areas of concern, which they stated arose from the findings of the nation’s member organizations. Those areas of concern were: day care, family planning, divorce, immigration, citizenship, women under criminal law, appointment of women to boards and commissions, equal pay, inclusion of sex and marital status in human rights codes and commissions, and the “Federal Status of Women Council.”<sup>21</sup> After submitting their report, the council met at their first conference in Toronto in April of 1972, and removed ‘ad hoc’ from their title. As an umbrella group, the NAC represented various women’s organizations across Canada. Their role was to “lobby for, and monitor the implementation of, the commission’s

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<sup>18</sup> Begin, “The Royal Commission,” 35.

<sup>19</sup> National Ad Hoc Action Committee on the Status of Women in Canada, “Submission to the Government of Canada,” 2. <http://n2t.net/ark:/13960/t2k76c382>

<sup>20</sup> National Ad Hoc Action Committee on the Status of Women in Canada, “Submission to the Government of Canada,” 1.

<sup>21</sup> National Ad Hoc Action Committee on the Status of Women in Canada, “Submission to the Government of Canada,” 3.

recommendations.”<sup>22</sup> Jill Vickers, Pauline Rankin, and Christine Appelle argue that the “NAC’s existence as an institutionalized parliament of women has contributed to the effectiveness of women’s politics in Canada.”<sup>23</sup> They further state that, through these institutionalized efforts, “English-Canadian women have had the advantage of a woman-centred, woman-controlled arena within which debate shaped by the diversity of experiences of member groups could occur.”<sup>24</sup>

The UN’s announcement that 1975 was to be International Women’s Year fueled the fires of the Canadian feminist movement. With International Women’s Year fast approaching, the federal government proudly announced its plans to work with women across the nation. In December 1974, Marc Lalonde, the Minister Responsible for the Status of Women, sent a letter to various Canadian women’s groups. He laid out the government’s program for International Women’s Year, which included a general awareness program, a series of regional and national conferences, and funding for women’s groups, adding that “the status of women is a national issue which should be the concern of all women and men in this country.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Manfredi, *Feminist Activism in the Supreme Court*, xii.

<sup>23</sup> Jill Vickers, Pauline Rankin, and Christine Appelle, *Politics as If Women Mattered: A Political Analysis of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 11.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3138/j.ctvcj2jbx>

<sup>24</sup> Vickers, Rankin, and Appelle, *Politics as If Women Mattered*, 247.

<sup>25</sup> Marc Lalonde, “Message from the Minister Responsible for the Status of Women,” *International Women’s Year Brief* vol. 1, no. 5 (December 1974): 1-2, Victoria Women’s Movement Archive, Special Collections & University Archives, University of Victoria, Victoria, British Columbia.

Yet, it must be conceded that the goals and initiatives of the NAC did not always represent all of the women of Canada. Writing in 1988, Adamson, Briskin and McPhail break down the difference between grass roots (independent) and institutionalized feminism, making the case that while both were taking place, “the non-partisan equality-for-all stance of these [institutional] organizations made them acceptable to the media and the government, and they have come to be regarded as the women’s movement.”<sup>26</sup> However, they also argue that despite its lack of universal representation, the NAC enabled the women’s movement to become “one of the most significant and successful social movements in Canada.”<sup>27</sup> While the larger NAC conferences focused on systemic issues affecting many women across the nation, local NAC chapters working within the structures of municipal and provincial governance had their own legitimate initiatives and also effected real changes. The central organization of the NAC worked symbiotically with its local groups, each bolstering the other. Women studies scholar, Naomi Black, states that this structural component of the Canadian feminist movement meant that “in Canada, a movement that is provincially fragmented [...] was able to mobilize small-scale but effective elite pressure for an issue,” and that “the umbrella/coalition structure so characteristic of Canadian organizations enables a national group to call on a wide range of other sympathizers – on the necessary local basis.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Adamson, Briskin, and McPhail, *Feminist Organizing for Change*, 62.

<sup>27</sup> Adamson, Briskin, and McPhail, *Feminist Organizing for Change*, 3.

<sup>28</sup> Naomi Black, “Ripples in the Second Wave: Comparing the Contemporary Women’s Movement in Canada and the United States,” in *Challenging Times: The Women’s Movement in Canada and the United States*, ed. Constance Backhouse and

## **Feminist Organizing in British Columbia**

In British Columbia, women's groups existed in communities throughout the province. These were organized within a provincial umbrella group, the British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), which functioned similarly to the NAC. The BCFW's goal was to create a province wide support network that could collectively take action on women's issues. The member groups were also branch chapters of the NAC, and all worked in concert. They were reacting to a need for gender equality on a national scale, while focusing on provincial legislation. This coalition of women's groups was comprised of political groups, including the NDP Women's Committee, occupational groups such as Women in Teaching, and regional groups like Victoria Status of Women.<sup>29</sup> Writing in April 1975, Mary Barretto of Status of Women Vancouver wrote that the aim of the BCFW was to "demonstrate that through the power of power of united numbers we can achieve more than as individuals or individual groups," and "to co-ordinate the diversity of organizations [...] into a mosaic wherein B.C.F.W. can represent the needs of women from every walk of life and from every part of the world."<sup>30</sup>

BC's women's groups had been working together and extending their reach as the movement grew throughout the 1970s. When the Social Credit party was elected to the provincial government at the tail end of International Women's Year, and made

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David H. Flaherty (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), 107.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt81bsh>

<sup>29</sup> Mary Barretto, "B.C.F.W.," *Kinesis* vol. 5, no. 43 (April 1975): 4.

<http://doi.org/10.14288/1.0045460>

<sup>30</sup> Barretto, "B.C.F.W.," 4.

significant cuts in the realm of women's rights, BC's feminists knew that it was time to come together for substantial political action. The issue of most concern to BC feminists was the closure of the Provincial Office on the Status of Women, and dismissal of its coordinator, Gene Errington. This office had only just been implemented by the NDP at the beginning of International Women's Year. The role of the coordinator was "1) to advise the government on matters affecting the status of women; 2) to coordinate government programs relating to women; 3) to monitor government programs and policies to ensure that equivalent benefits accrue to both men and women."<sup>31</sup> The swift decision to remove Errington from office was made by Grace McCarthy, the Provincial Secretary for the Social Credit Party. While *Kinesis*, the journal of the Vancouver Status of Women organization, reported that "the Provincial Status of Women Co-ordinators Office has been closed by the Socred government, because 'IWY is over,'" McCarthy claimed that her decision had been misinterpreted by the labour, education and feminist groups in the province.<sup>32</sup> She argued that "it's too soon to take a strong reaction to a new government's move, which was simply not to renew an old contract an old government had made."<sup>33</sup>

For the many concerned with this decision, the timing called into question the importance of women's rights beyond the tokenism

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<sup>31</sup> Women Rally for Action, *Our Story* (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1976), 2, Victoria Women's Movement Archive, Special Collections & University Archives, University of Victoria, Victoria, British Columbia.

<sup>32</sup> Karen Richardson, "CLOSED," *Kinesis* vol. 5, no. 52 (February 1976): 2. <http://doi.org/10.14288/1.0045497>

<sup>33</sup> "McCarthy defends decision," *Daily Colonist* (Victoria), 13 January 1976, 16. <http://n2t.net/ark:/13960/t7jq8ff9h>

of International Women's Year. As one January 1976 editorial from the *Daily Colonist*, titled "Gone and forgotten," stated:

Activists in the women's rights movement are understandably upset over the closing of the provincial office set up by the former government last year to promote their cause [...] The decision to abolish the five-member Status of Women section of the provincial secretary's department was predicated, apparently, on International Women's Year having run its course [...] there is a risk in picking a day, a month, or a year for a special observance. When the time passes more often than not it is forgotten. Hopefully, this isn't happening, as much as it looks that way.<sup>34</sup>

Correspondingly, the February 1976 cover story from *Kinesis* read:

If we weren't already aware that International Women's Year is over, the provincial government made it perfectly clear during the first two weeks of 1976 [...] Somehow the entire point of IWY has been missed. It was not supposed to just be a calendar mascot – one year the Year of the Rabbit, the next the Year of the Woman.<sup>35</sup>

With this sense of betrayal resonating amongst British Columbia women, they came together to make their voices heard. The day that the budget cuts were announced, planning began "in a smoke-filled room with thirty other feminists representing local

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<sup>34</sup> "Gone and forgotten," *Daily Colonist* (Victoria), 10 January 1976, 4.

<http://n2t.net/ark:/13960/t9675xb03>

<sup>35</sup> Jo Lazenby, "good-bye iwY," *Kinesis* vol. 5, no. 52 (February 1976): 1-2.

<http://doi.org/10.14288/1.0045497>

women's groups" for what organizers would later call "the largest mass lobby of Members of the Legislative Assembly in the history of BC."<sup>36</sup> In the face of peril, with impeccable organizational efforts, women from around the province came together to begin organizing *Women Rally for Action*. On March 22, 1976, following just two months of dedicated coordination and planning, the lobbying event would come to fruition.

### ***Women Rally for Action Organizing***

This article relies greatly on the three self-published booklets from the *Women Rally for Action* organizers. These booklets, published one year after the event, clearly show the organizers' dedication to formal processes and present a framework for future women's organizing. *The Rally Story* contains an account of the planning, organization and enactment of the event; *Our Story* contains the policy brief presented by *Women Rally for Action* to all of British Columbia's MLA's; and *MLA's Tell Stories* recollects the proceedings of the lobby meetings and MLA's responses to the policy brief.<sup>37</sup>

Between *The Rally Story* and the *Our Story* booklets, the organizers made sure to explain in detail their working process. They met at a series of planning meetings and maintained various committees that included local women's group representatives from

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<sup>36</sup> Women Rally for Action, *The Rally Story*, 7, preface.

<sup>37</sup> Women Rally for Action, *The Rally Story*; Women Rally for Action, *Our Story*; Women Rally for Action, *MLA's Tell Stories* (Vancouver BC: Press Gang Publishers, 1976), Victoria Women's Movement Archive, Special Collections & University Archives, University of Victoria, Victoria, British Columbia.

all across the province. The representatives of each lobby group and committee were to provide a weekly report on their proceedings, which were then redistributed through an “extensive network of feminists and women’s organizations in BC from which [they] could make the contacts necessary to transform ideas into reality.”<sup>38</sup> A two-page centre-fold flow-chart in *The Rally Story* detailed the evolution of the rally from the first meeting held to discuss the need for action on January 18, 1976, through to the rally itself on March 22, and all other follow up tasks. This flow chart, reproduced in figure 1, shows the plethora of committees that were created and maintained in order for this event to take place. In her recollections on their organizing, one woman stated: “The meetings and work were non-stop. Women were contributing every minute of their free time on weekends and late into the evening.”<sup>39</sup>

One product of these meetings was a detailed brief of policy recommendations concerning the equality of women in British Columbia. This brief was to be submitted to the province’s MLAs prior to the rally, which was planned to occur early in the new government’s first legislative session. The brief’s first draft was crafted by ten women, utilizing the input of various women’s groups. In the weeks that followed, hundreds more women became involved by offering their input for the policy recommendations.<sup>40</sup> With the collective input of women from all across the province, the organizers felt that the final product was one of the most comprehensive briefs ever submitted to the government. They made sure to not arbitrarily

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<sup>38</sup> Women Rally for Action, *The Rally Story*, 7.

<sup>39</sup> Women Rally for Action, *The Rally Story*, 8.

<sup>40</sup> Women Rally for Action, *Our Story*, foreword.

# Women Rally for Action (Flow-Chart)

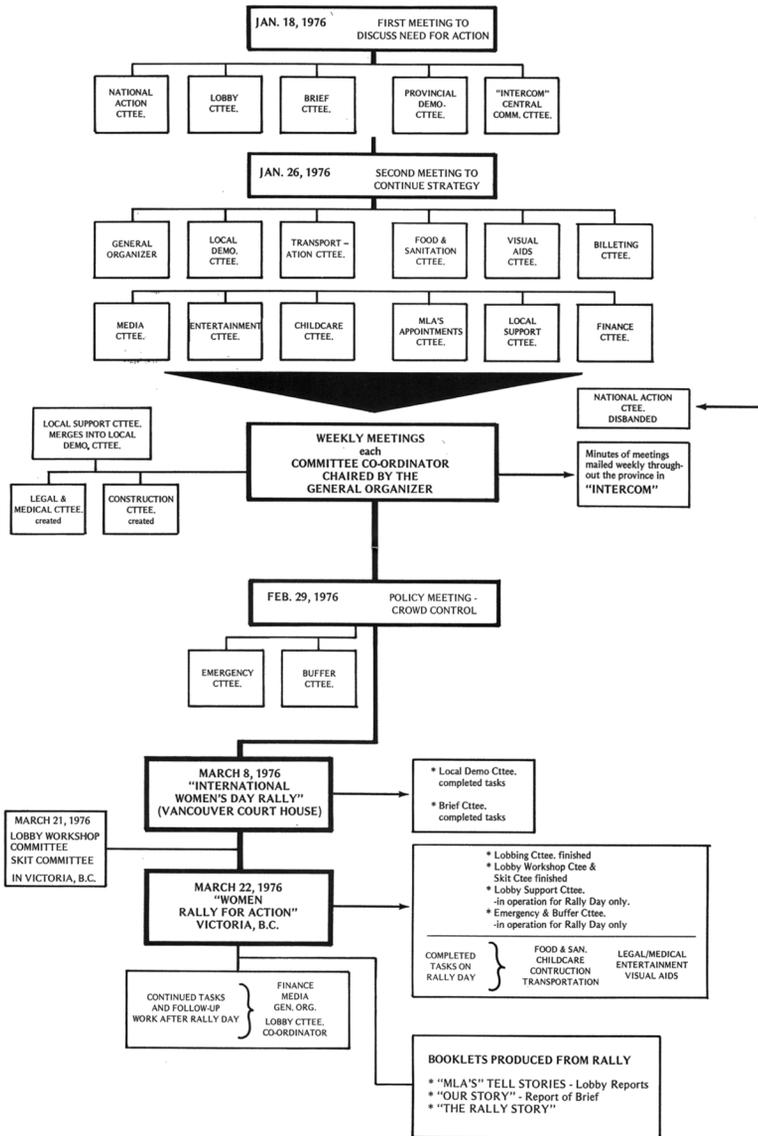


Figure 1. Women Rally for Action, *The Rally Story*, 10-11.

give priority to any single issue, or to create expectations of complete unity on all issues by all women.<sup>41</sup> The final policy brief, as presented in the *Our Story* booklet, gave equal coverage to a variety of issues including, “Representation for women within government, Basic Funding for women’s centres, Rape, Health, Education, Family Law, Human Rights, Labour and Labour Law, Rights of Lesbians, Affirmative Action, Rights of Native Women, Welfare, Credit, Pensions, Childcare,” and included an addendum that covered issues neglected at the rally.<sup>42</sup> To ensure the rally was seen as a sincere political endeavor, the organizers made sure that the members of the Legislative Assembly were made well aware of the impending event. In *The Rally Story*, the organizers recollect, “letters were sent to each M.L.A. requesting an appointment, followed by numerous phone calls when a commitment was not forthcoming (which it often wasn’t!).”<sup>43</sup> Advanced copies of the policy brief were sent to all MLAs with the hopes that they would study the policy recommendations prior to the rally.<sup>44</sup> Although the brief and the rally reflected many of the concerns of the broader NAC initiative, a number of province-specific issues were highlighted as well, including calls to fund local women’s shelters, address sexism in provincial education, and provide equality in provincial health care.

Funding for transition houses or women’s centres was a central issue, as British Columbia was at the forefront of the battered women’s shelter movement. Further, the focus on making sexual and physical abuse visible was a “distinctive feature” of the women’s

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<sup>41</sup> Women Rally for Action, *The Rally Story*, 8.

<sup>42</sup> Women Rally for Action, *The Rally Story*, 8.

<sup>43</sup> Women Rally for Action, *The Rally Story*, 8.

<sup>44</sup> Women Rally for Action, *The Rally Story*, 8.

movement nationwide.<sup>45</sup> The brief called for the continued funding of transition houses in Victoria, Vancouver, Aldergrove, Kamloops and Prince George, and for further transition houses to be set up throughout the province.<sup>46</sup> In Victoria, the local Victoria Women's Centre organization operated a transition centre that acted both as a place of refuge for women escaping dangerous situations, and as an organizational space for consciousness raising groups and other feminist organizing meetings.<sup>47</sup> Historian Nancy Janovicek has written a detailed account of the battered women's shelter movement in Canada. She explains that before the women's movement made wife battering a political issue, these women had nowhere to turn to and remained in life-threatening situations with their families.<sup>48</sup> Margo Goodhand also writes on the history of the women's shelter movement in Canada, and states that the system of women's shelters and transition houses created at this time "remains the envy of women's movements around the world."<sup>49</sup> In her book, she speaks to the apathetic and sexist outlook of the Social Credit government during International Women's Year. She quotes the then-Minister of Human Resources and later Premier of the province, Bill Vander

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<sup>45</sup> Constance Backhouse, "Contemporary Women's Movements: An Introduction," in *Challenging Times: The Women's Movement in Canada and the United States*, ed. Constance Backhouse and David H. Flaherty (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), 10. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt81bsh>

<sup>46</sup> Women Rally for Action, *Our Story*, 30.

<sup>47</sup> Victoria Women's Centre, "Sisters," *Victoria Women's Centre Newsletter* (February 1974), Victoria Women's Movement Archive, Special Collections & University Archives, University of Victoria, Victoria, British Columbia.

<sup>48</sup> Nancy Janovicek, *No Place to Go: Local Histories of the Battered Women's Shelter Movement* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007), 1.

<sup>49</sup> Margo Goodhand, *Runaway Wives and Rogue Feminists: The Origins of the Women's Shelter Movement in Canada* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2017), 1.

Zalm, who stated concern that “public money was being spent to help women leave their partners,” and that the husband’s “stress taken out on his wife” was a consequence of women working outside of the home and leaving their traditional role.<sup>50</sup> Spousal abuse was seemingly of little concern to the provincial government, and the Social Credit Party’s threatened removal of all funding for these centres no doubt infuriated women across the province.

In the realm of sexism in education, the brief demanded that sex discrimination be eliminated from the provincial public education system. They asked that the Provincial Advisory Committee on Sex Discrimination in Public Education be re-instated, the contract for the Special Advisory to the Minister of Education on Sex Discrimination be renewed, that non-sexist books and materials be distributed in classrooms, and that courses on sex-role stereotyping and discrimination be offered to teachers and students.<sup>51</sup> As the new provincial budget threatened to cut contracts for these programs, which the government deemed unessential, they became a primary rally concern.

Another important issue was equality in provincial health care. Concern for reproductive freedom around abortion and birth control was at its height during the second wave feminist era. The brief demanded that all hospitals receiving provincial money be required to set up and operate therapeutic abortion committees, that all birth control information and devices be made available and free, and that only a women’s signature be required for medical procedures

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<sup>50</sup> Goodhand, *Runaway Wives*, 98-99.

<sup>51</sup> *Women Rally for Action, Our Story*, 8-9.

affecting her body.<sup>52</sup> Abortion was a particularly important issue provincially, as Ann Thompson discusses in her book, *Winning Choice on Abortion*.<sup>53</sup> British Columbia's feminists fought hard to repeal laws surrounding anti-abortion legislation in the 1970s. In 1973, the US Supreme Court had ruled that abortion was a constitutional right in their *Roe v. Wade* decision, but in Canada, abortion was not made fully legal until 1988.<sup>54</sup>

The rally was to be an opportunity for women from all across BC to have their voices heard by the provincial government. Originally planned for March 8th - International Women's Day - the event would later be postponed until March 22nd, one week after the legislative session began on March 17th, so that MLAs would be present at the Parliament Buildings during the protest.<sup>55</sup> Alice Ages, the office coordinator of the Victoria Status of Women Action Group (SWAG), stated in one interview that "every riding would be represented by women from just about every women's group in the province," and that "the rally is the most ambitious thing we have ever tried to do, and it cuts across all political, religious, ethnic, and economic lines."<sup>56</sup> Notably, due to a widespread political strategy of unity and coordination across the NAC and BCFW, no individual

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<sup>52</sup> Women Rally for Action, *Our Story*, 38-39.

<sup>53</sup> Ann Thompson, *Winning Choice on Abortion: How British Columbia and Canadian Feminists Won the Battles of the 1970s and 1980s* (Victoria: Trafford, 2004).

<sup>54</sup> Thompson, *Winning Choice on Abortion*, 75.

<sup>55</sup> "URGENT NOTICE TO ALL MEMBERS OF THE VANCOUVER STATUS OF WOMEN FEB/76," *Kinesis* vol. 5, no. 52 (February 1976): addendum. <http://doi.org/10.14288/1.004549720>; "Throne speech will be outgunned by the salute," *Daily Colonist* (Victoria), 16 March 1976, 1. <http://n2t.net/ark:/13960/t14n6nj9h>

<sup>56</sup> "Hundreds of women to lobby Monday," *Daily Colonist* (Victoria), 20 March 1976, 26. <http://n2t.net/ark:/13960/t7vn1qh2s>

group is mentioned as the organizer in the records of the event. This was to be an event that equally represented every woman in the province. Every group, and every woman, had an important role. For one example of a centre's involvement, the Port Coquitlam Area Women's Centre handled all the communications out to women's centres and groups across BC.<sup>57</sup>

There were opportunities for everyone to get involved and to represent their local communities through participation, fundraising, and writing letters to the MLAs. As was announced in *Kinesis*:

WHAT CAN YOU DO? [...] Pool your resources with other women. For example: Campbell River women are getting together for a workshop to write their MLA letters. Ishtar Women's Centre has gotten ahold of a bus and they are filling it with women from the Fraser Valley to go to Victoria [...] The B.C. Liberal Women's Commission plans to bring 15 women to Victoria via private boat. They will moor it across the Parliament Buildings with a huge banner from bow to stern! [...] Women from Fraser Lake, Burns Lake, Vanderhoof and Gran-isle are also planning a MLA letter writing get-together.<sup>58</sup>

The article reminds women how they can involve themselves in the political process, stating: "AND VERY VERY IMPORTANT! WRITE A LETTER TO YOUR MLA! [...] Just imagine if EVERY MLA got a letter from EVERY WOMAN in his/her riding! What an

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<sup>57</sup> "URGENT NOTICE," *Kinesis*.

<sup>58</sup> Jo Lazenby, "WOMEN'S RALLY FOR ACTION," *Kinesis* vol. 5, no. 53 (March 1976): 2. <http://dx.doi.org/10.14288/1.0045503>

effect that would have! And we can do it! Let them know we are out there!”<sup>59</sup>

The organization of the rally had begun with just thirty groups from the Lower Mainland and had extended to over four hundred women’s groups and organizations across the province by the time of the event. Throughout the process, women had produced ten thousand flyers promoting the Rally, sold five thousand *Women Rally for Action* support buttons, written hundreds of personal letters to MLAs, and printed and distributed seven hundred copies of their policy brief throughout the province, including a copy for each MLA.<sup>60</sup> The event’s Appointment Committee members spent countless hours in contact with MLAs to set up lobby appointments, and some of the MLAs were eager to meet with them.<sup>61</sup> Others were more reluctant, and held out to the very last minute, but by the day of the event organizers had set up appointments with every MLA but Pat McGeer.<sup>62</sup> Women travelled to Victoria from all over the province to participate in the rally. On the Sunday before the rally, approximately two hundred lobbyists met in the Fairfield United Church basement to participate in lobbying workshops. The workshops, led by the rally’s Lobby Support Committee, prepared the women for their lobby meetings with the MLA’s and further

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<sup>59</sup> Lazenby, “WOMEN’S RALLY FOR ACTION,” 2.

<sup>60</sup> Nancy D. Conrod, “women’s rally for action,” *Kinesis* vol. 5, no. 54 (April 1976): 9. <http://dx.doi.org/10.14288/1.0045492>

<sup>61</sup> The eager MLAs were Scott Wallace, Gordon Gibson, Emery Barnes, Rosemary Brown, Gerry Strongman and Stephen Rogers. Conrod, “women’s rally for action,” 9.

<sup>62</sup> Miriam Gropper, “SAGA OF A RELUCTANT MLA,” *Kinesis* vol. 5, no. 54 (April 1976): 20. <http://dx.doi.org/10.14288/1.0045492>

discussed the issues at hand.<sup>63</sup> The women were as prepared as they could be with such a short period of planning.

## The Rally

On the day of the rally, crowds gathered on the lawn in front of the BC Parliament Buildings, as the first legislative session of the new Social Credit government took place indoors. The women set up a tent on the front steps of the buildings, standing as a temporary Provincial Women's Office in place of the one recently abolished by the Social Credit government. Lobbying teams planned to attend appointments with MLAs inside and report back to the Women's Office.<sup>64</sup> The day was meticulously organized around a program of events set from 10:00 am to 3:30 pm. It began with a series of speakers briefing the crowd on the important topics of the rally. Throughout the day, between the protest chants, rousing speeches, and bustling activity, lobby teams emerged from the Legislature to present their reports. The teams were made up of three to six women, and once a team completed its MLA appointment, it would report the results of their meeting to the crowd through a microphone at the Women's Office. It was a cold and rainy day in Victoria, - one *Daily Colonist* article, titled "Coldly composed," stated: "It was one of the best organized affairs and also one of the coldest the Legislature had ever seen."<sup>65</sup> However, it was not just the weather that was 'coldly

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<sup>63</sup> Conrod, "women's rally for action," 10.

<sup>64</sup> Conrod, "women's rally for action," 10.

<sup>65</sup> Nancy Brown, "Coldly composed," *Daily Colonist* (Victoria), 23 March 1976, 2. <http://n2t.net/ark:/13960/t68418j05>

composed,' while the women had come well prepared, the MLAs were not so well informed.<sup>66</sup>

Frequent groans from the crowd were heard as the lobby teams shared some of the responses of the MLAs inside. Housing Minister Hugh Curtis claimed to have no awareness of discrimination against single parents in housing.<sup>67</sup> When approached by lobbyists inside, Education Minister Pat McGeer, who denied a lobby meeting until the event was nearly over, stated that "sexism is not really a serious problem."<sup>68</sup> When the lobbyists demanded another meeting, McGeer replied: "As long as it's not too soon."<sup>69</sup> Human Resources Minister William Vander Zalm stated that "women make the best cooks and housekeepers and should be encouraged in that role."<sup>70</sup> Mines, Petroleum Resources, Lands and Forests Minister Tom Waterland stated that he did not agree with "a special office for women," since "women do not have special rights."<sup>71</sup> In response to a question about sexism in schools, one MLA said: "You have a point, but let's face it – in spite of it all we turn out OK."<sup>72</sup> Another MLA stated that they "[didn't] know what a women's centre is," and asked, "is it a social club or something?"<sup>73</sup> Finally, Finance Minister Don Phillips dismissed the women's political demands as complaints, stating: "I didn't even know [the Provincial Co-ordinator on the Status of Women office]

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<sup>66</sup> Brown, "Coldly composed," 2.

<sup>67</sup> Brown, "Coldly composed," 1.

<sup>68</sup> Brown, "Coldly composed," 1.

<sup>69</sup> Brown, "Coldly composed," 2.

<sup>70</sup> Brown, "Coldly composed," 1.

<sup>71</sup> Miriam Gropper, "lobby reports," *Kinesis* vol. 5, no. 54 (April 1976): 12.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.14288/1.0045492>

<sup>72</sup> Women Rally for Action, *The Rally Story*, 9.

<sup>73</sup> Women Rally for Action, *The Rally Story*, 9.

existed until women started complaining about it [...] I'm all for women's lib. Change has to come gradually as people become accustomed to it. You've got a good cause – don't ruin it.”<sup>74</sup>

There was entertainment and singing throughout the day to keep the crowd in high spirits as they awaited the reports from the lobbyists. They cheered as the reports came in, but it remained obvious that most of the MLAs were not overly concerned about the women's issues, and further, had not read the brief that the women had put all of their hard work into. The day wrapped up with further lobby reports and a final press conference at the temporary Provincial Women's Office. In the end, the general consensus was that the majority of the MLAs had not even read the brief. As one woman in attendance that day explained: “We were shocked. We had expected disagreement and lack of awareness, but never fathomed the extent...We never imagined such total ignorance and blatant chauvinism could, in 1976, still exist in our society's 'leaders'.”<sup>75</sup> The lack of consideration shown that day by most MLAs reinforced the women's belief that they were fighting against a serious and pervasive problem and made them even more determined.

### **The Rally Outcomes**

The rally could be seen as an unsuccessful event, but the organizers themselves did not view it that way. They may not have had the reaction they desired on that date of assembly, but the rally was a striking display of the power of women's organizing. It also

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<sup>74</sup> Gropper, “Lobby reports,” 12.

<sup>75</sup> Women Rally for Action, *The Rally Story*, 9.

offered a newfound political awareness to the individual attendees and organizers, established an organizational framework for future lobbying events, and gave strength to the national women's movement. *The Rally Story* writers explain:

We had made our first show of our collective political power a success. We had been granted audience because we had given the MLAs no opportunity to classify us as a 'radical fringe' or 'unrepresentative.' We had shown our numbers, our competence, and our unity across all barriers of age, region, lifestyles, party affiliations. We had produced credibility with the Press. We were able, for once, to obtain widespread coverage on our issues and exposure of the unresponsive and archaic attitudes of government.<sup>76</sup>

In the epilogue to *The Rally Story*, the writers concluded that "the Rally had far-reaching effects for the growth and the politicization of the women's movement in BC," and that "as an example of organization and collective decision-making, our Rally/Lobby was a great success."<sup>77</sup> Likewise, the front-page story of *Kinesis* reflecting on the event stated: "Women's Rally for Action is a beginning [...] We have experienced the strength that comes with knowledge and organization and co-operation and numbers [...] we can share our experiences, and provide ideas and knowledge to help still more women organize to fight for our rights."<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Women Rally for Action, *The Rally Story*, 9.

<sup>77</sup> Women Rally for Action, *The Rally Story*, 42.

<sup>78</sup> "AND NOW..." *Kinesis* vol. 5, no. 54 (April 1976): 1.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.14288/1.0045492>

By employing a national feminist strategy of organized political pressure, women's organizing in even the smallest of municipalities had national implications. Their collective voices on a national scale pressed the federal government to pass legislation ensuring gender equality and protection of women. In 1976, *Status of Women Canada* became an official department of the federal government.<sup>79</sup> In 1977, Prime Minister Trudeau passed the *Canadian Human Rights Act* which specified that there was to be no discrimination based on sex, and further that there must be "equal pay for work of equal value."<sup>80</sup> In 1979, the federal government released a Plan of Action on the Status of Women in Canada, citing the federal government's furthered commitment to "achievement of equality and economic independence of women."<sup>81</sup> Then, in 1981, the NAC lobbied for changes to the Canadian Constitution through submissions made to the Special Joint Committee on the Constitution. Their goal was "to provide constitutional direction for the judicial interpretation of equality," guaranteeing equal rights on the basis of gender.<sup>82</sup> As a result, feminist organizations played a significant role in amending the Constitution.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Canada, "Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada."

<sup>80</sup> Marjorie Griffin Cohen, "The Canadian Women's Movement and Its Efforts to Influence the Canadian Economy," in *Challenging Times: The Women's Movement in Canada and the United States*, ed. Constance Backhouse and David H. Flaherty (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), 215-224.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt81bsh>

<sup>81</sup> Status of Women Canada, *Towards Equality for Women*, Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1979, 9.

<sup>82</sup> Manfredi, *Feminist Activism in the Supreme Court*, 44.

<sup>83</sup> Manfredi, *Feminist Activism in the Supreme Court*, 46.

## Conclusion

The *Women Rally for Action* event exemplified the Canadian feminist process of using highly organized, politicized pressure tactics to urge large-scale policy change. The rally further demonstrated the movement's goal of inclusivity, as women from all regions of British Columbia came together to collectively lobby against the government in the name of gender equality. By rallying together under a national feminist strategy of political pressure and unity, BC's feminists showed an unwavering dedication to their cause.

The creation and development of the NAC and its member branches show the importance of institutional organizing and real political action in the development of the Canadian women's movement. Begin concurs, stating that:

Between 1971 and [1976], the Canadian state quite rapidly adopted all the simple reforms requested, integrating women's issues in official discourse, and taking action on several fronts that did improve the daily lives of thousands of women in Canada. It did so exceptionally rapidly and smoothly when compared with state action in the most industrialized countries, including the United States.<sup>84</sup>

In her 1979 article on the then-current evolution of the Canadian women's movement, Lynne McDonald foreshadowed these conclusions in stating that, as she saw it, the movement was

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<sup>84</sup> Begin, "The Royal Commission," 36.

distinctive from those in other countries in its “solidarity across class lines,” and “commitment to the ordinary political process.”<sup>85</sup>

For the women of *Women Rally for Action*, this comprehensive commitment to influencing legislative policy was the only way forward – the only way to legitimize their cause and to create real change. When the Social Credit government turned its back on the women of British Columbia at the end of International Women’s Year, women from across the province rallied together to show the power of their collective voice. They had clearly defined goals, an abundance of organizational ability, and a commitment to carrying their planned actions to completion. That the majority of the MLAs either did not read, or did not engage with, the policy brief created by the rally organizers showed that sexism was still pervasive within the provincial government in 1976. For many of the MLAs, it was the first time their attention had even been brought to the issues women faced in the province, and as such these women were responsible for paving a road to progress in gender equality in the province.

The countless hours of persistent dedication that the event organizers and women across the province put into making their political presence known did not dissipate after March, 1976. Women’s groups in British Columbia continued, and continue today, to organize in their fight for gender equality in the province and beyond. As can be gleaned from the Social Credit party’s reversal of the BC NDP’s gender equity legislation in 1976, these two dominant provincial governments would struggle to push their opposing

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<sup>85</sup> Lynne McDonald, “The Evolution of the Women’s Movement in Canada,” *Branching Out* vol. 6, no. 1 (1979): 39.  
<http://riseupfeministarchive.ca/publications/branching-out/branchingout-06-01-1979>

visions for human rights in the province for decades to come, and BC's feminists fought with and against them each step of the way.<sup>86</sup>

Following the collapse of the conservative Social Credit Party in 1991, the BC NDP party returned to power and introduced the BC Ministry of Women's Equality as a freestanding ministry, headed by feminist NDP MLA Penny Priddy. When the BC Liberals were elected in 2001, some BC feminists again felt that their government opposed gender equality. The standalone Ministry of Women's Equality was rebranded as Women's Services and Social Programs, becoming one of several organizational elements in the newly-created Ministry of Community, Aboriginal and Women's Services.<sup>87</sup> One feminist organization, the BC Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women group (BC CEDAW), stated in their 2003 report to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women that the "drastic and discriminatory changes to provincial legislation and programs which have been made since May 2001 violate the obligation [outlined by the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women] to 'take, in all fields [...] all appropriate measures...to ensure the full development and

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<sup>86</sup> For further discussion of the history of sexism and human rights in British Columbia during the Social Credit party years, see: Dominique Clement, *Equality Deferred: Sex Discrimination and British Columbia's Human Rights State, 1953-84*, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014).

<sup>87</sup> For further discussion of the differences between BC NDP and BC Liberal policies regarding women's equality, see: Katherine Teghtsoonian, "W(h)ither Women's Equality? Neoliberalism, Institutional Change and Public Policy in British Columbia," *Policy and Society* vol. 22, no.1 (2003): 26-47.  
[http://doi.org/10.1016/S1449-4035\(03\)70012-5](http://doi.org/10.1016/S1449-4035(03)70012-5)

advancement of women.”<sup>88</sup> Following the 2017 election of the BC NDP party, a Gender Equity Office with a Parliamentary Secretary at its head, whose role is to ensure the government commits to gender equality in all budgets, policies and programs, and to act as the government liaison for feminist and women’s organizations, has been introduced.<sup>89</sup> Alongside all of these changes and challenges, BC’s feminists made their voices heard from their own organizations and within levels of government. We can look at the *Women Rally for Action* event of 1976 and recognize their exemplary show of the power of women’s organizing as a causal factor in creating the Gender Equity Office in the provincial government.

Today, we still see sexism, pay inequity, and a struggle for affordable childcare – but we can certainly reflect, for example, on the comments given by some MLAs on the day of the rally to see just how far gender equality has come. The *Women Rally for Action* organizers, and feminists across the nation, demanded that governments push aside old gender stereotypes to embrace equality in legislation and in practice. Through strength in numbers, the women of *Women Rally for Action* organized a politically engaged event that ensured that women’s issues would be widely acknowledged, both in public and political realms. The organized and institutional action of the women of British Columbia, and of Canada’s second wave feminist movement more generally, initiated a final push towards gender

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<sup>88</sup> BC Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, “British Columbia Moves Backwards on Women’s Equality,” 3.

<http://www.westcoastleaf.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/2003-01-23-CEDAW-SUBMISSION-BC-Moves-Backwards-on-Womens-Equality.pdf>.

<sup>89</sup> British Columbia, “Gender Equity in B.C.”

<http://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/gender-equity>

equality legislation, creating lasting structural change and a framework for continued progress in gender rights.

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