

Disparate Fates in Challenging Times: Women's Policy Agencies Under Governments of the  
Right in Aotearoa/New Zealand and British Columbia

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## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

One of the first acts of the incoming government formed by the victorious Liberal Party following the May 2001 provincial election in British Columbia was the elimination of the Ministry of Women's Equality. Although the Liberals had seemingly reversed their long-standing opposition to the Ministry's existence with a pre-election promise to retain it, once in office they quickly abandoned this commitment. As a result, Women's Equality was dismantled and reconfigured as "Women's Equality and Social Programs," a small sub-unit in the Ministry of Community, Aboriginal and Women's Services (CAWS).<sup>2</sup> CAWS is a sprawling entity established after the 2001 election that incorporated a dizzying array of units and responsibilities transferred from seven different Ministries. Initially accounting for a mere 7% of the 1184 FTEs absorbed by CAWS, Women's Equality and Social Programs had been rendered all but invisible (Teghtsoonian 2003, 33). Disappointing to supporters of the Ministry, the restructuring of Women's Equality was consistent with developments elsewhere. In other Canadian provinces such as Alberta and Ontario, as well as at the state and federal levels in Australia, governments of the right have undermined the work of women's policy agencies by down-sizing or

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<sup>2</sup>Although initially identified as "Women's Equality and Social Programs," by the time CAWS's 2001/02 annual report was issued the name of the department had been changed to "Women's Services and Child Care," although Lynn Stephens continued to be described as the Minister for Women's Equality (CAWS 2002). The department's name was changed again during the January 2004 cabinet shuffle, when it became "Women's Services, Seniors and Child Care" and Stephens was replaced by Ida Chong, who was appointed as Minister of State for Women's and Seniors' Services (CAWS 2004).

eliminating them, moving them to peripheral locations within the bureaucracy, and reducing the resources available to them (Chappell 2002; Harder 2003; Malloy 1999; Sawer 1999).

Despite having to operate in a similarly inhospitable political context during much of its history, the Ministry of Women's Affairs in Aotearoa/New Zealand has nevertheless experienced a different institutional fate. Established by the Fourth Labour Government elected in 1984, Women's Affairs had been the target of ongoing hostility from socially conservative segments of society and from critics within the right-wing National Party while the latter was in opposition during the 1980s. And yet, after winning the 1990 election, the incoming National government retained Women's Affairs as a free-standing ministry with Cabinet representation. Although calls for the dismantling of the Ministry persisted from various quarters while National governed throughout the 1990s, it survived to see the return of the Labour Party to office in the 2002 election.

The disparate fates of these two Ministries under governments of the right pose a puzzle that this paper seeks to unravel. A comparison of key institutional features of the two Ministries reveals important differences between them in terms of the activities in which they were involved and the nature of the relationship each had with women's groups in their respective jurisdictions. I argue that these institutional differences interacted with the local particularities of neoliberalism in ways that enhanced the vulnerability of the BC Ministry, and minimized that of Women's Affairs, to the political agenda of an incoming right-wing government.

In addition to engaging with a number of theoretical issues, the analysis developed below is also important from a practical point of view. Scholars reflecting on experiences in a broad range of countries in the industrialized west have argued that women's policy agencies constitute a key site within government for the substantive representation of women's interests (Chappell

2002; Stetson and Mazur 1995; Squires and Wickham-Jones 2002). For example Laurel Weldon, in summarizing the results of her cross-national study of policies pertaining to violence against women, argues that women's policy agencies and women's community-based activism "in combination ... give women a stronger voice in the policy-making process than does the presence of women in the legislature" (Weldon 2002, 1153-54). In light of the significant role that women's policy agencies can play in articulating and promoting the interests of diverse groups of women, it is important to enhance our understanding of the variables that support or detract from their capacity to survive and work effectively on behalf of women.

## **2. The Ministry of Women's Affairs and the Ministry of Women's Equality as Comparative Cases**

There are a number of similarities between these two women's policy agencies and the broader political contexts within which they have operated that make them useful as cases for comparative analysis. Both Ministries were strongly supported by feminist activists within the governing party that established them, the Labour Party in Aotearoa/New Zealand and the provincial New Democratic Party in British Columbia, and initially enjoyed broad-based support among community-based women. Both were entitled to have their Minister sit in Cabinet, and each was initially led by a strong feminist minister who brought additional political resources to bear on her tasks in the women's portfolio. For example in British Columbia Penny Priddy, the first Minister of Women's Equality, sat on a number of key Cabinet committees including Treasury Board (Erickson 1996, 119) while the first Minister of Women's Affairs, who simultaneously served as Minister for Social Welfare, "had high political credibility and was able to push her agenda effectively in Cabinet" (Sawer 1996, 19).

It is true that the Ministry of Women's Affairs had not been operational for as many years as the Ministry of Women's Equality prior to the arrival in office of the party of the right. This was partly a function of the shorter tenure in office of the Labour Party (six years) compared with that of the NDP (ten years). It also resulted from the fact that the extensive consultative and hiring processes through which Women's Affairs was established meant that the ministry was not fully staffed until mid-1986 (Nathan 1989, 53). Nevertheless, both Ministries were well-institutionalized and had operated through two full electoral cycles prior to the election of National in Aotearoa/New Zealand in 1990 and the provincial Liberal Party in British Columbia in 2001.

Women's Affairs and Women's Equality shared certain challenges as well. As noted above, both Ministries were the targets of ongoing criticism by conservative social and political forces that questioned their legitimacy and sought their disestablishment. And, although initially enjoying strong political leadership, both Ministries subsequently operated under the direction of less powerful ministers (Sawer 1996, 16).<sup>3</sup> Finally, even before the election to office of the party of the right in their respective jurisdictions, each ministry found itself having to function in a political and ideological environment that was less supportive of feminist policy directions than

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<sup>3</sup>This was particularly notable in British Columbia where the final years of the NDP administration were plagued by ongoing scandal and negative publicity. Sue Hammell, who had replaced Priddy as Minister of Women's Equality in 1996, resigned in mid-1999 in the context of Premier Glen Clark's refusal to step down in response to allegations of improper conduct that swirled around him. In the less than two years between Hammell's resignation and the 2001 election there were three different Ministers of Women's Equality who moved in and out of the position as part of wider Cabinet reshuffles undertaken by Clark, as he sought to hang on to his position, and his successor Ujjall Dosanjh, as he tried to put his own stamp on the party in preparation for the looming election. None of the three Women's Equality Ministers during this period were key "players" within the party (although Jenny Kwan, who briefly served as Minister between July 1999 and February 2000, was to be one of only two NDP candidates elected in May 2001).

might have been anticipated given that the governments of which they were a part were formed by ostensibly social democratic parties.

Each Ministry adapted in various ways to the neoliberal elements of the political agenda pursued by the government under whose auspices it had been established. Indeed, the success of Women's Affairs in doing so while the Fourth Labour Government was still in office has been cited as one of the principal reasons why it was able to survive the transition to government under National (Curtin 1992). Nevertheless, as the discussion below will establish, Women's Equality also adapted to various aspects of the increasingly neoliberal agenda of the NDP government in British Columbia. Consequently, it is necessary to look further than these women's policy agencies' capacity to adapt to the ideological contexts within which they operated in order to explain fully their disparate fates. My analysis focuses on two institutional features that, in combination with locally dominant expressions of neoliberal ideology, shaped each Ministry's institutional trajectory. The first is the nature of the activities in which Women's Affairs and Women's Equality were involved and the different allocations of their budgetary resources that these activities entailed. The second, related, feature is the relationship between each Ministry and community-based women's groups. These differences between the two Ministries, I will argue, made significant contributions to the divergence in their institutional fates under governments of the right.

### **3. Accounting for Disparate Fates**

Research to date has identified a number of ways in which governments' commitments to neoliberal policy directions and advanced liberal "technologies of rule," including balanced budgets, marketized accountability mechanisms and performance indicators (Rose 1999; Lerner

2000), have undermined the work of women's policy agencies and have sustained political contexts within which the restructuring or dismantling of these units has been facilitated (Chappell 1995; Eisenstein 1996; Harder 2003; Sawer 1999; Teghtsoonian 2003, 2004). Beyond noting these general tendencies, however, there has been little systematic attention in the literature to a more fine-grained analysis of the features of women's policy agencies or their broader contexts that render them more or less vulnerable to these trends.

A more analytic focus has emerged in research that seeks to identify factors which support, and those which detract from, the effectiveness of existing women's policy agencies. These discussions have generally identified three broad sets of influences: (1) the extent to which the values, goals and ways of working adopted by the women's policy agency are congruent with those of the wider bureaucratic context within which it operates and, more generally, the ideological commitments shaping the government's policy agenda; (2) the political and bureaucratic resources available to the agency; and (3) the nature of the relationship between the community-based women's movement and the women's policy agency; (Chappell 2002; Grace 1997; Malloy 1999; Stephen 2000, Stetson and Mazur 1995; Squires and Wickham-Jones 2002; Weldon 2002). Although the discussion below is not intended to assess the effectiveness *per se* of the two Ministries, the general literature exploring this subject is helpful in that it does draw our attention to institutional features of Women's Affairs and Women's Equality on which we can focus for the purposes of a comparative analysis aimed at understanding their different fates under governments of the right. Framing the discussion in these terms will also permit a consideration of the extent to which various features of women's policy agencies which have been identified as contributing to their *effectiveness* may enhance, or undermine, their prospects for *surviving a partisan change in government*.

### **A. Conformity to Organizational and Ideological Context**

Assessments of the effectiveness of women's policy agencies in a number of different jurisdictions have concluded that conformity to the surrounding organizational and ideological context contributes positively to these agencies' institutional capacity and their "survival prospects" (Meyer and Rowan cited in Malloy 1999, 273; see also Squires and Wickham-Jones 2002; Stephen 2000). However, there are a number of ways in which the organizational features of women's policy agencies may depart significantly from those which characterize the wider bureaucratic context within which they operate. For example, agency staff may adopt organizational practices that reflect feminist concerns regarding the hierarchical structures and norms that characterize the wider public service (Iannello 1992). Furthermore, feminist approaches to policy analysis flow from a critique of mainstream "scientific" methods that fail to address the structural constraints shaping the lives of diverse groups of women as social collectives and that dismiss or diminish the value of qualitative data (Grace 1997; Malloy 1999). Thus the methods of data collection and analysis preferred by feminist staff working within women's policy agencies may be viewed with suspicion by their more conventional counterparts elsewhere in government.

In addition to being set apart from their bureaucratic environment by virtue of a distinctive organizational or methodological profile, women's policy agencies may be characterized by a feminist and equity-seeking orientation that places them at odds ideologically with their political masters. Stetson and Mazur have noted that the ability of women's policy agencies to articulate and promote women's interests will be enhanced in political contexts in which government and society accept the legitimacy of using state mechanisms to address



structural inequities (1995, 290). Thus, where progressive governments are in office a congruence between the prevailing ideology and a women's policy agency's equity agenda can enhance the latter's capacity to work on behalf of women. A shift in the partisan complexion of government, however, may well pose a challenge to women's policy agencies and the policy directions they promote. Commenting on experiences in Australia at both the federal and state level, Louise Chappell has noted "a pattern of advancement under Labor governments and retreat under conservative governments" on the issues addressed by women's policy agencies, and that the latter "have tended to be marginalised" under governments of the right (2002, 92; see also Chappell 1995; Sawer 1999).

In considering these trends it is useful to remember that, although there are broad policy directions and discursive trends that are often identified as flowing from a neoliberal political agenda, neoliberalism in practice is not a monolithic entity, invariant in its manifestations across time and space (Larner 1996; 2000). It is thus important to retain a sensitivity to local configurations of neoliberalism in attempting to unpack its impact on the interests of diverse groups of women, and the ability of women's policy agencies to articulate and advance these interests. We need also to consider the ways in which neoliberal policy goals and normative commitments have infiltrated the political agenda of governments formed by ostensibly social democratic parties. As the discussion below will elaborate, the Fourth Labour Government in Aotearoa/New Zealand, which established the Ministry of Women's Affairs, was an early and vigorous proponent of neoliberal policies and modes of governing; these were taken up as well - albeit less comprehensively - by the NDP government in British Columbia during the 1990s. More generally, analyses of "third way" governments have noted the many points of contact between their policy orientations and those of the right-wing administrations that they have

replaced including, sometimes, a disinterest in or antipathy to feminist policy directions (Bashevkin 2002; Benn 2000; Kelsey 2002; Teghtsoonian 2004). These analyses suggest that it may be useful to begin by considering the extent to which Women's Affairs and Women's Equality adjusted to neoliberal imperatives *prior to* the arrival in office of governments of the right, in order to assess the extent to which their relative success in doing so may have influenced their survival prospects when the government changed.

The organizational and ideological shifts implemented in the Ministry of Women's Affairs while the Fourth Labour Government was in office were dramatic and far-reaching. In part, this reflected the fact that the Ministry was established - and initially operated - in a radical and unprecedented manner. Under the leadership of its first bureaucratic head, Mary O'Regan, Women's Affairs pioneered a number of departures from civil service practice. These included efforts to minimize hierarchical relationships within the Ministry, consulting with Maori women in the community regarding the structure of, and appointments to, Te Ohu Whakatupu (the Maori women's policy analysis unit located within the Ministry), allowing family and community members of Maori applicants for positions in the Ministry to be present during their interviews, making part-time work available, and working to implement biculturalism and anti-racism in the Ministry's structure and operation (Curtin 1992; Nathan 1989; O'Regan and Varnham 1992; Washington 1988). Recruited from an activist background, O'Regan was committed to incorporating feminist process into the Ministry's work both within government and in its connections with the women of Aotearoa/New Zealand (O'Regan and Varnham 1992).

From the outset, the Ministry developed a strong and interactive relationship with a broad range of women's organizations as well as with large numbers of women who were not especially active politically. These linkages were originally fostered through a series of

“women’s forums” held around the country prior to the establishment of the Ministry, so that the latter project could proceed on the basis of a thorough understanding of the priorities and concerns of a broad spectrum of ordinary women.<sup>4</sup> This initial, powerful connection between Women’s Affairs and women in the community was sustained both by ongoing consultations with a range of different women’s groups and by Ministry staff’s understanding of themselves as collectively accountable to women throughout the country, as well as to their Minister and the government. As the Ministry explained in its post-election briefing to the Labour government returned to office in 1987:

As public servants, Ministry staff are aware that we must always be loyal to our Minister and to the Government. As the only official agency in the system for women, we are also aware of our accountability to women. For the Maori women in the Ministry there is also the issue of accountability to their iwi. There are obviously times when these lines of accountability are in conflict. We would always hope that we can have frank and open discussion with our Minister in these circumstances. (MWA 1987, 38)

In terms of both its internal organizational practices as well as its relationship with women outside of government, the Ministry thus offered a sharp contrast with established civil service norms.

Remarkable in their own right, the Ministry’s innovative practices were all the more notable in light of the political direction pursued by the Fourth Labour Government. To the dismay of its erstwhile supporters, the government launched a vigorous and wide-reaching reform of the economy and the public service that was shaped by neoliberal assumptions and goals. Through various policy avenues, including the privatisation of state enterprises, the deregulation of financial markets and key changes within the civil service, the principles of

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<sup>4</sup>For accounts of forums that took place in various locations around the country written by feminist participants see “Forum Fever,” Broadsheet (January/February 1985), pp. 12-18. The Ministry estimated that in total 24,000 women participated (MWA 1986, 5).

public choice theory and the privileging of market relationships were brought to life (Kelsey 1995; Larner 1996, 1997). The State Sector Act of 1988 and the Public Finance Act of 1989 entrenched marketized relationships and business models within the public service itself (Boston et al. 1996). This new emphasis on efficiency, outputs and the accountability relationship between bureaucratic and political leaders could hardly be more contrary to the feminist commitment to process, relationship building and accountability to the community that had characterized the work of Women's Affairs under O'Regan's leadership (O'Regan and Varnham 1992).

A key factor contributing to the survival of the Ministry after National's arrival in office in 1990 was the replacement of Mary O'Regan by Judith Aitken in 1988 (Curtin 1992). Committed to the government's neoliberal agenda<sup>5</sup> (Bunkle 1993), Aitken moved decisively to undo many of the feminist organizational innovations that had characterized the Ministry during its early years and oversaw the implementation of the new planning, budget and accountability processes required of all government departments under the State Sector Act. In addition to a more hierarchical and managerialist structure, these changes were also reflected in a sometimes awkward business language that came to characterize Ministry documents in the late 1980s. For example, in the Ministry's 1988 Statement of Intent violence against women by abusive partners ("domestic violence") and women's high levels of unemployment are characterized as "important indicators of inefficiency" in wider economic and social structures and systems of service delivery (MWA 1988b, 8).

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<sup>5</sup>See also the interview with Aitken presented in Gordon Campbell, "Marketing the Ministry," NZ Listener, 6 August 1988, 32-34.

Aitken also placed the relationship between Ministry staff and the wider community of women on a more conventional footing. In contrast to the emphasis in earlier documents on the Ministry's *accountability* to community-based women, the 1988 Statement of Intent reframed the purposes and tone of this relationship in ways that removed its radical edge:

As a centrally-located advisory agency, the Ministry is expected to ensure that its advice to the Minister of Women's Affairs is reliable, comprehensive and timely, which means among other things keeping in direct contact with women in the community, so that the advice proffered to the Government reflects women's own experience, expectations and needs (MWA 1988b, p. 5).

These shifts were deeply disappointing to many of the Ministry's supporters in the community.

As one feminist commentator regretfully concluded: "What we have now is a Ministry of Women's Affairs that operates just like any other government department. So be it. We can adjust our expectations accordingly." (Rosier 1989, 9) Nevertheless, the operational style and political discourse adopted by the Ministry under Aitken's leadership did serve to demonstrate Women's Affairs' ability to operate within the prevailing neoliberal paradigm. Because the Fourth Labour Government was itself so saturated with key neoliberal orientations, Women's Affairs had in many ways adjusted to these prior to the arrival of National in office, undoubtedly enhancing its prospects for survival.

There is a somewhat different story to relate about the Ministry of Women's Equality in British Columbia. Apart from the fact that a freestanding gender-based ministry was a novelty in the Canadian context, there was nothing particularly distinctive about the new ministry's structure, staff or mode of operation. The first Minister, Penny Priddy, did articulate a strong commitment to working in partnership with women's groups throughout the province, but there was no extensive mobilization of the women of British Columbia around the establishment of the Ministry analogous to the women's forums that were held in Aotearoa/New Zealand. And,

unlike Women's Affairs, there were no moves to depart from established bureaucratic practice in terms of staff recruitment or internal organizational practices. It is true that, later in the 1990s, Women's Equality forged an innovative trail through the practice of job-sharing the position of Deputy Minister, with each of the two part-time occupants of the position working half the week, overlapping on Wednesdays.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, in general the Ministry undertook no sustained efforts, such as those pursued under O'Regan's leadership at Women's Affairs, aimed at challenging the hierarchical structure of the civil service. Institutionally, then, Women's Equality was broadly in conformity with its wider organizational context from the outset.

Women's Equality was also relatively successful in adjusting to predominant ideological directions and modes of governing, which took on an increasingly neoliberal flavour during the latter part of the 1990s. Plagued by allegations of fiscal mismanagement and intent on demonstrating their credibility as responsible managers of the province's economy, the NDP government under Premiers Clark and Dosanjj implemented a number of neoliberal "techniques of governance" (Rose 1999). These included a strong rhetorical and practical emphasis on accountability relationships and performance management systems in structuring both the internal operation of government departments and their relationships with service providers in the community. Its efforts to appear fiscally responsible also led the NDP to adopt balanced budget legislation in 2000.

We can see these trends reflected in the emergence of elements of neoliberal discourse in the annual reports and planning documents produced by the Ministry of Women's Equality during the latter half of the 1990s. The Ministry's annual "Strategic Plan" had, by 1996/97,

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<sup>6</sup>Deborah Pearce, "CEOs tame over-the-top workload by job-sharing," Victoria Times-Colonist, 17 December 1996, C1.

evolved into a “Business Plan;” during the final year of the NDP’s term in office this document had been further transformed into a three-year “Performance Plan” as prescribed by the government’s Budget Transparency and Accountability Act, replete with performance measures and quantitative targets and carefully aligned with the government’s wider strategic plan (MWE 1996, 2001a). These planning documents also increasingly emphasized working in partnership with the private sector as a Ministry goal, and outlined new initiatives to support and encourage women in business and women as entrepreneurs (see, for example, MWE 1998a, 27; 1998b, 13; 1999, 7; 2001b, 3) The Centre for Workplace *Equity*, established to assist smaller employers in creating gender-equitable and family-friendly workplaces, was soon renamed the Centre for Workplace *Excellence* (MWE 2001b, 8). Finally, and more generally, cost-effectiveness and accountability were assigned central importance as objectives guiding the work of Women’s Equality and as values sought in the operation of the community-based agencies and services supported by the Ministry (Teghtsoonian 2003, 39-41).

Although persuasively accomplished, these efforts to frame the Ministry’s work in terms of the fiscally prudential and accountability-oriented norms of the wider public service were not sufficient to save Women’s Equality after the Liberals arrived in office, even though a similar adaptability to neoliberal administrative norms appears to have contributed to Women’s Affairs’ survival in Aotearoa/New Zealand. It is true that, even as these neoliberal orientations were seeping into the Ministry’s work in British Columbia, Women’s Equality remained involved with, or an advocate of, initiatives that were antithetical to the free enterprise agenda supported by the provincial Liberal Party. Among other things, the Ministry was a strong advocate of expanding pay equity initiatives into the private sector, supported continued increases to the provincial minimum wage, and endorsed the government’s plans to move toward universal

access to affordable child care - all measures to which the incoming Liberal government was adamantly opposed. Perhaps it was the Ministry's advocacy of, and support for, these policy directions under the NDP that sealed its fate.

This seems less likely when we consider the fact that Women's Affairs was also a strong advocate for women-positive policy directions that were anathema to the incoming National government (and which were, in some cases, also highly unpopular with key figures in the Fourth Labour Government). For example, the Ministry had been a strong advocate of employment equity legislation which, despite opposition from Labour's own Finance and Labour ministers, was passed in the dying days of the Fourth Labour Government's term in office and repealed by National soon after being elected. Women's Affairs also played a crucial role in deflecting attempts by the Labour government to transform the universal family allowance into a targeted benefit, another policy "win" that was undone under National (Curtin 1992; Curtin and Sawyer 1996). Moreover, the Ministry's 1990 Brief to the Incoming Government presented a carefully-worded critique of neoliberal assumptions and policy directions in a number of areas, including labour market deregulation, state sector restructuring and social policy (MWA 1990a).

It is clear that Women's Affairs' adjustment to neoliberal norms while the Labour government was in office made an important contribution to its survival under National, but that this adaptation by no means involved a capitulation to neoliberal policy preferences. Because a similarly partial adjustment also characterized the experience of Women's Equality under the NDP, we need to look beyond this feature of the two Ministries in order to understand why their institutional trajectories diverged once governments of the right took office.



## **B. Ministry Mandates and Neoliberal Spending Cuts**

Women's policy agencies vary tremendously along a number of institutional dimensions, including the scope and nature of their responsibilities and their budgets and staff complements (Stetson and Mazur 1995). Some analyses of these agencies, and of horizontal policy agencies more generally, have suggested that program responsibilities and the budgetary resources associated with them enhance considerably the political "clout" that such agencies enjoy. As Jonathan Malloy has argued, "[t]he chief failure of earlier horizontal ministries [within the Canadian federal government] was seen to be their excessive reliance on knowledge and 'information production' alone to produce policy influence, without budgetary and statutory resources or powerful ministers" (1999, 272-73). These lessons were reflected in the belief among staff in Women's Equality that the program responsibilities attached to the Ministry at various points over the years were "critical because they entail a substantial budget and hence give the department some status on budgetary grounds, and because they give the ministry access to various forums of decision-making that are important for women's issues" (Erickson 1996, 119). However, program responsibilities and budgets may also have negative consequences for the women's policy agencies to which they are attached. In addition to stimulating or aggravating "turf wars" with other departments (Malloy 1999), these involvements may also draw the hostile gaze of governments with a neoliberal commitment to reducing public spending on, and involvement in, the delivery of programs and services.

Most discussions of the relationship between neoliberal policy directions and the interests of diverse groups of women have emphasized the negative impact of the former on the latter (Kingfisher 2002; Teghtsoonian 2003, 2004). This troubled relationship flows, in many respects, from neoliberalism's antipathy toward the state and its strong normative preference for market-

based allocation of resources and provision of goods and services, including those historically provided through welfare state structures. Where governments espousing neoliberal principles have taken office, they have sought to reduce the role of the state by, among other strategies, reducing government spending on social programs and relocating responsibility for caregiving into the private realm of “communities” (assumed to operate in a relatively unproblematic fashion) and “families” (framed and understood in gender-neutral terms). Activists and scholars alike have noted the gendered burden this creates as, in practice, women in communities and families are expected to take up the slack resulting from the under-funding or elimination of hitherto state-supported services, frequently on an unpaid basis or in low-wage, insecure jobs (Brodie 1995, 2002; Kingfisher 2002).

These general policy directions were pursued with great vigor by both the National Party government in Aotearoa/New Zealand after 1990 and the provincial Liberal government elected in British Columbia in 2001. National launched an ambitious assault on the welfare state that included significant reductions in social assistance benefits, the replacement of universal eligibility with tighter targeting of a number of benefits and services, and the introduction of market principles into the provision of health and housing (Boston 1999, 10-18). In British Columbia, the Liberals have made deep cuts to social programs and services in a broad range of policy areas while at the same time implementing cuts to income and corporate tax totaling more than \$2 billion along with increases to a variety of regressive taxes, including the provincial sales tax and MSP premiums (BC CEDAW Group 2003; Fuller and Lindsay, 2002 ).

These similar policy agendas had different implications for Women’s Affairs in Aotearoa/New Zealand than for Women’s Equality in British Columbia because of key differences in the mandate and budget priorities of the two ministries. Unlike Women’s

Equality, the Ministry of Women's Affairs' mandate did not include responsibilities for program or service delivery and it provided only very limited funding to support the activities of community-based women. The work of its staff revolved instead around the development of policy advice for the Minister of Women's Affairs, including the analysis of policy proposals originating elsewhere in government. As a result, none of the government's cuts to programs and services were targeted specifically at Women's Affairs because none were housed within the Ministry.

Its lack of program responsibilities also meant that the Ministry did not appear as vulnerable to "capture" as did other departments of government. "Capture" presented itself to theorists of the new public management as a particular problem flowing from the absence of institutional boundaries between responsibilities for policy development, service provision and service funding. Where these various activities were located within a common organizational framework, there was a perceived risk that the "narrow interests" of service providers, rather than the broader interests of the community they were serving or a disinterested analysis of policy options, would shape decisions (Boston 1996, 93-94). These concerns led, among other developments, to a significant restructuring of the health care system under National through which service provision was established on a competitive, "semi-commercial" basis, separated from government funding and purchasing agencies, with a view to decreasing costs and improving efficiency (Boston 1999, 14). With no role in the delivery of programs and services to women and only a minimal proportion of its budget allocated to grants to women's organizations in the community, Women's Affairs escaped similar restructuring initiatives of which it might otherwise have been the target. Ironically, then, the absence of these key components of "clout" - program responsibilities and associated budgets - and the restriction of

its mandate to “information production alone” may have contributed to the Ministry’s survival under National.

The Ministry of Women’s Equality in British Columbia, by contrast, was implicated in a number of funding and service delivery programs that arguably made it a target for an incoming Liberal government intent on reducing government involvement in, and financial support for, social services. During the 2000/01 fiscal year these included funding for the province’s network of transition houses and other services for women fleeing abusive partners; programs for children who have witnessed violence; and employment-oriented bridging programs designed to assist women leaving abusive partners. The Ministry also provided funding for 37 women’s centres that served as community-based resources for women throughout the province (MWE 2001b, 15). Spending on these programs and services far outstripped spending on the ministry’s policy and planning functions: in 2000/01, \$49.9 million was allocated to “Stopping the Violence and Regional Programs,” which constituted 92% of a total Ministry budget of \$54.4 million (Finance 2001, 212). This was consistent with the general profile of Women’s Equality’s budgets during the NDP’s second term in office: the percentage of the Ministry’s budget dedicated to programs and services ranged from a low of 88% in 1999/00 to a high of 96% in 1996/97, the year preceding the transfer of child care services from Women’s Equality to the Ministry of Children and Families.<sup>7</sup>

The institutional dismantling of the Ministry facilitated spending cuts and other changes to programs and services associated with it that the incoming government was intent on making. These included the elimination of funding allocated by the Ministry to support the province’s

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<sup>7</sup>These calculations are based on figures presented for the Ministry of Women’s Equality in the annual Estimates published by the Ministry of Finance and Corporate Relations for the years 1996/97-2000/01.

women's centres (discussed in greater detail below) and reviewing and reducing the funding basis for bridging programs. In addition, the Liberals had a number of objectives in the area of child care services which entailed modifying or eliminating policies adopted under the previous administration. For example, one of the new government's first acts was to repeal the NDP's Child Care Act that had, as a first step toward universal access to child care services, provided funding that reduced to \$7 from \$12 the maximum daily cost of after-school child care for children up to the age of twelve. The Liberals also reduced spending on subsidies available to low-income parents to assist with the costs of child care services, and cancelled a wage subsidy program aimed at child care workers that the NDP government had developed during the late 1990s (Teghtsoonian 2003).

Interestingly, the government chose to assign responsibility for child care services to the Minister of State for Women's Equality, Lynn Stephens, who enthusiastically endorsed the new policy directions. Child care was thus reattached to a gender-based unit within government after several years in other ministries following its transfer out of Women's Equality in 1997. Moving child care services back to Women's Services contributed to two key political goals. First, eliminating Women's Equality as a free-standing Ministry while at the same time attaching responsibility for child care services to its weakened successor served to reduce the visibility of the Liberals' spending cuts and policy changes in this area and to minimize the political resources and clout that Women's Services, as a potential advocate for child care services, might bring to bear in attempting to oppose or modify the new government's policy directions in this area. A similar logic applied to the other cuts to programs and services funded through the Ministry. Second, the reassignment of child care to a women's policy agency otherwise diminished in stature and political resources undermined the gender-specific focus of the

Ministry by making it as much about children as about women. Finally, as the section below will demonstrate, the elimination of financial support for the province's women's centres gave expression to the Liberals' opposition to "special interests" in addition to furthering the budget-cutting goals flowing from its ideological agenda. Thus program and spending responsibilities, which may well have enhanced the Ministry's clout under the NDP, arguably contributed to its demise under the Liberals.

### **C. Relationships with Community-based Women and "Special Interests" Discourse**

Both scholarly research and the accounts of activists within and outside of government have emphasized the ways in which a positive working relationship between a vibrant women's community and feminists working within a women's policy agency can contribute to the successful pursuit of feminist policy goals (Eisenstein 1996; McKinlay 1990; Sawer 1996). As Dorothy Stetson and Amy Mazur have noted, "many have argued that it is only through the joint action of well-placed insiders and outsiders with certain levels of organizational capabilities that women's equality policies will rise on the political agenda" (1995, 276; see also Sawer 1996). The mobilization of community activists in support of policies that will benefit diverse groups of women can serve as a political resource for feminists within government. Community-based groups have a freedom to advocate for policies in ways that may not be possible for feminist bureaucrats, but that can be referenced by the latter as they build a case for women-positive policy choices. Similarly, women's policy agencies can serve as a source of financial and other resources for women's groups in the community, and as a channel through which the views and voices of women in the community are brought into policy discussions within government circles (Stephen 2000, Stetson and Mazur 1995).

However, a collaborative and mutually reinforcing relationship between feminist activists in the community and the staff of women's policy agencies can serve as a target for neoliberal critiques. Indeed, a key source of tension between neoliberalism and the interests of diverse groups of women is the normative and practical privileging of the individual that lies at the heart of neoliberal ideology. This philosophical stance is antithetical to feminism's focus on women's collective social and political disadvantage and has become aligned, in several jurisdictions, with a discourse of "special interests." This discourse has been mobilized to delegitimize political activism among women and other marginalized groups that seek to participate politically on the basis of one or more dimensions of a shared identity; it has also been directed against government programs and services intended to address the needs of such groups (Brodie 1995; Sawyer 2002, 2003). Thus, in addition to undermining the legitimacy of equity-seeking groups, a discourse of "special interests" supports the wider anti-statist agenda of neoliberalism in the name of "ordinary citizens" whose interests are understood to lie in a minimalist state and low levels of taxation (Harder 2003; Laycock 2002). On this view, women's policy agencies and their programs constitute an unwarranted appropriation of public resources by politically powerful feminists who have little understanding of or interest in "average women" but are, instead, bent on furthering their own narrow self-interest at the expense of "taxpayers" (Teghtsoonian 2000).

A "special interests" discourse was not entirely absent in Aotearoa/New Zealand during the 1980s and 1990s, although it was not always articulated in precisely these terms. For example, there were regular outbreaks of letters to the editor questioning the extent to which the Ministry was aware of, or capable of articulating, the interests and concerns of "ordinary women" There had been significant opposition to the establishment of the Ministry among social

conservatives (Abigail 1991, 144) and the National Party's initial position was that, if the Ministry were to exist at all, it should be restructured as a Ministry of Family Affairs. However, National's official stance toward Women's Affairs softened during the 1980s and, in contrast to circumstances in British Columbia, an ideological opposition to the Ministry's existence was not successfully entrenched in those sites within the National Party where authoritative decisions were taken. Indeed, Jenny Shipley, who went on to become Prime Minister in the latter part of the 1990s, spoke vigorously on behalf of the importance of Women's Affairs and its work while serving as its first Minister under National. In responding to a vote by the Auckland divisional conference of the National Party calling for the elimination of the Ministry, Shipley argued that Women's Affairs was "a small but efficient policy unit which provides valuable constestible advice to the Government" and that it was "working hard to give women a voice in Government policy."<sup>8</sup>

In British Columbia "special interests" discourse has occupied a more central place within the provincial Liberal Party. For example, its resonances were visible in the "New Era" documents distributed by the party in preparation for the 2001 election which were intended to outline its vision for the province's future. The Liberal's plans for a "New Era for Equality," which were presented toward the very end of the 33-page election package, emphasized the importance of addressing the needs of "British Columbians" in terms that undermine the legitimacy of gender and other marginalized dimensions of identity as focal points for equity-oriented initiatives:

The NDP have ... treated equality issues as so-called 'wedge' issues, using women, aboriginals, seniors, gays and lesbians, multicultural groups and others as political pawns

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<sup>8</sup>"Govt pledges to keep women's ministry," New Zealand Herald, 28 May 1991, p. 5 and "Shipley defends Women's Affairs Ministry," The Dominion, 28 May 1991, p. 2



to try to gain partisan advantage. That's no way to build our future. We must start treating all citizens fairly, equally, and with respect, regardless of where they live or who they are. A BC Liberal Government will be guided by the principle of equality. ... Equality of opportunity, responsibility and rights is what our Constitution guarantees. And all British Columbians are entitled to no less. (BC Liberals 2001, 32)

As I have noted elsewhere, “the twelve commitments presented as avenues to ‘A New Era of Equality’ discuss plans for ‘British Columbians’, ‘Canadians’, ‘rural communities’, and ‘local government’ - conceptual containers which render invisible the specific interests of identity-based groups, including (multiply-marginalized) women” (Teghtsoonian 2003, 37). Within this discourse, as was the case when it had been deployed by the political right during the 1990s, a Ministry for Women’s Equality appears deeply problematic (Teghtsoonian 2000, 113). And, in contrast to circumstances within the National Party, these views were well-established within the provincial Liberal Party rather than being confined to its periphery.

It is in the context of these localized particularities of neoliberalism and their expression within governing parties that key differences between the two Ministries in terms of their relationship with community women’s organizations take on significance. In Aotearoa/New Zealand only a small percentage (4-7%) of Women’s Affairs annual budget during the 1980s was directed to support women’s activities in the community: from an annual Ministry budget that ranged between \$2 million and \$3.3 million during the late 1980s, no more than \$190,000 in total was ever allocated to women’s groups in any given year.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, much of this funding was one-off in nature and involved small amounts granted through a yearly competition

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<sup>9</sup>These calculations are based on figures presented in the annual Reports prepared by the Ministry of Women’s Affairs for the years 1987/88-1989/90.

to individual groups.<sup>10</sup> Even those opposed to the Ministry had little to work with here in making the case that feminists were bleeding the state of scarce fiscal resources.

Combined with the reframing of Women's Affairs' relationship with community-based women's groups undertaken by Judith Aitken, the absence of significant funding from the Ministry for these groups minimized its vulnerability to neoliberal criticism. Indeed, the Ministry was able to mobilize neoliberal discourse to legitimate its community contacts. As we have seen, Women's Affairs argued that its ability to bring forward the views of community-based women constituted a critical contribution to providing the government with "contestable policy advice," a key value within the civil service. In the marketplace of ideas, the views of community women were understood to have their own particular worth. Rather than a liability, then, the Ministry's reformulated linkages with women's groups in the community were framed as a neo-liberal "good" that could be taken on board by the incoming National government in 1990 with relatively little difficulty.

By contrast, the relationship between Women's Equality and the provincial women's movement in British Columbia was configured in a way that arguably reduced substantially the odds of the Ministry surviving the transition to Liberal rule in 2001. Women's Equality began providing core funding to women's centres in the province in 1992, financial support which became particularly important in light of the reduced amounts available through Status of Women Canada and the shift by the latter to project-based funding in 1998 (Burt and Hardman

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<sup>10</sup>For example, in 1987/88 the Ministry's "Project Fund" received 180 applications; 76 were funded from the available budget of \$50,000 (MWA 1988a). Ministry funding was also made available through Putea Pounamu, which involved a series of community-based projects designed to foster participation in public decision-making processes among Maori women. In 1989/90, these two funding pools provided a total of \$187,000 to women in various communities (MWA 1990b).

2001, 205-06; Vancouver City Council 2003, 4-6). By 2000/01, the NDP's final year in office, Women's Equality's budget included approximately \$1.9 million to support the work of 37 women's centres located throughout the various regions of the province (MWE 2001b, 15).

In their first budget the Liberals announced that they would cut all provincial funding to women's centres effective 31 March 2004, a pledge which they subsequently implemented without blinking. Despite the best efforts of women's centres' staff and supporters to draw attention to the extensive volunteer time already being contributed to their operation by women in communities across British Columbia, and the increased demands on their services in the wake of the extensive cuts to innumerable public services, the government remained firm in its resolve. While partly a function of its budget-cutting agenda, the refusal to continue funding women's centres also expresses the government's broader ideological objectives. As the BC Coalition of Women's Centres has noted, their work involves systemic advocacy as well as the provision of much-needed services and support to women in their communities: "Women's Centres are often the lone socio-political voice speaking out for the rights of women in our communities and in our province. If that voice is gone - if Women's Centres lose our agency and autonomy - many more women will lose their voices" (BC Coalition 2003, 28).

By the time these cuts were implemented in the spring of 2004, Lynn Stephens had been replaced as Minister of State for Women's Equality by Ida Chong, who was promoted to the revised position of Minister of State for Women's and Seniors Services in a January 2004 cabinet reshuffle. In justifying the withdrawal of financial support for women's centres, Chong noted that the government's core service review (undertaken at the beginning of its term in office) had "determined that advocacy 'was not a core service' that the government would continue funding anymore. 'A determination was made that we wanted to ensure that direct

essential services would continue,' Chong said. 'That means transition houses, second-stage housing, safe shelters and counselling.'"<sup>11</sup> In this statement the services provided through women's centres, often to women with no other access to support, are effectively erased. In identifying women's centres with the "advocacy" that they undertake and mobilizing this aspect of their work to justify the elimination of provincial government funding for them, Chong's comments offer an illustration of both the way in which "special interests" discourse has informed the government's policies and the material consequences of this discourse for women.

The cuts to government funding for women's centres have been easier to pursue in the absence of a free-standing Ministry of Women's Equality, the elimination of which has itself reflected and contributed to the Liberal's ideological agenda. As Laurel Weldon has argued

political support from external social movements is necessary to provide women's bureaus both the political pressure and input that is necessary to capitalize on improved institutional capacity. ... Thus, a strong, autonomous women's movement improves the representative function performed by a women's policy agency. Conversely, women's policy agencies can strengthen women's movements. By providing financial support for organizing and independent research, women's policy machineries provide additional resources to women's organizations. In addition, by providing research support and opportunities for input on policy development, women's policy machineries can assist women's movement activists in publicly articulating women's perspective. *Thus, strong, autonomous women's movements and effective women's policy agencies reinforce one another in improving women's representation. This effect is interactive: Each factor magnifies the effect of the other* (2002, 1160 and 1162; emphasis in original).

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<sup>11</sup>Brennan Clarke, "Women's group funding severed," *Saanich News*, 5 March 2004, 1. The continued funding provided by Women's and Seniors Services for transition houses and other programs and services for women and children who have been the targets of violence is highlighted by the government as evidence of its commitment to advancing women's interests. This is consistent with developments in other jurisdictions where the marginalization of women's policy agencies has been accompanied by a narrowing of their effective scope to policy and programs addressing violence against women (sometimes alongside an interest in supporting women as entrepreneurs) under neoliberal or "third way" governments. See, for example, Benn 2000; Chappell 1995; Malloy 1999; Sawer 1996).

In British Columbia we have seen this dynamic play out in reverse, as the funding relationship between Women's Equality and the province's women's centres rendered both suspect in the eyes of the Liberal government. Buried deep within CAWS, led by a Minister of State indifferent to feminism and lacking prior Cabinet experience, "Women's and Seniors' Services" lacks the visibility and other political resources that an independent Ministry might be able to bring to bear in arguing against these cuts behind closed doors. And, with their very existence at stake, women's centres have more pressing issues on their plate than protesting the loss of the Ministry.

#### **4. Concluding Comments**

The analysis presented above suggests that, in considering various institutional features of women's policy agencies, it may be useful to draw a distinction between their impact on *effectiveness* and their implications for the *capacity to survive* a partisan change in government intact. As we have seen, the program responsibilities and financial links to community-based women's organizations developed by the Ministry of Women's Equality under the NDP, and conventionally understood to have enhanced its "political clout," became liabilities when the provincial Liberal Party assumed office in 2001. The new government has been intent on radically reducing government spending on, and involvement in, the provision of services; in addition it has been opposed to the political expression of marginalized identities, including gender, targeted by "special interests" discourse. This latter feature of the Liberals' ideological agenda was put into practice through mutually supportive policy choices: the elimination of the Ministry and the withdrawal of government funding to women's centres. In addition, the spending cuts and changes the Liberals wanted to make in policy areas attached to Women's

Equality were themselves facilitated by the Ministry's disestablishment and its reconfiguration as a minor sub-unit of CAWS. Through their interaction with the particular ways in which neoliberalism has been taken up by the provincial Liberal Party, key institutional features of the Ministry rendered it more vulnerable than it might otherwise have been following the change of government in 2001.

Lacking the correlates of "clout" with which its counterpart in British Columbia had been endowed, the Ministry of Women's Affairs nonetheless managed to survive intact as part of governments led by the National Party for more than a decade after the 1990 election. While its capacity to adjust to neoliberal norms under the Fourth Labour Government undoubtedly contributed to its survival, the comparison with Women's Equality suggests that Women's Affairs' status as a policy analysis unit without program-related responsibilities and budgets served to insulate it from National's restructuring initiatives. Its odds of survival were further enhanced by the absence of extensive Ministry funding for community-based women's groups and by the fact that the local version of "special interests" discourse was relatively marginalized within the National Party after 1990.

This last point takes on particular importance in light of the views articulated by Don Brash, who was selected as the new leader of the National Party in late 2003. Declining to appoint a spokesperson for Women's Affairs, Brash indicated his interest in eliminating the Ministry altogether, stating that "I don't frankly think there is any particular merit in having a Ministry of Women's Affairs any more than there is a ministry of men's affairs."<sup>12</sup> This renewed attack on the legitimacy of the Ministry comes at a time when it is arguably at an especially

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<sup>12</sup>Quoted in Audrey Young, "Brash drops women's affairs role," 3 November 2003, New Zealand Herald Online ([www.nz.herald.co.nz](http://www.nz.herald.co.nz)), accessed 9 December 2003.

vulnerable crossroads in its history, having been the subject of an intensely critical review by the State Services Commission earlier in 2003 (State Services Commission 2003; Teghtsoonian 2004). In this context, a resurgence of anti-Ministry sentiment in leadership circles within the National Party, rather than at its periphery, may be a harbinger of change for Women's Affairs should National be returned to office at the next election.

These speculations about the Ministry's future, as well as the comparative discussion presented in this paper, leave unanswered the question of whether the institutional structure of a women's policy agency is, in and of itself, of much consequence. The scope of this paper does not permit a discussion of the consequences of the divergent institutional trajectories traced by Women's Affairs and Women's Equality after the arrival in office of parties of the right, nor a comparative assessment of their relative achievements prior to that development. I have argued elsewhere that, although it is unlikely that the survival of Women's Equality as a free-standing ministry would have had any significant impact on the policy directions pursued by the Liberal government, the elimination of the Ministry has - in and of itself - had harmful consequences for women in the province of British Columbia (Teghtsoonian 2003). By undermining established working relationships and by reducing the visibility of, and thereby government's accountability for, the gendered impacts of its policy choices, the down-sizing of Women's Equality has constituted a move in the wrong direction for women. With this analysis in mind, I suggest that although there may well have been significant limitations on the capacity of Women's Affairs to pursue effectively a feminist policy agenda serving the interests of diverse groups of women after the 1990 election, its institutional integrity as a free-standing ministry left it better placed to do so than the marginalized women's policy agency to which Women's Equality has been

reduced in British Columbia. Exploring the extent to which this is, in fact, the case would be a fruitful avenue for further research.



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