

## **Brokers, Feminists & Populists: Understanding Parties and Social Movements in the Representational Politics of Identity**

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This paper offers a framework for understanding the relationship between political parties and contemporary social movements in Canadian politics. Building on an understanding of political representation as a process that constitutes political identities and interests, it is argued that parties and social movements can both be understood and studied from a perspective that locates them in the ideological and discursive processes of the ‘representational politics of identity’. The empirical core of the paper examines the uneasy association between social movements and brokerage-style partisan politics, explores Canadian feminism’s gradual rejection of constructive engagement with partisan politics, and reveals the hostile relationship between contemporary social movements and the new populism. While exposing the extent to which the representational politics of identity puts political parties and social movements in competition with one another, the paper concludes by arguing that the tension between these competing institutions of representation is healthy for Canadian democracy.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Political parties have played a critical role in defining the character of liberal democratic politics. Working through the electoral system and the institutions of parliamentary governance, they shape the primary opportunities for—and the character of—political participation and representation. They are often decisive as mediating institutions that influence how we think about politics, our political identities, public policy, and the legitimacy of competing approaches to governance. They are not, however, alone as institutions of political participation and representation. In recent decades, social movements—including feminism, environmentalism, and the gay and lesbian rights movement—have redefined the opportunities for political engagement. These contemporary social movements have also been among the most significant challengers to political parties in the discursive processes that define politics, give meaning to political identities, establish policy agendas, and determine the state’s approach to governance. This essay examines the relationship between parties and social movements by examining their respective roles in what shall be characterized as the ‘representational politics of identity’.

The goals of this paper are primarily conceptual; they revolve around the issue of how we think about representation, political parties, social movements, and the relationship between parties and contemporary social movements. After reviewing contending understandings of the relationship between parties and social movements, attention turns to presenting arguing in favour of understanding political representation as a process that actually serves to constitute our political identities and interests. A case is then made for locating our understanding of parties and social movements in these ideological and discursive processes of political representation. The empirical core of the paper builds on this analysis by examining the uneasy association between social movements and brokerage-style partisan politics, exploring Canadian feminism’s gradual rejection of constructive engagement with partisan politics and, finally, revealing the

hostile relationship between contemporary social movements and the new populism. While exposing the extent to which the representational politics of identity puts political parties and social movements in competition with one another, the paper concludes by arguing that the tension between these competing institutions of representation is healthy for Canadian democracy.

### **POLITICAL PARTIES AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS**

To advance our understanding of political parties, students of party politics must engage the literature on social movements and avoid analysis that artificially extracts parties from the relationships they have with contemporary social movements. It is essential that we turn a theoretical eye to the issue of the place of parties and social movements in the politics of representation. We need, also, to understand the ways in which the relationships between parties and movements may be competitive or complementary.

#### ***Competing or Complementing?:***

It is very common for observers to suggest that social movement organizations and pressure groups are in competition with political parties. Particularly within the discipline of political science, social movements, pressure groups and parties are considered to be competing institutions of political representation—and political representation is conceptualized as a process of aggregating existing political interests and then articulating those interests to the state.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, among those who subscribe to this competitive interest-oriented perspective on political representation, the dominant viewpoint is that democratic principles demand that political parties be considered the primary representative institution. In the words of the 1992 Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing, “only political parties can reconcile and accommodate diverse and competing interests to reach agreement on public policy.”<sup>2</sup> Within this frame, social movements and pressure groups are viewed as usurping the role of political parties and, as a result, weakening parties and thwarting the possibility of democratic political representation. The supposed problem with movements and groups is that they are not aggregative institutions; that is, they are said to focus too narrowly on the “special interests” of particular social constituencies and, in the process, neglect the integrative function of representing the “general interest.”<sup>3</sup>

In recent years, however, an increasing number of scholars have rejected this depiction of the relationship between political parties, groups and social movements. In one of the first widely read Canadian articles to dismiss the suggestion that social movements and political parties are embroiled in destructive competition, Claude Galipeau argued that parties, pressure groups and social movements form the core of “three analytically distinct levels of representation.”<sup>4</sup> It was Galipeau’s contention that political parties and pressure groups represent interests at the level of the electoral, parliamentary and bureaucratic networks of state policy-making. In doing so, they prefer to focus on how interests are represented and which interests can claim victory in the policy process. Social movements, on the other hand, operate at the level of the non-institutionalized margins of the policy system and perform a “function of innovation” by making political demands that aim to alter how we think about politics, political identities and political interests.<sup>5</sup> In doing so social movements most certainly challenge the world view and political commitments of parties, but because they fulfill a distinct function Galipeau claimed that they can not be perceived as competing with parties in the traditional sense of usurping their role in the processes of political representation. Susan Phillips echoed this basic line of thinking when

she argued that social movements “complement” parties by expanding “the scope of who and what is represented” in Canadian politics.<sup>6</sup> Newman and Tanguay have also contributed to developing our understanding of social movements as complementing political parties:

In Canada there has been a tendency for social movements to act as a complement rather than competitor to the party system. There has been no concerted effort to create social movement organizations to contest elections, and involvement in election campaigns has tended to take a non-partisan and educational focus.<sup>7</sup>

While I sympathize with the suggestion that social movements and political parties are complementary, it strikes me as a mistake to ignore the ways in which they are in competition. First, as Phillips has made clear, social movement organizations pursue a variety of representational strategies and roles. They often operate at the margins of formal politics, but they have never refused to engage in representing interests within the institutionalized levels of the political system—that is, within the political and bureaucratic networks of policy-making that are normally dominated by parties and pressure groups.<sup>8</sup> For example, in an important study of feminist constitutional activism in Canada, Alexandra Dobrowolsky comments that the women’s movement “traverses various representational channels, and its strategic repertoire blurs party, movement and interest group distinctions.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, some feminist social movement organizations are not unlike institutionalized pressure groups capable of lobbying through inside routes to the state and, in effect, challenging political parties through conventional processes of interest representation.

Less common, but also important to the competitive rivalry between movements and parties, is that social movements have sometimes challenged political parties directly by forming movement-parties that run candidates who contest the legitimacy of brokerage-style partisan politics. Over the years, Canadian social movement parties like the Progressives, the Feminist Party and the Green Party have actively challenged the traditions of brokering and Westminster-style parliamentarianism. Until recently, for example, the Canadian Greens were unequivocal about its desire to radicalize the representational role of parties to such an extent that conventional notions of the role of parties in interest representation would be permanently shattered.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, and most significant to the present discussion, political parties and social movements are in competition because they both engage in the discursive struggles that shape our individual and collective political identities and, thereby, influence the scope of who and what is represented in Canadian politics. Parties, like social movements, traverse various channels or levels of representation. While parties may appear to focus on how interests are represented, they also “attempt to manage what is represented in the political system.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, while the discursive identity politics of contemporary social movements—that is, the conscious pursuit of group-based identities—is unique in the extent to which it aims to expand the boundaries of politics and the legitimacy of new political identities, it is not wholly new. In fact, it could be argued that the identity politics of contemporary social movements merely seeks to end the established parties’ dominance of the representational politics that shapes political identities and interests. As such, parties and social movements are in competition on the terrain of the representational politics of identity. But this competition centers around a representational politics that is distinct from conventional interest-oriented formulations of political

representation. Moreover, by refusing to view political parties as inherently privileged institutions of political representation, the perspective being developed here creates a space for understanding parties and social movements as simultaneously competing and complementing one another.

***Political Representation and the Politics of Identity:***

To develop this line of argumentation it is necessary to reflect further on the concept of political representation. Alexandra Dobrowolsky has argued, quite convincingly, that the essence of political representation can never be fully captured by notions of interest aggregation and articulation. In fact, she claims it is a mistake to assume that there are preformed political interests waiting to be represented. Stressing that “interests and identities are not fixed or frozen,” Dobrowolsky asserts that representation involves a politics of identity that shapes our political identities and transforms our political interests.<sup>12</sup> She developed this argument to advance a view of the women’s movement as much more than a political group that articulates interests to the state. I believe that a similar point can be made about political parties. Political parties are not simply passive conduits that aggregate broad sets of interests and articulate a generalized interest to the state. Parties are actively engaged in a representational politics of identity that goes beyond acting for existing political interests—indeed they participate in a representational politics that serves to construct and deconstruct the multiple and intersecting collective identities through which we understand political conflict.<sup>13</sup>

Political representation was traditionally thought of as “acting for” or “standing for” a particular segment of the population or an existing political interest.<sup>14</sup> But focussing solely on this instrumental side of representation has too often allowed social scientists to ignore the constitutive side of representation. Representation in its constitutive sense involves the creation of individual and collective political identities.<sup>15</sup> As Stuart Hall explains, representation “has to be understood as an active and formative relationship” with an important ideological or discursive dimension.<sup>16</sup> In other words, the processes of representing a political interest forges and gives meaning to that interest by discursively defining who it is that is being represented.<sup>17</sup> Political identities are not pre-given, they are socially constructed through political representation; thus, political representation is, quite literally, a constitutive process in the sense that it is constituting the subjects of politics. Throughout this essay I use the phrase “representational politics of identity” to capture the constitutive nature of representation; the narrower term “identity politics” is reserved for references to the conscious pursuit of group-based political identities by movements of, for example, women, Aboriginal peoples or gays and lesbians.

To argue that the constitutive dimension of political representation is, at bottom, a process of identity formation is to make a point of considerable political consequence. First, political identities “are worn by individuals as part of their personal political and social consciousness.”<sup>18</sup> Second, shaping the range of identities and interests that are politically relevant and taken into account in politics and policy-making is an exercise of profound power.<sup>19</sup> Political identities serve to orient political action. We are all called into the world of politics on the basis of our political identities. We find political allies, understand and navigate salient political cleavages, and define the norms and values of politics from the perspective of our political identities. It can thus be said that the politics of representation shapes who and what politics is all about.

***Thinking about Parties:***

Our conception of political parties must situate parties in relation to this perceptiveness on representation and identity. If we are to understand political parties, the party system, and the relationship between parties and social movements, we must be prepared to think of political parties as interventions in the ideological and discursive struggles which shape the intellectual and ideological frameworks that give meaning to political life by fostering the emergence and acceptance of particular political identities and interests. From this perspective, the character of a party is an ideological as much as an empirical question. The full significance of a party's organization and social base is only fully revealed through a critical examination of how the party's ideology and political appeals discursively construct those social interests on whose behalf it claims to act.

Through the representational politics of identity parties shape how their supporters perceive themselves and those within the political community with whom their interests are in conflict. Parties are never simple expressions of social, economic or class interests. Moreover, neither a party's ideological orientation, nor its approach to controversial political questions can be simply and directly attributed to the character or distinctiveness of its organization or social base. Parties, then, are more than organizations or groups of supporters and activists; at the ideological level they are discursive interventions in the struggles and debates that shape political identities and interests and define the discursive character of a particular historical conjuncture. As Brodie and Jenson explain, "parties do not simply represent already existing interests; their contribution is more significant. They participate in the construction of the very definition of political interests."<sup>20</sup>

[P]arties provide voters with a *definition of politics*. In other words, political parties help to *shape the interpretation of which aspects of social relations should be considered political, how politics should be conducted, what the boundaries of political discussion most properly may be and which kinds of conflicts can be resolved through the political process*. From the vast array of tensions, differences, and inequalities characteristic of any society, parties treat only some as alternatives in the electoral process and thereby influence how the electorate will divide against itself.<sup>21</sup>

So what is meant by the notion of a party system? It is often argued that electoral competition between party organizations produces competitive patterns and interrelationships that constitute a party system.<sup>22</sup> At one level this is true. But these competitive patterns and interrelationships are only the most obvious and observable dimensions of the party system; they are shaped by a series of institutions, rules, norms, practices and meaning structures which, taken as a whole, constitute the party system.<sup>23</sup> The party system is more than simply a constellation of competitive partisan organizations. It is a system of representation, it facilitates the representation of people and interests, but it also embodies a meaning structure which shapes our understanding of and relationship to partisan conflict. Thus, it is important to recognize that every party system is characterized by a particular meaning structure or discursive framework which defines the boundaries of political debate, establishes the political identities to which parties appeal, provides a framework for interpreting issues and events, and places limits on the policy options which are considered as realistic solutions. The usefulness of such a

conceptualization of the party system is that it takes us beyond focussing on elections and partisan organizations. It reveals how political parties struggle to delineate the universe of political identities and interests that are significant to partisan politics and democratic governance, and it prepares us to understand the relationship between parties and contemporary social movements.

***Thinking about Social Movements:***

Social movements are often be defined as non-institutionalized networks of groups and individuals who are struggling to expand our understanding of politics and bring about change at the societal level in terms of behaviour, relationships and ideas. While shared political values provide some cohesion to social movement networks, it is the fact that social movement activists and organizations act on and through shared political identities that knits each movement together as a social force.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, for some, the defining feature of contemporary social movements is their commitment to cultural transformation at the level of social relations and political identities.

The construction of new meanings out of which new collective actors emerge is ultimately at the root of social movement practice. Social movements are dynamic structures that build communities and solidarities; consequently they are intimately associated with the emergence of ‘identity politics’.<sup>25</sup>

William Carroll contends these movements can be "viewed as instances of cultural and political praxis through which new identities are formed, new ways of life are tested, and new forms of community are prefigured."<sup>26</sup> While it is often stressed that contemporary social movements are social forces that are located in civil society and wish to bypass the state in their efforts to change our social values and personal behaviour,<sup>27</sup> many social movement organizations do make policy demands of the state. In fact, some of the groups spawned by social movements function in ways indistinguishable from public-interest pressure groups.

Much of the literature on contemporary social movements focuses on those movements whose ideological orientation and political objectives could be characterized as progressive, or left-wing. All the same, there are networks of groups and individuals advocating right-wing agendas associated with, for example, socially conservative family values, tax cuts, and the rights of firearms owners, that are also, by most definitions, social movements. With this in mind, it is important to draw readers’ attention to the fact that this essay continues the now common proclivity for associating the contemporary, or ‘new’ social movements with a particular type of progressive politics. While this narrower use of the term is certainly contestable, what is important here is that we understand that the focus of this essay is on those progressive social movements whose efforts, since the 1960s, to challenge oppression and domination have politicized a range of social relations and drawn attention to themes such as sexism, heterosexism and homophobia, racism, environmental degradation, and discrimination against people with disabilities. These groups have had considerable social and political impact. Their commitment to combining a politics of cultural and self-transformation has meant the proliferation of newly salient political identities. Moreover, in raising new issues and legitimizing alternative political identities, these progressive social movements “challenge established parties in their traditional role as mediators between citizens and the political system.”<sup>28</sup>

Much of the recent literature on social movements focuses on the ways in which the contemporary social movements associated with feminism, anti-racism, environmentalism, gay and lesbian rights, among others, have, over the past three decades, highlighted the social conflictuality inherent in a wide variety of social relations and generated resistance to forms of subordination that were previously considered natural. While it is true these movements have spawned traditional public-interest pressure groups which engage in state-centred policy advocacy, the larger *raison d'être* of progressive contemporary social movement organizations is to effect social change through cultural struggle which challenges the behaviour, relationships, ideas and identities of individuals. This has required new ways of defining and doing politics; in particular, it has meant a progressive politics for which the terrain of the state and political parties are less central.<sup>29</sup> As Claus Offe explains, the space of political struggle for many social movement organizations is noninstitutional politics:

they seek to politicize civil society in ways that are not constrained by representative-bureaucratic political institutions...[they] employ practices that belong to an intermediate sphere between private pursuits and concerns and institutional, state-sanctioned modes of politics.<sup>30</sup>

Laclau and Mouffe argue that contemporary social movements embrace existing liberal-democratic discourse in a way which takes the principles of the democratic revolutions of earlier centuries and extends them to a whole new series of social relations.<sup>31</sup> Contemporary social movements, then, are progressive political movements engaged in a project of radical democracy that aims to democratize the social relations of everyday life while also ensuring that the institutions of political democracy are based on a radical pluralism that respects social heterogeneity and positively values difference.<sup>32</sup> By struggling to transform social relations which have oppressed and marginalized women, visible minorities, people with disabilities, and gays and lesbians, among others, these social movements work to transform the landscape of salient political interests and identities. Indeed, “their common denominator of organization and action is some sense of collective identity.”<sup>33</sup>

Collective identity mobilization occurs around group-based identities such as gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, and others in order to gain recognition, but also to resist and contest dominant power relations, discourses, and practices.<sup>34</sup>

As Barry Adam argued in his study of gay liberation and the Canadian gay and lesbian movement, only by embracing a collective political identity could homosexuals be organized as a movement capable of articulating its interests and defending itself against its enemies.<sup>35</sup>

Contemporary social movements have politicized new themes and problematized once accepted social relations. They question the liberal-democratic party system’s narrow definition of politics. For some, social movements represent something of a challenge to the established political order, and the political parties at the centre of that order. Their political and ideological struggles have transformed the politics of representation and altered the character of political and ideological struggle.

## **PARTIES VERSUS SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN THE REPRESENTATIONAL POLITICS OF IDENTITY**

Even after opting to use the representational politics of identity as a lens through which analyse parties, social movements and their relationship to one another, empirical analysis is daunting. Our decisions regarding how we ‘cut into’ the complex world of party and social movement politics will have significant implications for our analysis. As such, it is useful to examine this relationship from a number of vantage points. The discussion to follow begins with an examination of how Canada’s brokerage-style partisan politics has shaped the relationship between parties and contemporary social movements. Attention then turns to the relationship of one particular social movement—the women’s movement—to parties and partisan politics. Finally, the paper analyses the impact that exclusionary populism within the party system had on the relationship between political parties and social movements during the 1990s.

### ***Brokerage Politics and the Party-Movement Relationship:***

It is said that the Canadian party system has been dominated by brokerage-style politics.<sup>36</sup> The Liberal and Conservative<sup>37</sup> parties, in particular, have been identified as practitioners of this brokerage politics. At bottom, brokerage politics is characterized by leader-dominated and ideologically similar parties that lack stable and well-defined bases of electoral support. Brokerage parties recreate their coalition of supporters at each election. Their platforms typically lack detailed policy substance, focusing instead on leadership, trust and their capacity to manage the delivery of the programs and policy initiatives Canadians most desire. Moreover, to the extent that brokerage parties do articulate clear policy stances, analysis across multiple elections reveals that their positions can shift significantly as they compete for the support of that broad segment of the electorate whose political views correspond with the dominant ideological trends of the times. The political appeals of brokerage parties are, for the most part, designed to minimize the political importance of any single social or political cleavage. Denying the political relevance of most social conflicts limits the range of salient political identities and interests, and positions the brokerage parties as aggregative institutions that are uniquely capable of playing the sort of integrative function that is necessary for the general interest to prevail.

The problem with the brokerage theory of the Canadian party system is that it confuses description with explanation.<sup>38</sup> It suggests that the character and behaviour of Canadian political parties is an inevitable response to Canada’s social cleavage structure and/or the distribution of ideological perspectives in the marketplace of political ideas. This sort of explanation amounts to a denial of the role that political parties play as active mediators of our relationship to politics—it hides the role of parties in defining the form and substance of politics. It is certainly true that, except during periods of profound political, economic or social change, the observed behaviour of Canadian political parties is what one would expect from brokerage-style parties: they support the status quo, offer broadly similar platforms, and downplay the legitimacy of alternative conceptions of politics. But this does not mean accepting brokerage theory’s suggestion that political parties are merely responding to the character of the Canadian cleavage structure or ideological landscape. Indeed, accepting brokerage ‘theory’ as mere description rather than explanation allows us to embrace the notion that the political discourse of the major Canadian parties serves to reinforce the dominant ideology and legitimize status quo thinking with regard to the character of politically relevant identities, interests and social cleavages.

As brokerage parties, the Liberals and Conservatives have endeavored to marginalize the



understandings of Canadian politics that are championed by contemporary social movements. The values, priorities and identities of contemporary social movements simply have no place in a partisan arena dominated by brokers. Even former Prime Minister Kim Campbell, a self-defined feminist who became Conservative party leader in 1993 promising a new ‘politics of inclusion’, characterized the social movement activists who did not accept her party’s policy agenda as “enemies of Canadians.”<sup>39</sup> Clearly, Campbell’s comments were meant to suggest that contemporary social movements are populated by misguided activists who are unwilling to set aside their narrow self-interest to embrace what (the partisan elite believe) is in the national interest.

The New Democratic Party (NDP) has had an uncertain relationship with both brokerage-style politics and social movements. Analysts have long argued that the NDP’s predecessor, the CCF (Co-operative Commonwealth Federation), was something of a movement-party that could only be understood if we examine the interaction of the party and movement aspects of this single organization.<sup>40</sup> The history of the CCF-NDP can be characterized as a gradual transformation from a left-wing protest movement to an organized brokerage party. As such, it is not surprising that in recent decades, the NDP has had something of a love/hate relationship with contemporary social movements. There are some obvious political and ideological affinities between the NDP and progressive social movements, but social movement activists argue that the combined effects of Canada’s single member plurality electoral system and pressures associated with brokering and parliamentarianism, has the effect of “dragging parties away from movements.”<sup>41</sup>

Within the NDP there have always been activists arguing against accepting the brokerage route to electoral success. Between 1969 and 1971 it was a left-nationalist party faction known as the Waffle that argued against accepting the definition of politics and the political agenda being championed by the leading brokerage parties.<sup>42</sup> In the mid 1980s Judy Rebick (a party activist who was later President of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women [NAC]) and a number of Ontario social movement activists organized the Campaign for an Activist Party in an effort to encourage a closer relationship between the provincial party and progressive social movements. This was a period of heightened activism and coalition building among social movements. Public support for environmentalism was on the rise, the feminist movement was becoming increasingly radicalized, and the Pro-Canada Network (later renamed the Action Canada Network) had brought women’s groups, labour unions, progressive church leaders, Aboriginal peoples’ groups, anti-poverty activists, and many others, together to fight against free trade and related elements of the Conservative Party’s policy agenda. During the 1988 election the Pro-Canada Network was non-partisan. It developed a strong working relationship with both the Liberals and the NDP as it campaigned against the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement, but the Network avoided endorsing either party. All the same, many Network activists hoped their efforts would reinvigorate the movement/party dynamic within the New Democratic Party and improve the prospect of a more movement-oriented NDP in the 1990s and beyond.<sup>43</sup>

In the event, however, the NDP of the 1990s opted for brokerage politics over movement-oriented politics. When the leader of the Ontario NDP, Bob Rae, was elected Premier in 1990, activists in social movement organizations had high hopes for a transformation in the style and substance of politics. But Rae’s early days in office focused on making it clear to the corporate sector that he would distance himself from social movement organizations and do nothing to

undermine business confidence. Many members of the NDP cabinet, caucus and political staff had links to contemporary social movements; but, in typical brokerage style, Rae insisted that he was Premier for all of Ontario, not just the narrow interests who most strongly support the NDP.

The price of working for the government was that people who had devoted their lives to a cause were required to divorce themselves from their base. The new members of the legislature were coached in how not to be advocates. The measure of a good minister was how quickly she or he learned this lesson.<sup>44</sup>

A few years later Svend Robinson—and NDP Member of Parliament from British Columbia—attempted to inject a social movement orientation into the national NDP by running for the party leadership on a platform that emphasized the need for the party to be a meeting place for labour, social movement and community-based organizations that wish to challenge the hegemony of brokerage politics and neo-liberal policy priorities. When the party rejected Robinson in favour of Alexa McDonough, it made a strong statement against his vision of an appropriate movement/party dynamic.

But, of course, the idea of a more movement-oriented party would not die easily. As the NDP contemplated its future after the 2000 general election, Robinson, Judy Rebick, and a number of left-wing activists from a range of social movements launched The New Politics Initiative, a progressive campaign calling on the NDP to dissolve and form a new political party with both a clearer anti-capitalist ideological stance and a commitment to engaging in a style of partisan politics that would better link the partisan left with non-partisan social movements. According to the advocates of this ‘new politics’, movement-building is as important a task for a progressive party as campaigning and participating in parliamentary politics.

The most important task facing the broad left in Canada today is to nurture and build the myriad of campaigns and movements fighting for key improvements in society, the economy, and the environment, and to ensure that these movements have a strong and consistent political voice... This central movement-building task is clearly complementary to the goal of electoral campaigning.<sup>45</sup>

While the New Politics Initiative failed to sway the majority of grass roots New Democrats, it seems clear that the tension between a brokerage versus a social movement orientation will continue within Canada’s partisan left for some time to come—and this tension defines important aspects of the relationship between parties and contemporary social movements.

### ***Feminism and Party Politics:***

Like other contemporary social movements, modern (or ‘second-wave’) feminism emerged in the mid 1960s with a notable emphasis on consciousness raising and cultural change. The slogan ‘the personal is political’ captured the way in which second-wave feminism aimed to politicize issues, behaviour and social relationships that had once been considered strictly private. But the Canadian movement never focused solely on the margins of formal politics. Particularly after the report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in 1970, feminist social movement organizations were actively engaged in efforts to influence formal political processes associated with policy-making within the state and political parties. Soon after its founding in the 1970s, the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC) established itself at the centre of the Canadian women’s movement.<sup>46</sup> Initially, this moderate,

liberal equal rights-oriented federation of women's organizations was interested in electoral and partisan activity from a distinctly multi-partisan perspective. As was the case with organizations like Women for Political Action, the NAC of the 1970s considered influencing parties to nominate women candidates and focus on women's concerns to be a "significant part of its overall strategy."<sup>47</sup>

By the late 1970s there seemed to be some evidence that the parties were beginning to change in a direction that included an embrace of liberal equal-rights feminism. For the first time women partisans had run for the leadership of national political parties—Rosemary Brown for the NDP and Flora Macdonald for the Conservatives. The number of women being nominated as candidates and elected to parliament was increasing. Then, in 1984, it seemed that organized feminism's engagement with partisan politics had resulted in a breakthrough for Canadian women committed to feminist principles. Not only did the percentage of women elected to parliament almost double in one election, but 'women's issues' became an election issue. Indeed, as a sign of the conversion underway in partisan priorities, the three major party leaders participated in a televised debate on women's issues organized by NAC—the mainstream parties seemed to embrace the legitimacy of Canadian women approaching politics as 'women', with identities and interests defined, at least in part, by gender relations. But, in the end, "the 'conversion' was short lived." The mainstream parties were willing to indulge the contemporary women's movement "when they perceived electoral payoffs," but few of the policy pledges made in the debate were translated into concrete policy initiatives following the election.<sup>48</sup>

Obviously some feminist social movement activists knew, even before 1984, that engagement with mainstream brokerage parties would produce little more than symbolic change. In 1979, a group of these activists turned their backs on the established parties and founded the Feminist Party of Canada. Their goal was not only to get more women elected, but to ensure that women parliamentarians would remain committed to feminist principles. As Marjorie Cohen explains, the Feminist Party was founded "because of the recognition that usually when women were elected through the major parties, they tended to lose their feminist will and voice through the process of loyalty to party discipline."<sup>49</sup> In the event, the Feminist Party was unable to successfully establish itself prior to the surprise 1980 election, and it faded out of existence within a year. But its formation presaged the women's movement's growing disenchantment with mainstream brokerage-style parties during the 1980s and 1990s.

After 1984, and particularly after the Brian Mulroney Conservatives were re-elected in 1988, competition and tension between the women's movement and the governing Conservative Party increased. As the Conservative's neo-liberal policy agenda hardened, the common ground between the women's movement and the governing party narrowed, and relations became increasingly conflictual.<sup>50</sup> There was, according to Sandra Burt, a "desire" on the part of the government to "restrict feminist discourse within the state."<sup>51</sup> What is more, as the mainstream parties embraced the precepts of a neo-liberal governing paradigm, the Canadian women's movement was moving away from its moderate liberal feminist focus on an equal rights agenda. The emphasis was increasingly placed on a structural analysis of women's oppression—an analysis that, in addition to being at odds with neo-liberalism, reinforced existing doubts about the efficacy of working with the mainstream parties to enhance the position of women in Canadian society. In response, NAC and other feminist social movement organizations abandoned their multi-partisan stance in favour of being apartisan. While working with the Pro-

Canada Network's campaign against the Free Trade Agreement during the 1988 election, NAC rejected developing ties with any political party. The NDP sought NAC's endorsement, but NAC refused. Indeed, Lisa Young reports that, at the time, NAC "made its participation in social movement coalitions contingent on the coalitions' non-partisanship."<sup>52</sup>

Four years later, during the 1992 referendum on the Charlottetown Constitutional Accord, NAC led the Canadian women's movement in a campaign against a constitutional package that had been endorsed by the three major political parties. Feminist activists knew that this campaign threatened the women's movement's relationship with all the national parties, not just the governing Conservatives. During the campaign NAC and other feminist social movement organizations were labeled illegitimate "special interests" who threatened a constitutional package that had been brokered by political parties acting in the "national interest."<sup>53</sup> The women's movement's relationship to formal partisan politics could hardly have been more frosty—disengagement was the order of the day. Indeed, by 1996 Young observed that NAC "retain[ed] only a rhetorical commitment to increasing women's representation in partisan politics."<sup>54</sup>

A decade later, NAC is less of a force and the contemporary women's movement is less unified than it was in the early 1990s. A number of multi-partisan feminist women's organizations—such as Equal Voice and One Women One Vote—have emerged to reengage partisan politics. But, for the most part, the mainstream parties remain uncomfortable with the representational politics of feminism, and the women's movement remains less than willing to actively engage partisan politics on terms established by the mainstream parties. Conflict between the movement and Canada's parties continues, but nowhere has that conflict been more profound than between the women's movement and the partisan vehicles of social conservatism and the 'new populism'.<sup>55</sup>

***Populist Parties and the Attack on Contemporary Social Movements:***

Populism is a form of identity politics played out on the terrain of the representational politics of identity.<sup>56</sup> More specifically, populism is a discursive representation of power and politics which constitutes the identities of political subjects in relation to a supposed antagonism between 'the people' and 'the powerful interests'. Of course, neither the essence of this antagonism, nor the political identities of the people and the powerful interests, are objectively given. Thus, populism is essentially a discursive move associated with the construction of these political identities and their respective political interests. The new populism is, in part, a reaction against the identity politics of the women's movement and a range of other identity-based social movements (such as ethnocultural minorities and Aboriginal peoples) that are seeking to varying degrees, self-determination, official recognition through state policies, or public support for broad cultural change.<sup>57</sup>

To understand the new populism, it is useful to note that the two decades in which the new populism emerged (the 1980s and 1990s) were a time marked by dramatic economic restructuring, punctuated by deep and prolonged recessions and a generalized sense that postwar national governing paradigms had lost their legitimacy. In this context, many of the working and middle class white men who had benefited most from the postwar boom were, for the first time, being economically marginalized. The postwar dream that socio-economic life conditions would continue to improve was shattered, and this produced the sort of heightened fear of unemployment and social dislocation that often motivates support for exclusionary forms of

populist politics.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, it was during these same decades that the social movement organizations representing many of those who had always been marginalized and excluded within society—groups defined by gender, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, ability, Aboriginality, and so on—began to grow more assertive. And, having embraced what scholars such as James Tully call the ‘politics of cultural recognition’,<sup>59</sup> these social movements demanded an enhanced capacity for self-determination, valorization in legal and constitutional discourse, and the extension of social rights as a means of realizing a more substantive social justice. This combination of the truly marginalized growing more politically assertive, and the traditional white-male working and middle classes taking a beating in terms of job losses and reduced earning power, left much of society’s mainstream with the “perception of being on the wrong side of social change.”<sup>60</sup> A significant number of Canadians became convinced that a new breed of powerful minority special interests were mobilizing within social movement organization to threaten the material interests of ordinary, hard-working citizens. Reg Whitaker has characterized the resulting dynamic as “a potent brew for producing resentment against ‘special interests’ who are seen as gaining special advantages”<sup>61</sup>—and it is this resentment that has been at the core of the conflict between the new populism and contemporary social movements.

In the partisan arena the new populism found its clearest voice within the Reform Party of Canada and the provincial Conservative parties in Ontario and Alberta. During the 1990s these parties appealed to voters as hard working tax payers whose interests are threatened by powerful minority interests represented by social movement organizations. They worked to undermine the legitimacy of contemporary social movements by characterizing ‘ordinary Canadians’ as having no political interest other than that which is the generalized national interest, and then contrasting this with social movements that embrace more limited political identities that divide against this general interest.

Empirical evidence of the clash between contemporary social movements and the partisan advocates of the new populism can be found in a revealing study of voters in the province of Alberta just after the 1993 general election, when the Reform Party burst onto the national scene by electing 52 members of parliament. In that election Reform’s campaign focussed on the party’s deficit elimination program. While this program clearly attracted fiscal conservatives to the Reform Party, the study in questions tested the extent to which a commitment to fiscally conservative New Right economics was, in fact, the key determinant of voter support for Reform. The authors’ conclusion was that what really differentiated Reform voters from others was, in particular, the populist belief that the special interests of contemporary social movements have too much influence over the course and content of Canadian public policy. Responses to survey questions regarding the influence of environmentalists, unionists, Quebec, women’s groups, ethnic minorities and Aboriginal peoples, suggested that “the belief that society is being held ransom by special-interest groups appears to be a critical element in the attractiveness of the Reform Party to Alberta voters.”<sup>62</sup>

Consistent with this analysis, Reform Party rhetoric throughout the 1990s was highly critical of social movements organizations. As former Reform Party leader Preston Manning explains, the new populists were concerned that “[a]s special interest groups are given more status, privileges, and public funding, they use their bargaining power to exact concessions from governments that are both economically inefficient and politically undemocratic.”<sup>63</sup> One early

Reform publication declared that the Canadian political system is driven by “special interests, and self-interest, rather than *people* interests.”<sup>64</sup> Another stated that in Ottawa, “every special interest group counts except one: Canadians.”<sup>65</sup> The bottom line, in the more caustic words of the Reform Party’s 1993 candidate for Thunder Bay-Atikokan, is that if “you’re a woman, coloured and lesbian, you’re laughing all the way to the bank.”<sup>66</sup> Reform’s new populist goal, of course, was to reverse this trend, to overturn the growing power of social movement organizations and public interest groups. This, they expected, would be a winning formula because, as Preston Manning said on more than one occasion: “for every special interest person that you anger, you make six taxpayers happy.”<sup>67</sup>

Interestingly, this new populist attack on the special interests of contemporary social movements was, in many ways, consistent with the competitive interest-oriented perspective on political representation that suggests that democratic principles demand that political parties serve as the primary institutions of political representation. The new populism is often associated with the advocacy of referenda and other mechanisms of direct democracy; but, when indirect political representation is necessary the new populists clearly accept the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing’s assessment that political parties are uniquely capable of reconciling and accommodating competing interests and ensuring that, in governance, the public interest prevails over narrower special interests. With this in mind, it is difficult to think of a clearer example of the conflict and competition between parties and social movements than the clash between contemporary social movements and the new populism. But, of course, the earlier discussion of brokerage politics, the NDP’s relationship with social movements, and second-wave feminism’s relationship with partisan politics, demonstrate that the representational politics of identity has long been a site of competition between parties and social movements.

### **CONCLUSION: PARTIES, MOVEMENTS AND THE HEALTH OF CANADIAN DEMOCRACY**

The central purposes of this paper have been conceptual. Readers were offered an understanding of political representation as an active and formative relationship that contributes to the creation of the political identities that underpin our political interests and orient political action. A case was also made for locating our understanding of parties and social movements in these ideological and discursive processes of political representation. Finally, these insights were employed to shed light on the nature of the relationship between parties and contemporary social movements. I have argued that political parties and social movements find themselves competing on the terrain of the representational politics of identity. Through the ideological and discursive processes of political representation, parties and movements compete to shape the intellectual and ideological frameworks that give meaning to political life—and it is this basic reality that shapes their relationships.

Canadian scholars and members of the political class often seem uneasy with the fact that contemporary social movements find themselves in competition with political parties. The concern, as it has been understood, is that only parties have the integrative capacity to advance the general will over narrow special interests. From this perspective, the public interest is compromised when social movements usurp the dominant role of parties in political representation—and when social movements challenge to the primacy of parties, they weaken Canada’s party system and undermine the democratic character of political representation. It should be noted, however, that this perspective on democracy and political representation is

rooted in an uncritical embrace of the institutions of electoral democracy—what some call Schumpeterian or competitive elite democracy. This form of liberal democracy affords citizens little more than an opportunity to choose between rival partisan elites who, once in power, can avail themselves of the mechanisms of executive dominance to control state policy-making in the (supposed) public interest.

Of course, not everyone embraces competitive elite democracy and the traditional interest-oriented perspective on the primacy of parties in democracy. Susan Phillips, for example, contends that social movements complement parties and enhance the quality of democracy because they expand the boundaries of politics and offer alternative organizational forms that ensure greater inclusiveness and more opportunity for the empowerment of those who are likely to be marginalized by the narrowness of brokerage politics and party-based democracy.<sup>68</sup> Herbert Kitschelt echoes this when he claims that the new social movements advance a more extensive and communitarian democratic theory against the contemporary practice of competitive elite democracy practised by political parties.<sup>69</sup> According to Phillips and Kitschelt, the competition between parties and social movements is a complementary competition that can be healthy for democracy. This assessment is a sensible one.

The progressive social movements that were the focus of this essay aim, in important ways, to democratized everyday life by challenging behaviour, relationships and ideas that are disempowering for the socially and politically marginalized in society. Moreover, when they engage the political and state processes that are normally dominated by political parties, these social movements aim to ensure that the institutions of political democracy are based on a radical pluralism that respects social diversity, values difference, and empowers those who are usually marginalized by electoral and parliamentary rule structures. Many social movement interventions are meant to temper the majoritarianism and elite dominance of liberal party-based democracy. As Newman and Tanguay explain,

The idea that social movement activities are truly antithetical to party politics is open to question, however. The political practice of social movements bears similarities to the conception of participatory civic republicanism, whereby knowledgeable citizens engage in a participatory politics that emphasizes self-government in everyday life, and is also directed at the institutions of community, state, and the world.<sup>70</sup>

It is, for this reason, that in the real world of Canadian politics social movement goals have inevitably clashed with brokerage-style partisan politics. In fact, this essay has provided ample evidence of the extent to which the representational politics of identity puts parties and social movements in competition with one another. Following Phillips, Kitschelt, and Newman and Tanguay, however, I believe we can conclude by suggesting that the competitive tension between movements and parties expands the boundaries of politics and introduces alternative representational forms that are, indeed, healthy for Canadian democracy.

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6 Susan D. Phillips, "Competing, Connecting, and Complementing: Parties, Interest Groups, and New Social Movements," in A. Brian Tanguay and Alain-G. Gagnon, eds., *Canadian Parties in Transition* (2nd ed.; Toronto: Nelson Canada, 1996), 441.

7 Jacquetta Newman and A. Brian Tanguay, "Crashing the Party: The Politics of Interest Groups and Social Movements," in Joanna Everitt and Brenda O'Neill, eds. *Citizen Politics: Research and Theory in Canadian Political Behaviour*. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 405-406.

8 Susan D. Phillips, "Social Movements in Canadian Politics: Past Their Apex?" in James Bickerton and Alain-G Gagnon, eds., *Canadian Politics* (3rd ed.; Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1999), 386.

9 Dobrowolsky, "Of 'Special Interest': Interest, Identity and Feminist Constitutional Activism in Canada," p. 741. See also Alexandra Dobrowolsky, *The Politics of Pragmatism: Women, Representation, and Constitutionalism in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2000).

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Representation?" 405.

12 Dobrowolsky, "Of 'Special Interest': Interest, Identity and Feminist Constitutional Activism in Canada," 741.

13 Dobrowolsky, *The Politics of Pragmatism*, 3.

14. Hannah Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1967).

15. The notion of the two senses of representation is adapted from Jane Jenson, "A Political Economy Approach to Interest Representation," in Alain G. Gagnon and A. Brian Tanguay, eds., *Democracy with Justice/La juste démocratie: Essays in Honour of Khayyam Zev Paltiel* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1992), 240.

16. Stuart Hall, "The Great Moving Right Show," in Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques, eds., *The Politics of Thatcherism* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1983), 26.

17 Some poststructuralist theorists would push this line of reasoning further and argue that identities and interests do not have a prediscursive existence. Laclau and Mouffe, for example, refer to the "discursive character of every subject position." See: Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony & Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985), 115.

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- 26 William K. Carroll, "Introduction: Social Movements and Counter-Hegemony in a Canadian Context," in William K. Carroll, ed., *Organizing Dissent: Contemporary Social Movements in Theory and Practice* (Toronto: Garamond Press, 1992), 7.
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