

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.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE INDEPENDENT WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN CANADA (1970-1973)

The Bird Commission and the Strategy for Change Conference (1970-1972)

Sophie Bissonnette: I'd like you to tell us about something that I think is less well known in Quebec, and that's about your role in the creation of the National Action Committee and, following the Bird Commission, the role you played in putting forth an independent feminist movement and bringing the concerns of female workers and labourers into the feminist movement.

Madeleine Parent: That was in 1967, following a series of lobbying efforts by women's groups to the government of Lester Pearson about women's rights, and the need to examine the issue very seriously and appoint a commission of inquiry. Lester Pearson eventually appointed what became known as the Bird Commission. Florence Bird was the president and Monique Bégin was the secretary. The committee worked very hard. They toured all over the country, including to the northern territories, and they received a lot of correspondence that included many, many suggestions. They produced a report that, for its era and considering the status of women in the country at the time, was very important. It was published by the government in 1970. It caused quite a stir for a few weeks, and then it was forgotten. There was this committee of women, mostly in Ontario but supported by others, and most of them were professionals, or the wives of professionals . . . what I mean is, there were no working-class labourers on the committee. So this group of women, as had been the custom in the past with women who were somewhat well-to-do, asked the government to authorize and pay for a women's conference, where the report of the Royal Commission would be discussed and certain priorities stemming from the report's recommendations would be proposed to the government. They figured that if they were simply to ask for a women's conference, it would frighten the government, but if it were based on the recommendations of the Royal Commission, then perhaps with a bit of pressure, they would succeed. Finally, after a lot of pressure and after Laura Sabia, who was president at the time, promised publicly that if the government did not take action—at this point it was Pierre Elliott Trudeau—a million women would descend on Parliament Hill . . . She later said, "If he had taken me at my word, I don't know what I would have done." But in the end, it was the threat of it, and many women were pressuring them . . . So the conference was held in the spring of 1972 at the King Edward Hotel in Toronto, which looks much different today than it did then. It's fancier now than it was then. And the government paid for the meals, for the transportation of two women from each province and territory, and for some other necessary expenses. The conference began with a banquet on the Friday night. On Saturday, there were workshops all day, and there

was a community dinner on Saturday evening. And on Sunday morning, until noon, it was the plenary session, where the reports from the workshops were presented, debated, and voted on. Then it was the decision-making meeting.

They had invited Pierre Elliott Trudeau to attend. Naturally, he didn't. They had also invited John Munro, who was one of the relevant ministers at the time, and he didn't go either. And there was another minister whose name I don't remember, but the committee was told, on behalf of the government, "You'll get Florence Bird." Okay, so she would get top billing for the opening of the conference.

SB: And she was president of the . . .

MP: . . . of the Royal Commission. That is, the politicians and ministers themselves didn't want to get involved at that point.

SB: And how . . . Why were you interested in attending the conference?

MP: I had given it a lot of thought. I had discussed it with some of the female activists in the locals, and I had decided it was very important that working-class women be heard at the conference, and that it wasn't enough for the professional women, the well-to-do women, to serve as spokespeople regarding all things. We needed to be there. And there were four young people working with us as volunteers, who were paid by the government. I think it was the Company of Young Canadians, or something like that, where the government paid young people to be active in community work. And in fact, they had to submit reports on what was going on, and it was useful information for the government. But they were sincere. So I said, "I'm going. Do you want to come with me? I'd like at least one of you to come with me." But it was, "Oh, they're older women, they . . . we're familiar with their program, we know . . . they're not radical enough for us." But Laurell Ritchie said, "Yes, I'll go with you."

Madeleine's Influence on the Creation of an Independent Women's Organization (1972)

Madeleine Parent: I found myself on the panel with Florence Bird, and Thérèse Casgrain was also on the panel, and there were two others, as well. And in her speech, Florence Bird talked about the Royal Commission's recommendation to the government that it appoint an advisory committee on the status of women, which the government itself would appoint, and which would provide advice to the government and stay abreast of women's issues. She insisted that that request be given priority. But we had to think about it, because there were so many recommendations, and she was giving that one so much importance . . . The next day, there were workshops all over, and as far as I knew, in all the workshops except mine, the recommendation was that we ask the government for the advisory committee. I don't know if I strongly opposed it during the workshop, I can't remember. It should be noted that at the conference, there were many, many women from the federal government, who were there as advisors, as participants . . . they were everywhere. You could say that at that point, the government had eyes and ears all over the place. And now that I'm thinking about it, I spoke . . . Yvette Rousseau, who was later a senator but who is now deceased, was director of the Quebec delegation. She had been vice-president of the Catholic unions at a time when unions were going through big changes and a lot of progress was being made. And as the leader of the Quebec delegation, she had been invited to a wine and cheese reception by Mrs. Paltiel, who was the leader of the team of government women at the conference. So she said to me, "Wait

for me. When I get back, I'll know more." So Frieda Paltiel insisted to all the delegation leaders that it was imperative to ask the government to appoint an advisory committee. And then . . .

Sophie Bissonnette: So, you were saying . . . Yvette Rousseau had told you to wait, that she would give you more information.

MP: When Yvette came out of the meeting with Mrs. Paltiel, she said, "That's it. They specifically support the idea of demanding that the government appoint an advisory board. It's their main priority." So I said, "Well in that case, that's not a very good sign. We still have work to do." Because judging from the number of participants, it was clear that the conference was a success. There were several hundred people in attendance, and on Sunday morning, for the plenary session, there were already 500 people there. That was a lot more than the government had expected. There was enormous interest and it . . . it came from all over the country.

So I discussed it with my companion, Laurell. On the first evening, Friday evening, after the banquet, Laura Sabia had asked me, "What do you think of the recommendation of the president of the Royal Commission? I said, "I'm not sure. I'm worried about it, but I'll try to consider it as seriously as possible." But after seeing what happened on Saturday and what had happened with Mrs. Paltiel and the directors, I was convinced that we had to take advantage of the fact that we were all there together to form an independent women's movement. So Laurell and I went to get Kay MacPherson, who was one of the people who had taken part in all the women's committees, and who was lobbying the government. We told her we thought it was time to form a movement, and would she come with us right away to speak to Laura Sabia? "Sure." So the three of us went to see Laura, and we said, "We think the most important thing we need to do is take advantage of the fact that we're all here together and form an independent movement." She said, "Well . . ." She seemed to be in agreement, but she wasn't sure; she wanted to get a feel for what was going on. She said, "Oh! There's Yvette Rousseau, with her group from Quebec. Let's go over right away, you and me." So we went to talk to them, and we told them what we thought. Yvette's delegation was divided. One group thought we should accept and support the government's proposal. The other was more in favour of our proposal to form an independent movement. So Laurell and I spent most of the evening talking to other women, debating the topic, trying to convince them. Almost all of them had been at the workshops where [Bird] had recommended that we propose an advisory council to the government. But we had some great discussions, and then we went to what was called "The Radical Caucus." It was a caucus of women, mostly young women. And they were . . . It was already late, at least 11:00. And poor Kay MacPherson, after having waited all that time, said, "I'm going to bed." I said, "That's okay." But Laurell and I stayed.

I don't know what time it was by the time they were willing to hear us out, but in general, they were against the women who were leading the group, and they wanted to know, were we going to kick them out or not? Their main demands were free therapeutic abortion upon request and free daycare. So they were pretty tired by the time they consented to . . . I think they were more tired than concerned about hearing us out, but that didn't matter. So I explained that we had an unprecedented opportunity to form an independent women's movement, and that this wasn't the time to wage battle against the wives of professionals. That we had to get organized to confront the government properly regarding women's demands. And if other women wanted to join us, great. Time would take care of the rest. But that tomorrow, we shouldn't ask for a government-appointed advisory board, because what would it end up being? We would make recommendations, but the government would choose, and we'd end up with nothing. But with all

the people we had, it was time to form a movement. And after some discussion and reflection, they agreed. And I recommended that, during the debate, since there would be so many people there and we didn't know most of them, we shouldn't expend our energy on issues that could place us in a minority. Let's get right to the point, which is to form a women's movement. So there were a lot of questions. Let's form our movement. Let's grab our independence. We'll debate the rest later, and elaborate on it. We already have the beginnings of a program in certain recommendations of the Royal Commission.

So it was very interesting. And the following morning, there were 500 people there. And the Steering Committee, with Laura Sabia and her colleagues, delivered their report. And the person who was delivering the report said, "Yesterday, in the workshops, there was near unanimity on one demand, but it seems to have changed a lot overnight. So instead, we have a new question before us." And so the debate began. And I went straight to the point, which was that this was an opportunity, the likes of which we'd never had before, to form our own independent movement, to take the initiative immediately. There was a group of women from the government who were opposed to it—this wasn't the right time, we had to appoint . . . to support the idea of an advisory committee, etc., etc. And I realized that there were other women who hadn't said anything, but who thought it was a good idea. And I later found out that some of them had been thinking, had been dreaming about forming a movement. But they hadn't dared say anything. So they joined together. The debate lasted . . . It was the main topic of debate the following morning. And the women from the government—not only the paid government team, but also women from the Liberal Party, here and there—got involved. And there was one woman from the union movement who was there simply to oppose me. No matter what I said, she opposed me. So she took the side of the government women who were against the idea of an independent women's movement. But the debate was so vigorous, and as some people raised objections and others replied to them, the women realized how much sense it made. For example, one of the arguments of the government women and their allies was, "We need a group that is accountable to the federal government." And I said, "Why? They're all men! We need a movement that is accountable to the women of Canada." And . . . Anyway, it went on for a long time, and it was very lively. But the majority voted in favour of it, and it was the biggest decision we made.

Feminist Demands and the Founding of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC/CCA) (1973)

Madeleine Parent: Next, we adopted other demands that had been discussed in the workshops. For example, the Royal Commission's recommendation to pass a law on equal pay, which we called "equal pay for work of equal value." What that meant that it was no longer "equal pay for equal work," as it had been for a long time, in accordance with a decision that had been made long before the war by the International Labour Organization, which was now associated with the United Nations. So say a woman worked, say in a job ghetto, for example as a typist, the value of her work in terms of skills, effort, working conditions, and responsibilities could be compared to a different "man's job" in the same company. For example, a man working in the parking lot. So while she had to possess certain skills and make certain efforts, and deal with interruptions, etc., she was attributed, not more skills, but a level of skill by adding everything up together, of equal value. And we had to insist on this being one of the main demands. Another was the request for daycare centres. Maybe not exactly as the young women had demanded. I would have supported them. But . . . I don't quite recall, there may have been some nuance, but

the demand was for government-subsidized daycare. And the issue of the right to therapeutic abortion. Once again, the young women wanted it to be readily available and free of charge. There may once again have been some slight modifications, but the principle of therapeutic abortion received support and was adopted by vote.

And other women's legal rights before the courts, property rights, the right to freedom, the right to speak for themselves, etc., were all supported. There was another very strong demand that had been discussed and proposed by an Indigenous woman from Kahnawake, an Iroquois named Mary Two-Axe Earley, who had described the situation of Indigenous women who married men who were not status Indians. It didn't matter if the man was white, immigrant, or even Indigenous. If he didn't hold legal status under the Indian Act, which had been conceived in the previous century under John A. Macdonald, by a parliament made up solely of non-Indigenous men, and that Indigenous people had had no say in . . . Under that law, a woman who married a man who did not hold Indian status would lose all her rights. And if her reserve didn't want her to stay, it had every right to expel her. And she said, "Imagine. In our reserve, where I was born and raised, there's a cemetery for dogs. But a woman like me can't be buried in a cemetery in Kahnawake. I'm asking for your support." So Lynn McDonald stood up and said, "Yes, it's one of the recommendations and it should be one of our priorities." And it was accepted. I have to say that Mary Two-Axe Earley spoke very eloquently and made everyone understand. It came as a big surprise to many women who didn't follow those things, but it was accepted as one of our priorities.

Sophie Bissonnette: So, after the conference, what was created, Madeleine?

MP: So then, the committee . . . First of all, some of the demands were based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which had been adopted in '48, following World War II. And I should mention that Professor Humphrey, John Humphrey of McGill University, who had been at the United Nations and who was one of the main authors of the Universal Declaration, with the support of Mrs. Roosevelt—who was much more forward-thinking than her husband Franklin, but who still managed to set him in the right direction at times—that Humphrey had been a member of the Bird Commission. So we had the benefit of his recommendations, of his expertise on the Universal Declaration, and that helped augment the quality of the Bird Commission's recommendations. So after that, the committee, Laura Sabia and the others, were tasked with organizing the inaugural convention, which took place the following year, in '73, and continued on afterwards. It was a coalition of women's groups. Which meant that there weren't any individual members. You could be an individual "supporter" for a monthly or yearly fee, but only women's groups could be members. And it was the first time . . . There was the Canadian Federation of Women, which had been formed several years earlier and which made certain demands, but which didn't have the scope of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women. And it was our group that took the lead on the demands. But the government still wanted to appoint the committee, the advisory board. So John Munro begged us to form it. Silence. But they finally received a request, if I remember correctly it was from the Canadian Confederation of Women, which had requested an advisory committee. So the government said, "Oh, so that's what you want?" "Yes, definitely!" So they went ahead and appointed it.

But they nevertheless had to appoint a few of our women. They asked me—and by the way, they had a very good woman organizing the government side. Unlike the others, who simply followed orders, she took a lot of initiative, and it was she who drew up the list of candidates. And several women said to me, "Listen, we're developing our movement, like we decided to. But

they're going to appoint a committee, and I'd like to run for it, I'd like to run . . ." And if they were committed enough to the right things, I said, "Well, then go for it!" And as you can imagine, the others didn't talk to me about it. And the woman from the government kept insisting that I be on it. So I said, "No." "But you've got to accept!" "No!" Finally, I told her, "Look, I just want to be free, that's all." And then she understood, so she didn't ask me again. And she herself . . . She was subjected to injustices by the government because she was too sympathetic to the women's demands. So they replaced her with someone else.

SB: And the group . . . the movement you launched, the coalition, what was it called?

MP: The National Action Committee on the Status of Women. It's a long name, but it was to associate us, at that stage, with the Royal Commission . . . with the recommendations of the Royal Commission. And in French it was even more of a mouthful! The *Comité canadien d'action sur le statut de la femme*. And I kept saying the name had to be changed to something simpler but . . . Someone would have had to deal with it seriously.

SB: How did you become convinced of the need for an independent women's movement? It was the early 1970s. There were already a few groups, such as the Comité de Lutte pour l'Avortement [Committee for the Fight for Abortion], a few groups that had begun . . . the Front de Libération des Femmes [Women's Liberation Front]. And up until then, you had always been involved in union work. What convinced you that there had to be an independent movement?

MP: Yes, well. First of all, in the unions, I had realized that women needed to be involved in the women's movement, and I found that the feminist groups that existed, many of which were very earnest, were still very middle-class. And that working-class women simply weren't being represented. We needed a coalition where working-class women would find their rightful place. And then there was the younger generation—this was in '72—that had a different set of demands. Here, the Quiet Revolution was taking place, as was the young women's movement, the battle for therapeutic abortion, even the united front of the unions, and the women who had gone into the reformed, completed health and education systems. There were a lot of women, and I thought, "Now's the time, with the Royal Commission and its recommendations marking a milestone." And also, I believed that simply trying to push the professional women aside, on behalf of younger women, wouldn't do any good. That they had done some good work, that they had a certain influence, that they were nevertheless feminists, and that we had to bring it all together into a coalition, and now was the time. The way I saw it, it was the right time, especially given the recommendations of the commission, which maybe weren't perfect, but which were much better than what we had been given by the government. Second, to ensure there would be no divisions between generations and groups of women. And third, I personally wanted women in the unions to get involved in the women's movement. We had never had such a great opportunity.

Pay Equity and the Economic Equality of Women (1970s)

Madeleine Parent: Given that I had spoken on the issue of "equal pay for work of equal value" at the conference, and that it had been the subject of a debate and had ultimately been supported, I was invited to speak about that demand in several places. In Toronto, at colleges, at several meetings, in Winnipeg, in Vancouver, in . . . anyway, in lots of places. And with all the publicity it generated, all the elements of the demand, the level of interest grew. And women were instrumental in getting the government to finally pass a proposal like that into law. And actually, it was only much later that a section was added to the Human Rights Act. And the first

government—it had always been a mystery to me, here in Canada, which had enshrined in its human rights legislation the demand for "equal pay for work of equal value"—was the Quebec government under Bourassa in '75. And only recently did I discover what I believe to be the explanation. Raymond Boyer, a scientist who had been interned during the Cold War, and came out of it and became a criminologist afterwards, was one of the directors of the new Ligue des Droits de la Personne [Human Rights League] at the time. So I think it was the Ligue des Droits et Libertés [League for Rights and Freedoms]—I can't remember exactly what name they were using at the time—that had instigated, and succeeded, in getting the Bourassa government to include the clause. But as we know, the Bourassa government didn't really sink its teeth into it, and unfortunately, neither did the PQ. So it remained a controversial issue. The principle had been accepted everywhere. But how to enforce it? They refused to provide the means to do so.

At the federal level, when Trudeau drew up the Charter of Human Rights and amended the Constitution, the federal government also included a clause based on the Human Rights Commission, which recognized the principle. But it didn't go much further in enforcing it. Which meant that many unions, especially in the public sector, but also in the private, were still stuck with management, with a public administration, that should have recognized the principle, because they had accepted it, but that refused to do so. And I've never been surprised by that, because women's inferiority is partly due to the fact . . . is largely due, in fact, to the fact that they are relegated to cheap labour on the job market, that they're confined to jobs that pay poorly, that make them work hard, but that don't confer value to them. But once women have economic equality, lots of things in our society are going to change. Especially the profits of employers, who will have to share a little more with women. But nowadays, women who demand equal pay for work of equal value, in the public sector, for example, and who are stuck with an insufficient offer from the government, are subsidizing part of the economy while at the same time serving as economic competitors to men. And there are many men who don't understand that, but they should.

In the 19th century, in Montréal, there was a men's clothing workshop, where there were only men working. But at some point, the employer discovered he could exploit women. So he hired women, and instead of siding with the women and demanding that they receive the same salary, the men went on strike. They said, "They have no right to be here." Well, they lost their strike. And in lots of ways, the same error keeps getting made. But once we have economic equality, we will have made great progress. And we're still trying to achieve equal social conditions for women, as well, so the responsibility of having children is not exclusively borne by them—because the survival of the nation depends on it—but rather, is also borne by men and the public authorities. And that's why we talk about daycares, universal access to education, many things, maternity leave, etc. In my opinion, that's at the heart of the issue.

And with that comes the issue of fighting for a higher minimum wage, because it's still women, and young people as well, who find themselves with the lowest wages, especially where there are no unions. And if we want to achieve pay equity, there can't be such a wide gap between minimum wage and . . . salaries for certain types of work. That's another thing we fought for, but didn't win. After World War II, and in the years that followed, there was a movement wherein when there were salary increases, they were done by percentage, whereas we've always advocated for uniform wage increases. Because when it's done by percentage, a mechanic who earns, say in those days, \$5.00 an hour and who receives a 10% raise, well, it's a \$0.50 raise. But an operator who earns \$2.50 an hour and who gets a 10% raise gets \$0.25. So the gap

keeps widening, and the possibility of achieving pay equity and getting women out of the work ghetto continues to recede. And unfortunately, the elite, many of the union leaders, have simply accepted it because management insists upon it so strongly.

And while I'm on the topic, there's something in collective agreements called an "orphan clause." Young people are against orphan clauses. They're clauses whereby when a new collective agreement is signed, there may be a salary increase, always at a uniform percentage, except that there's a two-tiered pay scale. And the new hires are paid less. And even after learning the job and jumping through all the hoops they have to jump through, they remain on a lower pay scale. And this injustice applies not only to young people entering the job market, but also to immigrants arriving into the country, who will be subject to orphan clauses if the trend continues to grow, as well as to mothers who leave their jobs for two or three years . . . for longer than their maternity clauses allow, and who come back as "new" employees. So it's a great injustice. And I side with young people in supporting the demand that orphan clauses be made illegal, because the trend is growing. And unfortunately, the FTQ, for example, is against making orphan clauses illegal.