A Woman-Centred Theoretical Perspective On Interest Groups

Michelle Perez

In *Politics As If Women Mattered*, Jill Vickers, Pauline Rankin and Christine Appelle propose a "woman-centred" conceptual framework of interest groups that is epitomised in their analysis of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC). Vickers et al. have a broad vision of NAC as an organization working both within the formal political structures — as an interest group — as well as parallel to the existing political structures — as the "parliament" of the English-Canadian women's movement. Vickers et al. view NAC as an example of a "woman centred" institution that is strengthened by its dual role. This duality allows NAC to incorporate both conventional and non-conventional elements within its organizational structure. In order to thoroughly examine the complex environment in which NAC operates as an interest group and as a "parliament of women" it is critical to see it as part of the larger social movement, the women's movement. All references to the women's movement or the women's social movement, in this paper, refer specifically to the English-Canadian women's movement.

The task of this paper is to utilize the "woman-centred" framework proposed by Vickers et al. to critique the application of conventional interest group theory to the study of women's groups in general and NAC in particular. I will focus on the work of A. Paul Pross and critique his treatment of social movements and his notion of institutionalization. I will argue that Pross' treatment of

social movements and his notion of institutionalization are too narrow in their scope to allow for the broader "woman-centred" view of women's groups and the larger women's movement. Moreover, Pross' conventional interest group theory does not allow for the conceptualization of NAC's dual role as an interest group and as a "parliament of women" that is put forth by Vickers et al. In order to emphasize the narrow scope of Pross' view of social movements, I will examine some theories of new social movements which advance a broader vision that is more receptive to the woman-centred framework that Vickers et al. introduce. This will be elaborated upon below.

New Social Movement Theory

In order to fully understand the sociopolitical character of the women's movement, an examination of new social movement theory is necessary. New social movement theory emphasizes the complexity and diversity of new social movements and their organizations, and offers an encompassing view of the political significance and the political capacity of such movements. This approach complements the arguments advanced by Vickers et al..

The social turbulence of the 1960s inspired the generation of "new" social movements (NSMs) that promulgated a barrage of radical and progressive ideas. These movements are considered new despite the fact that some of these social movements, such as the women's movement and the aboriginal movement, have an extensive history. This was a result of the fact that many of the movements that (re-)emerged in the 1960s were a reflection of the demand for radical social and political changes.

Carl Boggs describes contemporary social movements as:

...hardly marginal expressions of protest but ... situated within the unfolding contradictions of a rapidly changing industrial order, as part of historic attempts to secure genuine democracy,

social equality, and peaceful international relations against the imperatives of exploitation and domination (Boggs, 1986: 3).

Thus, the social and political nature of the social movements' claims are evident as are their challenges to the existing political system. Each of these elements is clearly present within the contemporary women's movement.

Claus Offe goes further in his analysis to suggest that new social movements "seek to politicize civil societies in ways that are not constrained by representative - bureaucratic political institutions and thereby to reconstitute a civil society independent from increasing control and intervention" (Offe, 1987: 65). Offe proposes that the "new politics" of NSMs can be understood in terms of a political paradigm that emerged during the 1970s. Offe describes this "new" paradigm as a response to the failure of the existing liberal democratic systems to accommodate the issues and values of the NSMs. As Offe argues:

> The new social movements politicize themes that cannot easily be classified in the binary code of social action that underlies liberal political theory. They locate themselves in a third, intermediate category, and claim a type of issue that is neither private (in the sense of being no legitimate concern to others) nor public (in the sense of being recognized as the legitimate object of political institutions and actors).... The new movements' space of action is *noninstitutional politics*, which is not provided for in liberal democracy and the welfare state (Offe, 1987: 68-69).

This third realm of social and political space that Offe describes as noninstitutional is the means by which NSMs can effectively challenge the formal political system by creating their own space. There is the sense that this noninstitutional realm is necessary, if not crucial, for NSMs since the formal political institutions that are in place cannot account for the issues that NSMs are seeking to politicize. Therefore, if NSMs worked entirely within the formal political realm their issue(s) would be lost, diluted, or coopted.

The noninstitutional realm of political space that Offe proposes can be viewed as compatible with the "woman-centred" notion of "institution." In fact, the notion of NAC as a "parliament of women" is clearly noninstitutional, in Offe's terms, in that NAC has c: ed a new space, outside the official realm of politics, within which a feminist agenda can be established and evolve through the collective and consensual efforts of the organization's diverse member groups.

The values and issues of the NSMs are often regarded as being unconventional and, therefore, less important than mainstream political ideas. By functioning in their own political space NSMs are not constrained by the "rules of the game" present in the formal political institutions. The NSMs are apolitical in the sense that they follow their own methods of political organization rather than the conventional methods that exist outside their noninstitutional realm.

Offe conceptualizes NSMs as having different notions of identity and a different understanding of the relationships among members. He describes NSMs as: less hierarchical and more egalitarian; as mobilizing public support through unconventional means; as having an "us" versus "them" mentality with regards to their political opponents; as insisting on the "non-negotiability of their concerns"; and as having an identity formation process that is not based on ideological or class division but is derived from their own issues of concern (e.g., gender) (Offe, 1987: 71-72). Therefore, it is evident that the "unconventional" nature of the values espoused by the NSMs have an impact on their political identity causing them to function in a different manner than conventional organizations.

Susan Phillips takes another approach to the study of new social movements by examining the networking of such a movement, specifically, the network of national women's organizations within the context of the larger social movement. Phillips examines the benefits of uniting different perspectives on the study of social movements: (1) the North American school of "resource mobilization" which emphasizes social movement organizations (SMOs); and (2)

the European school of new social movements, which emphasizes the movement characteristics of value change, collective identities etc. (Phillips, 1991: 755-756). Phillips' analysis conceptualizes SMOs as political actors. She focuses on the "relationship between the *internal* position of SMOs in a movement and their *external* effectiveness in creating a reputation among public officials" (Phillips, 1991: 758). As a result, the implications of conflict between these internal and external positions of the organizations are underlined. Such a conflict can be revealed in NAC as an organization that functions internally as an unconventional organization and perhaps even as a "parliament of women," and NAC's external position — whereby it seeks to influence public policy within a formal conventional structure.

Phillips argues that all women's groups and organizations have similar traits. She states that inter-group linkages are co-operative and often involve the sharing of information or coalition-building around certain issues despite the issue-specific nature of some of the service-oriented women's groups (Phillips, 1991: 760). Phillips does indicate, however, that the SMOs, as policy advocates, do end up facing two competing demands that distinguish them from conventional interest groups. These competing demands are: (1) that organizations must stress the collective nature of the movement and the universality of the issues they are advocating in order to build coalitions with other SMOs; and (2) in organizations that are more well entrenched, there is a drive for greater specialization, and a focusing in on one specific issue, which causes SMOs to assume the role of special interest groups (Phillips, 1991: 776). Susan Phillips' treatment of SMOs' dual purposes closely parallels Vickers' et al. analysis of NAC. Although Phillips does not see the strategies of "collectivity versus specificity" as entirely incompatible with one another, she does state that the obvious differences between the two do cause SMOs to make trade-offs between coalition-building and defending their principal interests. Once again it is evident that these types of trade-offs would have to occur

within an organization such as NAC, which would cause tensions among the member group and create problems for organizational cohesiveness, representativeness etc.

The sophisticated conceptualizations of social movements in the work of Offe and Phillips illustrate a broad and encompassing interpretation of the role, and the political significance, of social movements and their organizations. Furthermore, there are strong links between social movements and SMOs. In particular, Phillips views the organization-movement link as enriching the nature of women's groups even if, at times, the two may be working towards different goals.

A Conventional Understanding of Interest Groups

For Pross, social movements are weak in their diversity — a notion which stands in stark contrast to both the "woman-centred" view and the social movement theorists' view. Pross views pressure groups as being very highly organized and goes on to argue that:

> ...it is the quality of the organization that distinguishes the pressure group from...the movement...movements do exist over time, but they represent generalized progressions of public opinion. Organized groups participate in this progression, but the movement consists of too many distinct elements to be described as a coherent unit such as a pressure group (Pross, 1992: 3-4).

This is essentially the extent of Pross' treatment of social movements. The most problematic aspect of his analysis of social movements is its narrow focus and, in particular, the implications of this narrow focus for the women's movement.

Pross acknowledges that social movements can exist over time but he does not view the organization of such a

movement as substantial. This is problematic for the study of women's organizations, such as NAC, since women's groups are very firmly entrenched within the broader social movement. Therefore, the notion, proposed by Vickers et al., of "women's movements becoming institutionalized" (Vickers et al., 1993: 17) would be viewed as impossible in Pross' theory. The political capacity of social movements is seen as limited to short-range objectives and issues within a limited time span and this political capacity dissipates as the issues lose significance or change in priority. Pross argues that this short-term political capacity is a result of the movement's lack of formal institutionalization.

Pross' treatment of social movements overlooks the political significance of such movements as well as the nature of the organizations that evolve from social movements. These social movement organizations cannot be adequately addressed by the conceptual tools that are offered in conventional interest group theory. New social movement theory is useful in addressing some of the inadequacies of the treatment of social movements in conventional interest group theory.

It is impossible, as Vickers et al. argue, to understand the development of NAC and its success as an interest group without seeing it as part of the larger social movement. NAC is not an issue-specific interest group that has divorced itself from the women's movement. The overarching interest in NAC is to advance the status of all women in Canada. It also attempts to encompass the diversity of all Canadian women. However, this has not been an easy task and NAC's inability to fully realize this goal of representing all Canadian women has been a point of contention since the organization's inception, but this is the task of another paper.

What is important to note is that NAC has attempted to broaden the range of interests that it represents. For example, since the mid-1980s NAC has taken strong stands on what are considered to be "non-feminist" issues, such as the Meech Lake Accord, the Free Trade Agreement, and NAFTA. The broadening of the range of issues that NAC represents to include "non-feminist" issues underlines the

"progress towards the development of a full-fledged feminist approach to public-policy issues" (Vickers et al., 1993: 277). This feminist approach is conducted by an organization that is grounded in the larger social movement, that incorporates nonconventional organizational mechanisms, and that, at the same time, functions as a formal pressure group in its interactions with the policy-makers it seeks to influence. As a result of this dual role, NAC can be characterized both as a social movement organization and as a formal institutionalized interest organization. The institutionalized characteristics of NAC can be accounted for in Pross' conception of interest groups but the other unconventional aspects of the organization cannot.

Pross views the process of institutionalization as a trajectory moving from loosely-organized single issue interest groups to the ultimate goal of multiple issues and institutionalization. Once a pressure group moves from its "issue-oriented" or "nascent" status at the low end of the continuum and becomes institutionalized, it is understood as having rejected — through a process of organization and issue specialization — many of the characteristics of the larger social movement that it is a part of. Pross defines institutionalization:

> ...as a process through which an organization — a 'technical instrument designed as a means to definite goals' — acquires a system of values and becomes an institution — 'a responsive, adaptive organism' that is 'peculiarly competent to do a particular kind of work'.... Through institutionalization, group attitudes, norms, structures, and behaviour become internally coherent and attach the organization to its immediate environment (Pross, 1992: 95).

The significance of this passage is the firm entrenchment of institutions within the existing, conventional, political system. Pross argues that organizations cannot influence policy-makers from outside the political system since they need to establish close ties with public officials and they

must be organizations that are respected by those officials. In other words, they must subscribe to the conventional "rules of the game" in order to be considered or taken seriously.

Institutionalized pressure groups are described as being highly organized, with a professional staff, and a clear division between the staff and the members. Hierarchical organization is seen as a necessary prerequisite for an efficient and successful organization. The organizational values emphasized in Pross' process of institutionalization are: the members' socioeconomic status within the organization, which can facilitate access to public officials through high levels of personal resources etc; the majority of the group's membership being drawn from the mainstream of society rather than the fringes; strong financial resources in order to maintain a high level of research etc.; and the stability of hierarchical organization and elite decision-making processes (Pross, 1992: 102-110). Therefore, the only way interest organizations can seek to influence public policy is by becoming institutionalized, i.e. subscribing to the conventional "rules of the game" that have been established by the formal political institutions.

Although in most cases Pross' notion of institutionalization is necessary for access to key political figures, it does not, in itself, guarantee influence within the policy process. In fact, many of NAC's successes (e.g. the demonstrations in the 1980-81 constitutional negotiation) were a result of non-conventional tactics that stimulated public support through mass demonstrations, interest intermediation and interest promotion.

Sandra Burt contends that:

> the focus on interest group organizational development is of only limited use for understanding the relationship of Canadian women's groups to the policy-making process .... Other factors — notably group claims — may explain policy influence. The gender-related demands of women's challenge deeply-rooted perceptions of women's and men's appropriate responsibilities...in the short term, women have difficulty affecting changes which lie outside the range of what is

> perceived to be normal or acceptable...this study also points to the need for further refinements to the categories Pross uses to describe the process of institutionalization — in particular, the precise nature of contacts between interest groups and government... (Burt, 1990: 26).

This further underlines the need for a different type of theoretical or organizational conceptualization of women's groups since conventional interest group theory is inadequate. Although, in many ways, NAC has become an institutionalized interest group — in Pross' terms — and has developed a highly organized structure, NAC has not divorced itself from the larger social movement and it still upholds the movement values of co-operation and consultation within its organizational structures and policy process.

In *Politics As If Women Mattered*, Vickers et al. "reconceptualize" politics in "woman-centred" terms. The framework that the authors put forth encompasses more than women's participation and representation in the formal political institutions that exist in society. The authors argue that in order for women's demands and interests to be addressed and responded to as prominent issues, women must organize a new, separate, woman-centred realm within the existing political system. Vickers et al. hypothesize that:

> ...women's movements represent values and demands that currently cannot be integrated fully into the political systems of the liberal democracies. For this reason, we argue that, to be successful, *women's movements must become institutionalized* to ensure continuity of activity over long periods of time (Vickers et al.,1993: 17) [my italics].

Vickers et al. view the institutionalization of women's movements as creating a space within which women's values can be fully integrated. This closely parallels Offe's conception of a noninstitutional space. The notion of "women's movements" becoming institutionalized indicates the collective and encompassing view of women's

organizations that the authors are advocating.

It is important to note that Vickers et al. state explicitly that they are appropriating the concept of "institution" and using it in "woman-centred" terms. In their analysis, Vickers et al. use the term institution with specific "reference to an instrument of social organization that exercises collective power over a number of generations" (Vickers et al, 1993: 133-134). The multigenerational aspect of the women's movement and its organizations is crucial to the understanding of a "woman-centred" process of institutionalization.

The concept of a "parliament of women" crystallizes the notion of creating a new political space for women. It is a forum within which women exert control over the way in which politics are conducted, interests are organized, and issues are prioritized. Moreover, Vickers et al argue that:

> Women will need stable, woman-centred institutions in the future, because their campaigns for equality and justice will take several more generations to complete...[and] there will be a need for woman-centred institutions operating parallel to the structures of official politics throughout the liberal democracies (Vickers et al., 1993: xii).

Hence, women can forge a new political space for themselves and their interests within their own institutions. The fact that these "woman-centred" institutions are operating parallel to formal political institutions allows for permanence of the woman-centred political space as well as the entrenchment of the values and interests of women over time.

Vickers et al. view the National Action Committee as a clear example of a "woman-centred" institution. Vickers et al. describe NAC as having a "dual role as a "parliament of women" and an interest group aggregating and representing the views of its member groups to the federal government" (Vickers et al., 1993: 52). In other words, on the one hand, NAC is a stable, woman-centred institution operating parallel to formal political structures, and, on the other hand, NAC is

an interest group operating within the existing formal structures. Rather than weakening the position of women's organizations, this duality is an entrenchment of women's experiences within the dominant political culture. According to Vickers et al.:

> ...women have to operate on two fronts simultaneously: They must build autonomous, women-centred institutions in which to develop alternate ways of doing politics and they must be present, to whatever extent possible, within existing institutions, to participate as women and thereby challenge the logic of those structures [sic]. This dual focus need not be maintained by all individuals or groups; rather, the movement as a whole should operate on both fronts (Vickers et al., 1993: 24).

Once again the collectivity of the women's movement is stressed. The various women's organizations, although rich in diversity, are always understood in the context of the larger social movement.

To conclude, it is evident that Pross' narrow definition of social movements and his treatment of the process of institutionalization tend to exclude certain key aspects of the women's movement and of the nature of women's organizations. Certainly, the institutional framework that Pross advances does not encompass the broad vision of women's organizations that Vickers et al. propose.

The fundamental basis of Vickers' et al. "woman-centred" view of interest groups is the women's movement itself. The dual role of NAC as an interest group and as a "parliament of women" is regarded as a product of the larger social movement. As a result of the multigenerational aspect of the women's movement and its organizations, the notion of a "woman-centred" institution evolved. NAC as a "parliament of women" is an institution that will guarantee a forum within which the prominence of women's issues and demands can be ensured over time. The dual role of NAC will entrench its ties to the women's movement.

I find the "woman-centred" view of interest groups to be

far richer in its analysis of women's organizations, and the broader women's movement, than that of Pross. Pross' analysis actually masks the complexity and uniqueness of women's social movement organizations and takes away from the multigenerational aspects of women's political organization.

Moreover, the importance of the theoretical contribution of Vickers et al. extends beyond a feminist framework for studying women's groups and may, in fact, have an impact on other new social movements. Other interest groups that are part of new social movements concerned with internal democracy and a participatory democratic base — for example, environmental groups, aboriginal groups, or peace groups — could, potentially, also be examined within the Vickers et al. framework. The incorporation of both conventional and unconventional organizational structures is a critical and defining feature of interest groups that are part of new social movements and this duality is a fundamental part of the Vickers et al. framework. It may be a mistake, therefore, to think of the theoretical critique of Vickers et al. as only important for women's groups because it may restrict the impact of their critique. Furthermore, if we do not restrict the theoretical framework of Vickers et al. we can begin to understand their feminist contribution to political science as a broad and encompassing contribution affecting both women's groups and other new social movements.

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