Women and Reform in British Columbia: Some Preliminary Suggestions

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The women's movement in Canada in the period 1890-1930 has been the focus of a number of studies in women's history. Some studies have centered on the general reform goals of women's organizations; others have concentrated on the suffrage campaign, itself an outgrowth of the reform atmosphere. But while these studies provide valuable data on membership, activities, ideology and goals of women's groups, few have yet attempted an analysis in any depth of why reform, particularly in relation to women and children, was so important to middle-class women of the period. Nor has there been a serious attempt to determine what effect, if any, the women's movement had on the eventual legislation enacted in these areas. Both questions are of prime importance if we are to advance our understanding of the impact and significance of the women's movement and its relationship to the society in which it developed.

I

In the years between 1890 and 1930 in Canada there was much concern and uncertainty about what types of reform society needed and how they should be implemented. There was also confusion about the relative status and roles of the sexes in this process. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that there was confusion about the status of women and their role in the process; men, as traditional rulers, protectors and providers did not question their right to be involved (or not involved) in any area of public life they wished - this had always been their realm. Women, on the other hand, had been traditionally concerned with the private sphere of the home and family and their movement into the public sphere of social reform presented many problems. This movement out of the privacy of the home and into society at large increased greatly over the period under consideration and was justified by the philosophy of maternal feminism. Supporters held that women's maternal instincts and superior moral and spiritual fibre were needed not only within the family but throughout society if it were to be regenerated. As well as mothering her own children, the middle-class reform-minded woman would 'mother' the whole of society. This widely held philosophy led to practical problems, one of which was the campaign for female suffrage. As women became more active in reform the implementation of welfare programs, some became aware of their own lack of power to directly influence social change. They began to call for female suffrage to give women this direct power. The majority justified their demands by emphasizing the importance of woman's role as mother. The female vote, they claimed, would ensure a strong, healthy and moral race who would create a great nation. Others, however, raised the issue of equal rights for women.

To date, studies of women in Canada in the half century from 1890 - 1930 have approached the subject from several different angles; some have separated the reform and suffrage movements, others have linked them together; some have viewed the

results of reform on society as a whole placing women in the background, others have concentrated on women while neglecting the rest of society. None has as yet fully examined the role of women as an integral part of the society in which they existed.

Neil Sutherland has suggested that during the progressive era a consensus was reached in English Canada on the desirability of certain social policies concerning children and that these policies were gradually implemented in the decades following the First World War.[1] His concern is primarily for the development and implementation of the policies and their impact on Canadian children but there are other implications. Women are not examined as a specific group but they are increasingly visible in his examination of child welfare issues, firstly at the philanthropic level and later in the rapidly expanding and predominantly female professions related to health and welfare. If women were active in the implementation of some of the new policies it seems reasonable to assume that they were involved in others as well and they also had some influence on the earlier stages of consensus formation.

Not one study has yet offered an adequate explanation of why suffrage organizations did not continue the battle for equality after they had won their initial victory, although most authors have implied or openly stated that they should have done so. Linda Hale attributes their lack of further action to "lack of vision"; Veronica Strong-Boag to the easy diversion of women's interest to patriotic and nationalistic causes during World War One, and Gloria Geller to the self-interested manipulation of male politicians.[2] Carol Bacchi laments the importance placed on the maternal role which she sees as inevitably blocking any moves for full sexual equality.[3] All these authors seem to assume that once they had achieved suffrage women should have continued their struggle and grappled with the problems that today's feminists are facing. The activities of non-suffrage organizations, many of which continued to exist for decades, are completely ignored.[4] Such a presentist bias obscures the fact that the position of women was very different in the early years of the century from what it is today; neither does it take into account that their aims were different from those of modern women. What is needed is not regrets but a clearer understanding of how both women and men perceived their society and its needs more than half a century ago. Then we may understand more clearly their aims and the way they went about implementing them.

In a recent article Susan Mann Trofimenkoff has pointed to the similarities in the values underlying both feminism and nationalism.[5] This suggests, I would argue, that having reached their goal of the franchise, women returned to what was in their view the more important task of strengthening and upholding the moral and social values of their society. In other words they saw the franchise as a means to implement reform rather than as an equal rights issue - the rhetoric about equality was more a result than a cause of the suffrage campaign.

II

In the opening decade of the twentieth century, British Columbia, like the rest of Canada - and indeed the United States and Great Britain too - had its share of middle-class women's organizations. The Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) was represented; there were several local councils of the National Council of Women of Canada (NCWC) in both urban and larger rural areas; there was a University Women's

Club; there were a plethora of Church organizations; there were the Young Woman's Christian Association (YWCA) and the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). Linda Hale has linked the work of some of these organizations to the suffrage campaign which began in earnest after 1910.[6] There was certainly some link, for all believed in the advantages the vote would bring in the implementation of their reform programs, but it is obvious that the main concern of these groups was not suffrage but the moral regeneration of society through the elimination of such problems as alcoholism, prostitution, venereal disease, gambling, drug addiction, adultery and a host of lesser evils. When the suffrage movement gained strength in later years it received a certain amount of support from these groups, but most of the suffrage campaign was carried out by organizations specifically formed for that purpose. Even the WCTU, which was ardent in its calls for suffrage, saw it quite plainly as a means to further its prohibitionist aims rather than an important issue in itself.

What we have at the turn of the century then, are groups of articulate, reasonably well-educated, middle-class women, convinced of their obligation to conserve and strengthen their society through the extension of their maternal virtues. Their duty, as they saw it, lay in supporting the positive aspects of society and counter-acting the negative influences which they saw as emanating from the poor, the unprotected, the corrupt, the uneducated and the immigrant. But what exactly did they do in pursuit of these ends? Did they confine themselves mainly to rhetoric, did they undertake the reforms all by themselves, or did they influence men to bring about the reforms for them? Or perhaps there were no real reforms but merely some superficial first aid on the weak spots in society? The answers should not be difficult to ascertain but they are crucial to our understanding of the period. An examination of the papers of the various organizations concerned should shed light not only on their aims but also on their activities and the results obtained. But the search must not stop here. It is vital to know what role middle-class men were playing at the same time. Were they unconcerned with women's activities - leaving them to get on with work in their "female" sphere while they themselves were busy with their "male" concerns? Or were they hostile? indifferent? or supportive? Hale has shown that numbers of men were actively involved, either for or against, in the suffrage campaign, so it is possible that this was also the case in the area of social reform. Who supported reform legislation in the pre-suffrage years? how was it introduced? and how was it carried through?

Finally, what difference did the winning of the female vote have on the reform programs? Hale has shown that prior to the suffrage campaign women's organizations concentrated on extending women's influence in local government, especially on school boards. In this they were successful as early as 1895 and thereafter women were elected to boards in Vancouver, Victoria and New Westminster continuously for the next quarter of a century.[7] But did this make any difference to the functioning of the boards? Similarly, once the vote for women was a reality, did women influence the legislation that was passed? Helen Gregory MacGill, suffragist, reformer and first woman judge of the juvenile court in Vancouver, wrote in 1928:

> The belief of the suffragists that the ballot is the proper and only effective means of expressing public opinion has been amply demonstrated in the case of British Columbia, which, from being the most

> backward of Provinces, today leads in social legislation.[8]

Such a comment from a woman actively involved in both the suffrage campaign and the legislation that followed gives the lie to some present day historians' conclusions that the movement only achieved a modicum of success and died a sudden (and disappointing) death almost immediately afterwards. Legislation does not arise exclusively amongst our elected representatives but reflects the influences of society. An examination of the welfare legislation of the period, together with its proposers, its supporters and its opponents may show that the suffrage campaign was a minor battle in the war to retain and extend middle-class values throughout society. It may be that once they had the vote, women returned to work for the reforms they had been supporting for several decades. And if they did not effect these reforms through direct influence on the legislature, perhaps they continued to work through indirect influences such as the rapidly expanding female professions concerned with health and social welfare. Or perhaps their pre-suffrage reform agitation had been sufficient to mould the consensus that Sutherland identifies and in later years the reform legislation moved forward under its own momentum.

Footnotes

[1] Neil Sutherland, *Children in English-Canadian Society: Framing the Twentieth Century Consensus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), pp. VIII - IX

[2] Linda Hale, "The British Columbia Women Suffrage Movement, 1890 - 1917". (M.A. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1977); Strong-Boag, *Parliament of Women* (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1976); Gloria Geller, "The Wartime Elections Act and the Canadian Women's Movement", *Atlantis*, Vol. 2, no. 1 (1976), pp. 88 - 106.

[3] Carol Farraro-Bacchi, "Liberation Deferred: The English Canadian Women's Suffrage Movement", (Ph.D. thesis, McGill University, 1976); Bacchi, "Race Regeneration and Social Purity. A study of the Social Attitudes of Canada's Speaking-Speaking Suffragists", *Histoire Sociale/Social History*, Vol. XI, no. 22 (November, 1978), pp. 460 - 474

[4] Rosa L. Shaw, Proud Heritage: A History of the National Council of Women in Canada (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1957). This study does follow the activities of the NCWC until well after the issue of suffrage was dropped but as it is a chronicle rather than a critical analysis it is of little help in understanding the relationship between and reform.

[5] Susan Mann Trofimenkoff, "Nationalism, Feminism and Canadian Intellectual History", Canadian Literature, No. 83 (Winter, 1979), pp. 7 - 20.

[6] Linda Hale, *op. cit.*, ch. 1.

[7] *Ibid*.

[8] Helen Gregory MacGill, *Laws for Women and Children in British Columbia* (Vancouver, 1928), pp. 5 - 6.