

Pioneers of Feminism and Unionism: Léa Roback and Madeleine Parent

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These transcriptions were extracted from footage shot during the filming of *Madeleine Parent, tisserande de solidarités* (2002), directed by Sophie Bissonnette.

SUPPORT FOR INDIGENOUS WOMEN (1970s to 1990s)

Aboriginal Women's Struggles to Maintain Status and Rights (1970s and 1980s)

Madeleine Parent: At the first women's convention, which had resulted in the forming of the National Action Committee, that first meeting in '72, Mary Two-Axe Earley, a Mohawk from Kahnawake, came to appeal to us for support for her cause. The Royal Commission had recommended rescinding a part of the Indian Act that caused great injustices to women who had married men who didn't have Indian status. Men that may have been Indigenous, but who had lost their status because they had . . . enlisted in the Canadian army—imagine losing status for that—or taken up a profession, or for some other reason. It also applied if the man was white, or to any other man who did not have Indian status. What happened was that when a woman married such a man, she lost her own Indian status. She could be thrown out of the reserve where she had been born, and she lost various other rights to which Indigenous persons were entitled. So [Mary] requested that we support her and her Indigenous companions in their battle to have the “genocidal” law rescinded . . . Really, when you think that under the same law, if an Indigenous man married a white woman, she could gain status. And the white woman would be the one raising their kids. So on the one hand, they wanted to keep true Indigenous women away and dilute the Indigenous population on the reserves, completely in violation of individual rights and of family and community aspirations.

So we promised to support the Indigenous women's campaign to have the law changed. It took quite a long time. We came close in 1984. The Trudeau government had introduced a bill in the House, but had taken so long to introduce it that it was only adopted on the last day his government was in session, and the bill still had to be adopted by the Senate. Everyone went up to the Senate once the bill had been adopted by the House, on the third reading. In the Senate, it had to be unanimous. But an Indigenous senator whom Trudeau had recently appointed opposed it, and the bill died. And that was the end of the session, and then the general elections were called. So we had to start over, and this time, we were dealing with the Mulroney government. And all three parties—NDP, Liberal, Conservative—had promised that if they were elected, they would rescind the discriminatory section and introduce an appropriate bill. So, one of Mulroney's ministers introduced a bill. It wasn't as comprehensive as the previous bill, but it was all they could get. And the Indigenous women—Mary Two-Axe Earley, for one, Gail Stacey Moore, who was then president of Native Women Quebec, Jenny Margetts in Alberta, Caroline Ennis in New Brunswick with the Maliseet, and a whole delegation—first of all, they lobbied the federal MPs in their own respective ridings, and there were also delegations and lobbying in Ottawa. We in the

National Action Committee on the Status of Women, the CCA-NAC, as we called it, adopted a position of support. We never initiated any demands. It was the Indigenous women who initiated the demands, and everything else. And we supported them. And once in a while, some of our non-Indigenous companions were tempted to criticize the Indigenous women and come up with so-called brilliant ideas. But it was *their* cause. They had been fighting for so many years and I, along with others, insisted it was they who had to decide what they wanted. And as for strategy, we could provide advice, but they were the ones with the final say, and that's how it was done.

The Indigenous men in power and the Grand Chief at the time, an Albertan named . . . oh, I forget . . . were opposed to women having more rights, and they put a lot of effort into that. They hounded us everywhere we went, in front of parliamentary committees and in different sessions, and they didn't want anything to change. But the campaign was strong. Women vigorously supported the position of Indigenous women. And finally, in '85, a bill was passed whereby an Indigenous woman who married a non-status Indigenous man would keep her Indigenous rights. And a woman who had lost them because she was already married to a non-status man would regain them, subject to a formal application, which could sometimes be complicated, because not only did the marriage certificate have to be provided, but so did the person's birth certificate. And the parish priests hadn't always inscribed the correct names in the archives. If there was an Indigenous name they didn't recognize, some of them would give the person a different name, and the family wouldn't know. And when we tried to find those documents, in some cases we had to work hard to find out what the person's real name was, what name the parish priest or the agent had given them—because they wouldn't have bothered to learn the Indigenous language that was spoken—and authenticate all the documents. But in the end, they recovered their status.

But as for the children of those women, it wasn't fair. The first generation of children could recover their Indigenous status, but their children, that is, the woman's grandchildren, did not have that right. And those children, like their mothers, were not necessarily admitted into their communities, because more or less on the sly, at the same time as the government passed the law to allow women to regain their status rights, it reached an agreement with the chiefs whereby the chiefs and band councils had more power than before, and they could deny women the right to return home. So it was a bit like being stabbed in the back. On the one hand, they were making concessions, but on the other, they were taking away certain rights. And that's still the situation today. They never got those rights back. Some reserves welcomed the women back with no problems. But in some reserves, where there's a lot of natural wealth, for example, where there is oil or natural gas in certain parts of Alberta, they absolutely refused to accept the women, and they are still cast out.

But a demographic shift also took place among Indigenous people. At that time, most Indigenous women lived on the reserves, but nowadays, most Indigenous women don't. And one of the battles they had to wage was regaining their rights outside of the reserves. And once again, there was an issue with the chiefs, who enjoyed the fact that all the subsidies came to them for the reserves, and that there was very little for women on the outside. So that was another battle. And there was a committee of Indigenous women in the National Action Committee, the NAC, who attempted to support them on that demand. It was an important victory. It's important to note that the Indian Act, which disqualified those women, was passed in 1867, around the same time the Macdonald government established the Dominion of Canada, and it gave the bourgeoisie even more power than they had had before, given that our colonial status was even greater, and that it was the Macdonald government that had passed the law in a parliament that included no women, of course, and no Indigenous MPs, either. So it was an arbitrary law. And at that time, many governments believed that the genocide of Indigenous people was a real possibility, and it was a

genocidal law. But things didn't play out the way they had expected, and the Indigenous people survived. They had to have so much courage and stamina. But that's what happened, and [the Indigenous] population increased. And nowadays, with the charter of rights, which was partially inspired by the United Nations, they can claim even more rights, even if it's taking a long time for their rights to be recognized.

Mary Pitawanakwat's Lengthy Battle Against Racism (1984-1995)

Madeleine Parent: The Indigenous women were also fighting another important battle, which we also backed. It was Mary Pitawanakwat's. She was an Ojibwe woman from Manitoulin Island who had been employed by the Secretary of State as a consultant for Indigenous groups on reserves in Saskatchewan. She visited all the reserves. She didn't visit urban Indigenous groups, but her file was very, very demanding. She had to take roads . . . country roads all over Saskatchewan to visit with Indigenous groups on the reserves. And it was she who advised them and helped them obtain grants from the federal government for education, recreation, health care, and cultural activities. She was their main consultant and advisor. And she loved her work, but she had to work alone. In her government department in Saskatchewan, there were about two dozen employees, and she was the only one who was visibly Indigenous. There were no others. There was one other Indigenous woman, but she wasn't visibly Indigenous, so she was considered to be white.

So when she began in 1979, everything went well. They were happy with her work and praised her for it. But about a year and a half later, they started criticizing her about many things. There had been a change in upper management, and they said her work wasn't as good. At one point, they asked her for a report on certain files, but when she went to the filing cabinets to get the documentation, she couldn't find her paperwork. So they accused her of not keeping her paperwork in order, even though later a witness testified that someone in management had removed the files from the filing system. So it was a setup. Sometimes, people made jokes about Indigenous people, which not only embarrassed her, but also insulted and humiliated her. And it was difficult for her because she was already . . . she was quite young. She defended herself, but as it went on, the comments became . . . For example, when she returned from an Indigenous meeting with a white female government colleague, and she drove the woman home, her husband said, in front of Mary Pitawanakwat, "So, they didn't scalp you?" That type of things happened frequently, and it was very hard to take, and it showed the type of discrimination that was taking place there. One time, her manager called her and said, "In such-and-such reserve that you advise, we've heard that there might be drugs there. Since you go there, I'd like you to do a little search and report back to us." So she said, "But I can't do that. I'm their advisor. I'm not the police." So he insisted, "You will do it. You'll do your work, and do the search, and write up a report for me." But she flatly refused. And she filed a grievance with her union. But after working there for about six and a half years, she was fired for incompetence, when in fact, as the advisor to all those people throughout the province, she had had the biggest files. So she came to see us—we held a conference in Winnipeg around 1985, and she attended. She stood up during the general meeting and made a critique—it was a good critique, by the way. But it was her way of . . . because she had . . . she knew she had to defend herself. And so sometimes, when she arrived somewhere, instead of making a request and presuming it would be heard, she did it in a defensive manner. But it wasn't offensive. And truly, her critique was well-delivered. So right after the opening meeting, where she had spoken, I went to see her and said, "I'd like to talk to you. I'm on the Indigenous Women's Committee, and we could meet this evening, after the meetings." So we met at about 10:00 or 10:30 p.m. We had a long discussion, initially about her critique, and she was right, it was something we had to change. For example, our committee was called the Indigenous

Women's Committee. And I had inherited the title of president, which I didn't like. And she said, "I go there. I come here. I meet with the president of the Indigenous Women's Committee, and she's white!" And she was completely right. So we renamed the committee the Indigenous Women's Support Committee. There were Indigenous women on the small committees, and others, white women, who supported them. And it helped us keep our people in line, so they understood that we didn't take the initiatives, we supported them.

So we talked about that issue, and when it was almost midnight, I said, "All right, let's go to sleep." And she said, "I'm going to be fired." I said, "How? Why?" So she explained the situation to me—I think it must have been 1:00 in the morning—and I said, "We need help with this." And I said, "Tomorrow morning, we're starting with a special session at 8:00 a.m. If you can attend, come find me, and I'll talk to the vice-president of the NAC. Between the special session and the regular session, we need to get her backing on something, and I'm sure she'll back you too, and we'll get the ball rolling." So the next day, I went into the session, and I heard someone sit down in the chair behind mine, and it was Mary Pitawanakwat. So she and I met with the vice-president—it was Lynn Kay at the time, who was very good—and we promised her that we would support her and work with her. So she went back to Alberta and said to one of her friends, "I finally know I'm going to get some support." And later, when we knew each other better, she told me, "What surprised and reassured me the most was that you didn't make me go through a big interrogation. You believed me right away." So we were able to get to work. She said, "Every time we talk to someone who is not one of our people, they start asking, 'What did you do wrong? Why were you fired?'" I said, "I know there's discrimination against Indigenous people. And what you told me was simple and clear, and I had no need to ask you any questions. It was obvious." But it was very, very difficult.

A few months later, just as she had predicted, she was fired for incompetence, after six and a half years of hard work. She was ashamed of that, and once again the blame was placed on the Indigenous people, who were being treated unfairly. All the crimes, all the ignorance, all the mistakes that hadn't necessarily even occurred, but that they were blamed for when people wanted to get rid of them. And the government got rid of a lot of Indigenous people that way, by accusing them unjustly or by causing them to become discouraged as they realized they were being harassed, that they were always being accused of making mistakes, that no one would help them. That's how Indigenous people were treated by the government, in several departments. There were some statistics that showed that many, many Indigenous people quit, or were fired, in much higher proportions than other groups. And it was completely unfair. What happened was that employees, or managers, or other people in authority in the government would push them out by making their lives impossible, or by sabotaging their work, for example like in the case of Mary, who was being forced to act as a police officer against the Indigenous people she was supposed to be advising. Or for other reasons, by sabotaging their work. So many, many of them left. But Mary was so outraged at the injustice she had suffered, especially since she had two young kids who were being told at school, "Your mother is good for nothing. She got fired. She must be a drunk," and other things like that. She wanted to fight it. But she was working under incredible strain. For example, at one point, she had a tumour in her breast, so she had a minor operation, but it wouldn't heal. It kept leaking and leaking. But it finally stopped when she felt assured that she would be supported. But she pursued the grievance for the dismissal, which she felt had been unfair. And it went to arbitration. But the arbitrator, who was a Francophone lawyer, from Alberta, I think—and her manager was also a Francophone, with authority—the arbitrator backed up the manager, going so far as to say in his decision that, using the example of the policing assignment, as well as Mary's dismissal, that the manager had the right to make a mistake, as long as he didn't do so on purpose, as long as it was made in good faith. And what he said was based on laws

governing masters and servants. Under the Master and Servant Act . . . Before the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, a master could dismiss a good servant, if he did it in error. But it didn't even apply anymore! But still, something useful did come out of the arbitration. It was that the lawyer, the arbitrator, noted down a lot of the facts he had been given. And those facts, which he interpreted under the Master and Servant Law as not being illegal, were facts that nowadays, show . . . could prove that Mary was in the right.

So, after losing in arbitration—and she had been forced to go through arbitration, she couldn't go to the Human Rights Commission without first going through arbitration, because she was part of a union. And the union rep who defended her was very loyal. He did everything he could to defend her. But there was collusion higher up, so she lost. So she applied to the Human Rights Commission to have a committee hear her case. It was delayed over and over. And the Commission eventually said, "Well, your case has already been adjudicated, you don't have a case." Which wasn't true. That was illegal. Why did they even exist if it wasn't to enforce both the United Nations Declaration and the Rights Commission's important position in the declaration . . . The Human Rights Act? So she had to go to court to have the court order the Human Rights Commission to appoint a committee to her case and hear her. Another delay. And during this time, her illness was progressing. And all that time, her reputation remained damaged. And her kids . . . She remained unemployed. But then she had a small victory. If I remember correctly, the Human Rights Commission appealed the trial court's decision. They lost at the Court of Appeal, Mary won, and they were ordered to appoint a committee.

The directors of the Human Rights Commission, without much enthusiasm, appointed a committee to hear the case. And then the government, I think it was the Department of Justice, went to court to request an injunction against Mary Pitawanakwat, the complainant; against the Human Rights Commission; and against the special committee that had been appointed. Which goes to show how determined they were to keep her out and, at the same time, to teach other Indigenous people a lesson: "You'd better toe the line, because your job isn't safe." So that went on, and unfortunately, her illness was still taking its toll. Along the way, when bad things happened during the legal process, she became very discouraged and depressed, and she wanted to let her illness progress as a way of committing suicide. We really had to help her get back up and keep fighting. But she did it, and she kept going. And when the committee appointed by the Human Rights Commission issued its judgement, they had to admit that she had been unjustly dismissed, but they also said, "She has to be given her job back, but not in Saskatchewan, because there are too many problems." As though she were responsible for having been unjustly dismissed. So then, some people said, "There, you won, be happy with that." But she called me and asked, "What do you think?" So I said, "What do you want to do?" She said, "I want to continue my case." So I said, "Continue, and we'll support you." And some people thought that was risky, with the little she had won. But no. It was the principle of the thing.

So then, going from one court to another, she ended up with a final judgement, according to . . . And in the end, the Human Rights Commission itself was obligated to support her in court. And then she won. And the judge said that the committee appointed by the Human Rights Commission had been unfair in claiming that she was responsible for her misfortune, when in fact she wasn't, and that they had to come to an agreement with her and her lawyers to reimburse her and, above all, get her back to work. So then more discussions took place, and the government people proposed to give her . . . the highest amount they proposed to pay her was \$160,000 in reimbursements. But she had lost a lot of salary income. So she said, "No. The minimum I will accept is \$200,000, non-taxable, and that I be able to return to work, with the understanding that I'm sick and that I have the right to sick leave and the compensation that goes along with it." So, "No way!" etc., etc. Finally, she

won. They had to give in and we all celebrated together: her union, the Public Service Alliance of Canada, which is now fighting for pay equity, for example; and us from the NAC, the women's organization; and those who had helped her. So she went back to work, and there was a small celebration, but she was very, very sick. And she received her money, as well as what she was owed later in sick leave, which she used. Because when she went back, she was so ill that sometimes she could work for a few days, but other times she had to return home, sick, after an hour. In any case, her family, her children, and everyone else felt proud of their mother, who had continued to fight, who had held on to her conviction that she had to . . . that she couldn't give in, that she couldn't settle for half or accept that she was responsible for any of it.

So she's . . . she was fully reintegrated. But she died soon afterwards, and she was . . . There were two services. One in Regina, where she lived, and then we went up to the reserve on Manitoulin Island, where a final ceremony was held and she was buried in the cemetery on the reserve. It was . . . I think that, for the government as well, it exposed the injustices faced by Indigenous people at their hands, and the fact that they did everything they could to turn them into spies against their own people and that for that reason, and for other discriminatory reasons, Indigenous people had suffered many, many injustices at the hands of the government. There was a lot of publicity around it, especially since, at each NAC and women's movement convention, at the yearly conventions, we lobbied the government and the other political parties. And the fact that until about a month before her death, she came to every annual convention, and she got up and spoke, or one of us spoke on her behalf, about the government. And about a month before her death, or six weeks, she came again. She looked like a corpse, and she confronted the Minister of Justice, and she said, "Look at me. This is what you did." She showed courage, and then she left. She was in a wheelchair at that point. And then she went home to die.