

National Battles and Global Dreams: R.E.A.L. Women and the Politics of Backlash

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Abstract

Since 1983, R.E.A.L. Women has been active in the backlash against what is perceived to be the feminist agenda. For R.E.A.L. Women's adherents, a feminist agenda is any political demand that threatens the heteronormative marriage and family as conceived within Christian values. Nevertheless, the group asserts itself as part of the struggle for equality of women and espouses liberal and neo-liberal principles of diversity of point of view, personal choice and freedom from government interference. Despite animosity towards government institutions, they have actively pursued government remedies in their anti-abortion, anti-LGBT, anti-prostitution and anti-drug battles through participation in most of the major legislative and court cases since 1983. Likewise, despite its abhorrence of global governance, R.E.A.L. Women gained special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations in 1998 to continue its mission in an alliance with the American Christian right and the Vatican and to promote the establishment of 'freedom of religion' globally. Taking evidence from the organization's legislative and court testimonies, position statements and publications this paper explores the various framing of issues to identify its political strategy and potential for alliance in the Conservative Party of Canada and with powerful groups at the global level. The paper argues that, in variously framing their arguments in order to gain allies, R.E.A.L. Women, if not always successful in their goals, have played an effective role in the polarizing of politics that presents a formidable challenge to feminist politics both in Canada and globally.

Introduction

The anti-feminist group, R.E.A.L. Women,¹ emerged in 1983, a decade after the formation of the National Action Committee as a national umbrella organization for the women's movement in Canada. Similar groups were already well known in the US as Phyllis Schlafly's Eagle forum had been around for a decade and Beverley LeHaye's Concerned Women of America since 1979. At the time, feminist regard for these groups as a threat to the movement varied (Dubinsky 1985). Some feminists viewed the women in these groups either as the dupes of patriarchy or acting out of fear, given their oppression, or as adherents to a largely male and church hierarchy-led anti-abortion movement (Dubinsky 1985). However, even at this early stage, Karen Dubinsky argued that REAL Women must be taken much more seriously "as political actors in their own right" (1985, 5 emphasis in original). Not only did REAL Women identify some of the complex challenges and weaknesses of feminist-led claims for women but they also espoused an economically and socially conservative ideology that revered a hegemonic patriarchal ideal that was regarded as normal and that "simply 'fits' or makes sense of the world for large numbers of women" (Dubinsky 1985, 38). REAL Women, Dubinsky argued, had the potential of becoming part of a much bigger movement. Three decades later these words ring true. While it is tempting to regard REAL Women as simply part of a backlash intent on tearing down what feminists have built, there is more to it. This organization has demonstrated the ability to extend its influence through its continual participation in building a highly organized

¹ Stands for 'Realistic, Equal, Active for Life'; from now on referred to as REAL Women.

and complex Christian right movement in Canada that is based on a narrow nationalist and Christian-led ideology of restoring order to the family. In doing so they also been instrumental in the polarizing of politics that presents a further challenge to feminist politics both in Canada and globally.

Backlash, Movement and Countermovement

The growing organization of the Christian Right (CR) since the 1980s in North America has triggered an attempt to incorporate it into the analysis of social movements. David Mayer and Suzanne Staggenborg (1995) explore the conditions under which countermovements emerge and the dynamics of movement-countermovement relations once the countermovement has arisen. They argue that, because they have been so successful, social movements have evolved a common form and so a model of political action. That model includes creating collective action frames, raising a public profile, creating or magnifying events, taking advantage of political opportunity in engaging external actors, including the state and its institutions, and, in doing so, altering the structure of political opportunity for subsequent movements including those of “their own opponents” (Mayer and Staggenborg 1995, 1635). Meyer and Staggenborg argue that countermovements arise depending on both the viability and the necessity of “countermobilization” and they outline three conditions that fulfill those requirements (1995, 1635). First, the targeted movement must demonstrate success at many if not all of the strategies listed above and in particular must show that there is a possibility, if not complete success, on changing policy. On the other hand, a targeted movement that achieves decisive reform and limits any prospect of future subsequent change is “unlikely to generate extensive and prolonged countermobilization that reaches into the political mainstream” (Meyer and Staggenborg 1995, 1636). Second, countermovements arise when movement activity poses a threat to existing interests, especially if the demands and successes of the targeted movement speak to much larger values and social change. They assert that “[W]hen movement issues seem to symbolize a whole set of values and behaviours, they are likely to threaten a broader range of constituencies who will be attracted to countermovement action for different reasons” (Meyer and Staggenborg 1995, 1639). The third condition is the availability of elite allies and sponsors to sustain their interaction. Once a countermovement arises, Meyer and Staggenborg argue, the political opportunity structure changes in response to the complex and dynamic interaction of movement and countermovement. The political opportunity structures of movement and countermovement are different in that “each has its own allies and its own relationship to authorities, and each is a component in the political opportunity structure that the other confronts” even if they engage in the same venues (1995, 1635). Tahi Mottl (1980) also points out how important it is to analyse how the positions taken by elites and institutional actors affect the actions of movements and countermovements. As they confront and interact, successes and failures can alter the opportunity structures and affect strategies of participation, often referred to as ‘organizational repertoires’ (Friedman 2003). Referring to this interaction as a ‘conflux’ of movements, Mottl argues that this is key to the understanding of movements and countermovements and certainly Erin Steuter argues that examining the interaction is important for her comparative analysis of the American and Canadian anti-feminists movements (Mottl 1980; Steuter, 1992; also see Friedman 2003).

Didi Herman (1997) argues against the use of backlash and differentiating between movement and countermovement and prefers to treat the CR as a bonifide social movement on its own. Because of the emphasis on a return to a status quo the CR is often interpreted as a backlash but for Herman using backlash in this way confuses the issue and “serves to cloud historical shifts and contemporary politics” (1997,196). Conceptualized in this way backlash is unidirectional; lesbians and gays pushed for change and the Christian Right (CR) has reacted to it. Yet, she argues, the lesbian and gay movement may also be seen as a reaction to the hegemony of heterosexual culture; in this way the “lesbian and gay movement is the counterforce” (Herman 1997, 196). Backlash also tends to obscure historical developments within movements such as the different forms of feminist struggle. Nor is the CR itself monolithic, or the current period unique, in the its critique of the status quo. Finally, Herman makes an important point, the concept of backlash or countermovement prevents us from understanding that the CR is a movement with a comprehensive, progressive future *vision*... a paradigmatic movement for social change, and no more (nor less) a backlash impulse than feminism, gay rights and others” (1997, 195, emphasis in the original). It seems to me that Meyer and Staggenborg’s notion of interaction is more dynamic than the static positions Herman suggests and can account for some of her concerns as long as there is rigour in the analysis. Here Mottl’s analysis of the divergent impulses of movements and countermovements can be useful where the impetus for movements is reform and for countermovements the protection of vested interests or “the demand for new advantages versus resistance to the loss of advantages” (1980, 621). While I would hesitate to label the purpose of equality as merely gaining advantage, I think Mottl’s agree argument is useful analytically and argue that the movement/countermovement conceptualization is valuable for understanding the position and impact of REAL Women on women and politics.

In this paper I retain the conceptual framework of backlash and countermovement for a number of reasons which I will mention here and elaborate on below. First, REAL Women’s primary motive for action is their objection to the feminist demand for women’s equality which encompasses the concept of gender as socially constructed and includes sexual and reproductive autonomy; these are issues that only come into the general political debate during the so-called second wave of the women’s movement. In addition, REAL Women identifies the concept of gender and the sexual freedom inherent in the demand for sexual autonomy as the catalyst for LGBTQ rights and so, although the group can be viewed as anti-homosexual, its primary opposition is to feminism. This sets REAL Women clearly in a backlash to feminism and, to the extent that the group has been involved in building and supporting coalitions to counter this impetus to reform brought on by the women’s movement, it can be seen as part of a countermovement. Second, in many ways REAL Women takes its cue from the Canadian women’s movement in the strategies mentioned above. It does this by appropriating the language of collective action frames, taking advantage of political opportunity in engaging external actors, including the state and its institutions and entering the terrain of the women’s movement. Moreover, the organization has repeated this at the international level at the United Nations (UN). However, we must also understand REAL Women as part of a much bigger Canadian Christian Right (CCR) anti-liberal countermovement, reacting to the liberalization of organized religion, and society in general, in Canada in the twentieth century. Where I would deviate from Meyer and Staggenborg’s typology somewhat is in noting the importance of REAL Women’s,

and the CCR's, additional reliance on the American CR as a template in very specific ways. I agree with Herman that, on the surface, backlash and countermovement may not fully capture the future-oriented vision of the CCR. The CCR movement, and I include REAL Women as an important member and builder of that movement, has a 'future-oriented' vision of Christian nationalism that is connected to a larger vision of Canada's special historical role in fulfilling the prophetic vision of restoring God's kingdom on earth (McDonald 2010). While this larger context may be considered somewhat obscure and unimportant, I will argue that it is important in understanding REAL Women's committed participation in the polarization of Canadian politics. I argue that the 'future vision' actually galvanizes the anti-feminist and anti-gay stance of both the group and the larger CCR putting it definitively into the category of countermovement. Such an understanding may also assist in clarifying the question of intra-movement backlash. When the women's movement experiences controversy and serious conflict within, it often has resulted in clarifying ideas, developing new understandings and re-imagining collective identities while still challenging discrimination (Vanhala 2011). This is in stark contrast to the polarizing and uncompromising positions of REAL Women and the CCR countermovement.

The Women's Movement, REAL Women and Backlash

There is no doubt that the Canadian women's movement has presented a form and developed a model that has brought considerable success as a social movement. Women's mobilization in Canada established major government reviews beginning with the Royal Commission on the Status of Women and coordinated advocacy in the National Action Committee (NAC); took advantage of political opportunity to secure resources and create new institutional space in government for support for research, advocacy and service, including the Status of Women and Women's Program; claimed important political space in constitutional negotiation resulting in the strong Charter guarantee of equality which has enabled considerable legal activism including the organization of the Legal Education and Action Fund (LEAF); and, pushed for policy change in child care, pay equity, violence against women and reproductive rights (for example see Gotell 1990; Vickers 1993; Pal 1993; McIvor 1996; Bashevkin 1996; Brodie 1996; Chapell 2000; Dobrowolsky 2000). In doing so it has achieved overwhelming acceptance of equality for women and achieved considerable support for women's sexual and reproductive autonomy.

The movement has also been quite resilient despite the challenges that often eclipse the accomplishments. NAC, in its active role of coordinating the movement's interaction with external, particularly government, actors can take credit for much of the success but it also has faced considerable criticism for being too liberal, too compromising, too dependent on government resources and too exclusive (Bashevkin 1996). While it has played an important part in gaining constitutional equality, constitutional politics has also presented challenges in revealing important and divisive differences between NAC and La Fédération des femmes du Québec (FFQ) and between the mainstream movement and Aboriginal women (Bashevkin 1996). In addition, the potential foreseen in Charter equality has often been difficult to achieve in the courts (Dobrowolsky 2009). Ideological challenges from the more radical left and charges of exclusion from women of visible minority backgrounds presented continual pressure within the movement at a time in the late 1980s when movement relations with government were

deteriorating. Reliance on federal funding has become a serious flaw as funding cuts, starting in the late 80s, have become more austere and ideological, culminating in the Conservative government's change to the Women's Program to prohibit research and advocacy and elimination of the Court Challenges Program (Rodgers and Knight 2011).

However, many have pointed out the resilience of feminists in facing these challenges. Lisa Vanhala (2011) argues that, while the issue of pornography has been a divisive one, the actions of LEAF in reframing the issue as one of equality rather than morality in the *Butler* case eventually led to a useful debate that culminated in clarifying the substantive issue and LEAF's defence of lesbian erotica in the *Little Sisters* case.² Lise Gotell (1990) argues that although the fight for constitutional equality can be seen as a negative road leading to formal legalistic equality rather than substantive equality, the struggle to get an effective clause into the Charter mobilized women from across Canada and from all political perspectives, enhancing the demands for collective rights (also see Manfredi 2004). Bashevkin (1996) argues that after the Charter women had more favourable outcomes in court despite the political marginalization of the NAC itself. Kathleen Rodgers and Melanie Knight (2011) point out that, although the loss of resources has been devastating, important feminist organizations, including LEAF, have been remarkable resilient in finding other sources and allies which, in turn has broadened their network. As Jill Vickers argues, there is still a need for political engagement in formal politics and a need to use the term 'women' but the challenge remains of creating collective action frames that help women speak with one voice, given the complexity of issues and perspectives within the movement (Vickers; 2006; Dobrowolsky 2008).

Transnational activism has expanded the form of the women's movement as activists embrace new political opportunities leading to new advocacy networks, new collective action frames and the creation of new organizational repertoires. Women organized transnationally to take advantage of the UN Decade for Women (1975-1985) but significantly improved on the mobilization structure during the UN conferences of the 1990s (Friedman 2003)³. From the First World Conference on Women in Mexico City in 1975, women developed an NGO forum model and engaged pre-conference meetings of delegates, creating important mobilization and political action spaces. Out of this beginning came the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) adopted by the UN in 1979 followed by the Second

² *R v Butler* [1992], was the case brought by a video store operator who challenged obscenity laws in the selling of hard core pornography, and *Little Sisters v Canada* [2000], was the case brought by Little Sister's bookstore which challenged the right of customs officials to censor material.

³ 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo and the World Summit for Social Development and Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, both in 1995, are significant conferences. Also significant are three special sessions of the General Assembly as follow-up on the plan of action developed: Cairo Plus Five in 1999, Beijing Plus Five in 2000 and Beijing Plus Ten in 2005 (see Sen 2005).

and Third World Conferences in Copenhagen (1980) and Nairobi (1984). In the 1990s the transnational women's movement used the political spaces they had developed to negotiate the new and effective global collective action frame of women's rights as human rights and reorient frames of women's health to include control over fertility. These frames enabled them to exert considerable influence on final documents in Cairo and Beijing so that they had a "noticeable impact on global rule-making" (Molyneux and Razavi 1995, 991). In doing so they challenged Malthusian notions of population and put the emphasis on women's right to make contraceptive decisions as part of a women's health while still paying close attention to the language acceptable to women in specific contexts as they negotiated their own particular positions (Petchesky 1997).

Beijing was particularly significant for Canadian women's mobilization as they took advantage of the Liberal promise in 1993 to open and broaden foreign policy-making through interaction with civil society (Riddell-Dixon 2004). The government not only funded pre-conference organizing and communication but also included representatives of women's groups on the official Canadian delegation. The animosity between the government and the highly critical NAC precluded a leading role for NAC. Nevertheless, women quickly organized and groups, ranging from indigenous, peace, human rights, development, environmental to labour and encompassing rights of lesbians, children, disabled, women of colour and seniors, communicated and consulted throughout the provinces and territories. All participated in electing the NGO members of the official delegation who would engage in devising the official statements on a range of issues and would lead, represent and communicate with the NGO groups in Beijing. Elizabeth Riddell-Dixon argues that although the Canadian government controlled the official process they did not control the NGOs; women's groups shaped their own broader participation and derived considerable benefits from the process. For the first time domestically-focused groups worked with internationally-focused groups expanding and creating new networks. In addition, women had access to government officials and got very valuable experience in negotiating the language and procedure of the UN system.

As in the domestic movement, there are considerable challenges that tax the spirit and resources of the transnational movement. In the Canadian delegation the announcement of spending cuts to women's and international development initiatives, including the elimination of the Advisory Council on the Status of Women announced by the Minister of Finance leading up to Beijing created tension between Canadian NGOs and Canadian officials (Riddell-Dixon 2003). Although dissent was not silenced it was marginalized and negotiations over bracketed language (that language that has not been agreed upon yet) were largely unsuccessful. In the broader conference, conservative religious opposition led by the Vatican, which has observer status and no voting status at the UN but actually has a vote at UN conferences, bracketed and prevented the insertion of 'sexual orientation' into the final document and forcefully argued against the use of 'sexual right', 'reproductive rights' and 'gender' (Morgan 1996; Day 1996; Petchesky 1997; Buss 2004).⁴ This gets into the larger political and social terrain Meyer and Staggenborg refer to as this language speaks of women's autonomy and questions of the 'natural' and complementary natures of men and women (Buss 2004). Considering this opposition, the

⁴ Nevertheless, the Canadian delegation declared that it would read-in sexual orientation (Riddell-Dixon 2003).

wording that was accepted in the platform of action is remarkable for the strong international support for women's rights but often that strong support is in the context of the worst of abuse where women are seen as victims rather than in a positive right to autonomy and sexual right (Petchesky 1997).⁵ The conservative and religious opposition increased in the subsequent Beijing Plus Five and Beijing Plus Ten meetings. Whereas the Clinton administration had been an ally during Beijing, under Bush the US replaced the Vatican "as the key strategist against the women's agenda on sexual and reproductive health rights" (Molyneux and Razavi 2005, 1005). The pressure over language has been so relentless that in Beijing Plus Ten there was only monitoring of progress and no opening up of the terms for fear of having it rolled back (Chapell 2006).

From its emergence in 1983 REAL Women was intent on creating a polarized backlash to feminism rather than presenting an alternative voice in the women's movement and it is important to understand why. Gwen Landolt, founder, vice-president, legal counsel responsible for briefs and a prominent public face of the organization throughout its history, gives two reasons for starting the organization: the adoption of the Charter of Rights and the need for "another voice for women" (Vere 2008). The latter does not point to a barrier between REAL Women and the feminist movement as the women's movement had always been diverse and, by 1983, was becoming even more so. However, the Charter and NAC, which participated in the large and diverse mobilization for a strong equality clause, spoke to Landolt's greatest concern: that the Charter would lead to the elimination of the abortion law and the institution of abortion on demand (Vere 2008). Nevertheless, as Dubinsky pointed out at the time, viewing the group as simply an arm of the abortion movement "obscures the scope of the issues this group is attempting to reclaim" (1985, 31). REAL Women's challenge to feminism, and the NAC, which stands for organized feminism in their eyes, stems from a core belief that is irreconcilable with women's equality and reproductive autonomy. That core belief centres on the 'natural' family upon which human civilization rests and which is the answer to all political challenges (Dubinsky 1985, Eichler 1985) and it remains so today. Landolt argues that,

Whether we wish it or not, social order is dependent on our traditional understanding of family, defined as mother, father and children.... The traditional, natural family is, in fact, the best arrangement ever devised to care for the young, the elderly and the disabled. It is also the best system we have to provide for health, education and welfare (2007).

Inextricably bound to this vision is the belief that different roles for men and women are essential, both in terms of the natures of men and women, which are 'natural' and for the survival of the family and society; in this case, using the concept of gender is unacceptable. At the first annual meeting of REAL Women when speakers asserted that feminist did not understand the

⁵ Paragraph 96 reads: "Equal relations between women and men in matters of sexual relations and reproduction, including full respect for the integrity of the person, require mutual respect, consent and responsibility for sexual behaviour and its consequences" (Day 1996, 81). Paragraph 97 reads: "The human rights of women include their right to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters relating to their sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health, free of coercion, discrimination, and violence" (Day 1996, 81).

“real power of women through being feminine” they were referring this essential difference (Eichler 1985, 4). For REAL Women marriage is the institution that reconciles men and women in their differences and it is the differences between them that are crucial for bringing up children as, “(M)others generally are more sensitive to the children’s emotional needs whereas fathers excel in providing discipline, ensuring safety, and challenging the children to embrace life’s opportunities and difficulties” (Landolt 2007a). This ideal of the ‘natural’ family and women’s natural role is the core belief and it is this that produces an irreconcilable and polarizing opposition to feminism.

The other key to understanding both the core values and actions of the group is to analyse its religious underpinnings within the context of religious change in the late twentieth century in Canada. Self-described as a devout Catholic, Landolt became an activist in the pro-life movement and in 1971 founded first Right to Life (now Toronto Right to Life) and then, with two Basilian seminarians⁶, Campaign Life Coalition, a radical political arm of the pro-life movement that used religious language and more confrontational tactics (Vere 2008; Herman 1994).⁷ Herman points out that the pro-life movement was mainly “middle-class Catholic women”, although Landolt would describe her group as non-denominational (Herman 1994, 269; Vere 2008). Many pro-life Catholics were infuriated with the weak stand of the Church hierarchy⁸ in the early abortion debate in the late 1960s in Canada and so began to find more in common with evangelical groups and this fuelled a willingness to become more activist (Herman 1994; also see Cuneo 1989). This was part of a general change that took place in organized religion in the later twentieth century the results of which G. K. Rawlyk (1996) found in his mid-90s survey of evangelicals in Canada. He found that, although still a minority within the Catholic church, the number of evangelical Catholics had become approximately the same as Protestant evangelicals and that Catholics had moved closer in attitude to conservative and evangelical Protestants. In addition, evangelicals had shifted emphasis from conversion to that of the inerrancy of the Bible and 62% of evangelicals, 33% Roman Catholics and 57% of mainline Protestants strongly or moderately believed in the Rapture (Rawlyk 1996, 132). Rawlyk argues that this is a surprising finding as previously this would have been considered an obscure idea.⁹

⁶ One of whom was “in formation” and who later became a banker (Vere 2008).

⁷ Landolt founded Coalition for Life first but when the group became too compromising in its approach she left and formed a more radical group, Campaign for Life, which, along with Ken Campbell’s Choose Life Canada, adopted American tactics in targeting clinics and confronting their clients and the doctors performing abortions (Vere 2008; Herman 1994).

⁸ Dubinsky (1985) argues that the Catholic hierarchy did not present a strong opposition both because of confusion over doctrine which was in flux under Vatican II and because of anti-French and anti-Catholic sentiments in English Canada (Dubinsky 1985).

⁹ Part of the prophetic notion of the Endtimes derived from the Book of Revelations, the Rapture, as described by Rawlyk, is a “peculiar dispensational premillennialist view, that stresses that the truly converted will be miraculously removed from earth to meet their returning Saviour.

Although it is not prominent on the web site nor mentioned in any of their ‘positions’ REAL Women have identified their core beliefs as coming from the Judeo-Christian tradition and are connected to a network of evangelicals in the larger movement. A talk given by Link Byfield¹⁰ entitled ‘Three Futures for Mankind’ at REAL Women’s 2002 Annual General Meeting considered three possibilities of world domination in the future: Islam, technology and Christianity. Reporting on the talk in the newsletter, Michelle Bitto, New Brunswick representative on REAL Women’s board, considers his ‘third’ Christian scenario in the newsletter commenting that,

Christianity is about God saving man from himself. God saves us out of an unfathomable love. He saves us from idolatry. He saves us from our enemies. Women, men and families must be defended against those forces that enslave us as we speak. That's why it is necessary for REAL Women to exist and to persist in its work on behalf of the Judeo-Christian understanding of marriage and family life (Bitto 2002).

Thus, REAL Women’s core beliefs have deep roots in a broader religious movement that I will return to later.

These deeper roots have not always been recognized for a number of reasons, most of which reflect REAL Women’s affectation of the women’s movement’s form, including its language and strategies. From the beginning REAL Women “adopted some of the rhetoric of the women’s movement” and continues to use it to accumulate anti-feminist points (Eichler 1985, 1). Thus, a paper that is part of the first annual conference kit describes women’s liberation as “an arm of male chauvinism” that frees men but not women (as quoted in Eichler 1985, 3). Appropriating ‘equal’ for their name, they argue that women, “are not copies of males and therefore second rate or lesser men. Rather, women have value, purpose and contributions to make to government and world policies on the basis of their being women” inferring that the feminist idea of equality is to be second rate men (Landholt 1994, 22). Adopting the word ‘choice’ they argue that “women should have career choices which include the financial option of remaining at home, if they choose”.¹¹ On the other hand feminism has “provided a new straight jacket for a large segment of the female population... [where] women are made to feel that unless they pursue a career in the marketplace, they can’t hold their heads up” (Feminism 2008). This suggestion that the women’s movement has ignored the plight of wives and mothers persists despite the numerous positions the women’s movement has taken (Eichler 1985) and the services

For a brief time, they will be protected in the heavens from the bloody battle of Armageddon; then once Christ destroys the Anti-Christ the ‘Redeemed of the Lord’ will return with their Saviour to establish his Kingdom in present day Israel” (1996, 132).

¹⁰ Son of Ted Byfield publisher of the now defunct Alberta Report and Wildrose candidate in the recent Alberta election. Also works on the joint Canada/US Christian History Project (<http://thechristians.ca/>) with his father.

¹¹ Our View, <http://www.realwomenca.com/page/ourviews.html>.

it has created. On the other hand, their claim to choice rings hollow considering their core values. The group also claims to be more representative than NAC with a large membership from all regions of the country (55,000 in the past few years¹²) and more progressive and diverse; their alternative women's movement is "an advancement for women, in that it reflects the great depth and diversity among Canadian women".¹³ Although the numbers cannot be verified the potential for a large representation of women comes from two organized pools of support, pro-life and fundamentalist and Catholic religious affiliation (Erwin 1988; Steuter 1992). In the late 1980s there were questions raised among REAL Women's membership about regional representation and about the emphasis on anti-feminism rather than family values but, through Landolt's influence, the organization retained its emphasis on anti-feminism.¹⁴

REAL Women has also incorporated the political opportunity structure and strategies of the women's movement into their anti-feminism drive. Despite the vocal opposition to government funding, culminating in an appearance in hearings held by the Conservative government in 2007 to review Status of Women and the Women's Program, REAL Women sought and obtained the same funding.¹⁵ However, they turned their requests for funding into a confrontation over the exclusivity of the Program, and, by association, the exclusivity of the women's movement, claiming that they never received an application form until they applied as a lesbian group. At the same time, they portray themselves as more authentic pointing out that "REAL Women has thrived for over 21 years without any debt because we have managed to live on our income, by relying on volunteers and our generous grass-roots supporters to help us" (Insolvent 2004). In the 2007 hearing on Status of Women, Landholt, after repeating the 'lesbian story', claimed that, "REAL Women has never received money. We're obviously an advocacy group and we've managed to survive very well because we have grassroots support."¹⁶ Corrected by MP Irene Matheson (London-Fanshawe NDP), Landolt replied that, "all we've ever had was a

¹² Standing Committee on the Status of Women Wednesday, February 7, 2007, 1700.

¹³ Our View, <http://www.realwomenca.com/page/ourviews.html>.

¹⁴ During a tumultuous 1988 election, the then president and new president-elect, Lynne Scime, was accused of mishandling finances and women complained of over-representation of Ontario on the board (REAL 1988). Leslie Pal reports that Scime and her faction wanted to attack feminism less and promote family values more but Scime resigned and the original Landholt group won out (1995, 147).

¹⁵ Landolt writes that, "the Secretary of State seems intent on continuing to fund "women's groups. Realwomen concluded that it has no alternative but to apply to participate in this funding. To do otherwise would be to place our pro-family organization at an enormous disadvantage to that of the radical feminists" (Landolt 1986).

¹⁶ Standing Committee on the Status of Women Wednesday, February 7, 2007, 1700.

paltry \$6,000 for a few years, and that was cut off entirely in 1996”.¹⁷ REAL Women have presented briefs to ministries or parliamentary hearings on a range of legislation including child care, tax benefits, abortion, changes in benefits for lesbians and gays, same-sex marriage and Status of Women. They have also sought and obtained, standing in every major Supreme or provincial Superior court cases on a range of issues of concern, including abortion, same-sex marriage, drugs and prostitution.¹⁸

REAL Women has also affected the form of the transnational women’s movement and moved into its political terrain to protect its core beliefs. The group gained observer status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations in 1998 and has actively joined with the American Christian right and the Vatican in creating what Buss and Herman (2003) refer to as the CR UN. Seeking out the same political spaces as the transnational movement they are building, “alliances with sympathetic delegations, especially from Latin American and Muslim countries” (New 2005). They contribute to the overall monitoring of, and lobbying against, official document language to prevent “many, many anti-family, pro-abortion provisions from being included in UN documents” (New 2005). The group has attended all of the major conferences since Cairo in 1994, including the follow-up meetings on Beijing and meetings of the monitoring committee for CEDAW, and has actively lobbied in all of those spaces since 1998. REAL Women was included on the distribution list as Canadian women organized for Beijing but did not get on the official delegation because the delegates were elected by members of all the groups and they were a very small minority (Riddell-Dixon 2004). They have also called for governments to subsidize pro-family groups in attending UN conferences and to include them in their official delegations (Landolt 1999). In addition, the World Congress of Families, the key institution for bringing together “an alliance of orthodox faiths at the United Nations” and in which REAL Women is actively involved, has shaped its conferences along the lines of NGO involvement at UN conferences (Buss 2004, 60).

As they have at the national level, REAL Women appropriate the language of the transnational women’s movement for their anti-feminist goals. For example, citing coercive family planning actions in developing countries, Landolt argues that “the promotion of high risk forms of contraception, such as abortion , sterilization, injectables and implants, which *remove reproductive control from women*, also does little to reassure women that our interests have shaped the provision of these services” (Landolt 1994, 20, my emphasis). Although feminists have renounced the coercive contraceptive policies methods employed by states, Landolt blames this coercion on “an invasion into Third World countries of the western nations’ failed feminist revolution” (1994, 20). The radical feminist agenda for reproductive and sexual health, according to the group, demands new human rights, including the right to abortion and sex, that force

¹⁷ Standing Committee on the Status of Women Wednesday, February 7, 2007, 1720. Leslie Pal makes its clear that claims of REAL Women that they were treated unfairly by the Women’s Program are unjustified. He points out that Program does not send out general ‘application’ forms but asks for considers a record of work and adds that they also received \$21,000 for a conference in 1988 (Pal 1995, 143-150, 219-220).

¹⁸ See range of briefs at: <http://www.realwomenca.com/page/briefs.html>.

homosexuality and sexual addiction on the world and they blame Canada for playing a significant role (see for example, Foreign 2006; Malacko 2008; McNamara 2009). Although lesbian representation is present in the transnational women's work at the UN, there is no organized LGBT presence there¹⁹ but the CR UN consistently equates reproductive and sexual health as well as 'gender' with the 'enforcement of homosexuality' internationally (Buss 2004a). However, Buss explains that the UN CR use the term 'lesbian feminists' because feminism is the actual target of pro-family groups since, "the use of gender has become a symbol for untying social role from biology and this spells sexual freedom that can become any sort of arrangement and so undermines human culture which is based on the 'natural family'" (2004a, 272). This is the core of REAL Women's anti-feminism although they speak of 'radical' rather than 'lesbian' feminists both at home and at the UN. Present at the Canadian delegation's reporting to the CEDAW monitoring committee,²⁰ they complain that the proceedings are dominated by "Canada's most prominent lesbian" and, more generally, they blame lesbians for violence an abuse (UN 2003; Landolt 2004). This is not to downplay REAL Women's virulent opposition to the LGBTQ movement in Canada but to emphasize that feminism has been their target.

When it comes to the relationship with formal political institutions and actors in Canada it is clear that as the women's movement has lost political support, REAL Women have gained it. In the 1990s the Liberal government certainly gave support to feminists at the international level, particularly in reading in 'sexual orientation'. However, except for a brief child care initiative, in which women's groups had to pragmatically broaden their coalitions to accommodate the Liberal children's agenda in the early 2000s, Liberal support was sparse at the domestic level; under an actively anti-feminist Conservative government support is non-existent (Dobrowolsky and Jenkins 2004; Bashevkin 2009). Although they declare themselves non-partisan REAL Women has sought from, and given support to, both the Progressive Conservatives and the evolving Reform/Alliance which consolidated into the current Conservative Party of Canada. Although the Mulroney PCs did not view moral issues as party issues (Farney 2009), REAL Women enjoyed the support of individual socially conservative MPs in the party and in the early days they appeared at annual meetings, particularly when the group was seeking funding (see Lamb 1987; REAL 1988). During the Liberal years (1993-2005) the group felt "treated with disdain and barely tolerated" (McNamara 2006). However, the rise of the Reform/Alliance during the 1990s provided a strong political ally and as Michael Lusztig and J. Matthew Wilson demonstrate, served "as a bellwether of the electoral relevance of moral traditionalism" (2005, 126). Stephen Harper's consolidated Conservative victory in 2006 buoyed REAL Women but they remained cautious for the new minority government asserting that, "we do not want the media to jump all over the government at this time on highly controversial issues" (McNamara 2006). In fact, this plays along with the Harper strategy to gain power by playing down social conservatism and

¹⁹ The International Gay and Lesbian Association (ILGA) received ECOSOC accreditation in 1993 but it was revoked in 1994 after US complaints about The North American Man-Boy Love Association (NAMBLA) (Buss 2004).

²⁰ When states sign on to an agreement they must give a progress report to the UN monitoring committee for that agreement every five years.

using the ambiguity between social and economic conservatism to avoid losing votes (Behiels 2010). It is also the strategy of the CR Movement in Canada, as I argue below. REAL Women tamed their rhetoric in order to gain a more acceptable presence generally and, as I argue below, this strategy was enabled by their interaction with the women's movement. Since then, they have maintained support for the Conservatives and enjoy favour in being invited by then Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lawrence Cannon, to join the Canadian delegation at the canonization of Brother André, a Quebec monk, in Rome and most recently to nominate Canadians for the medals marking the Queen's Diamond Jubilee (President 2010; Wingrove 2012). One might find the latter of these favours appropriate for such a religious group, however, the continued support for homophobic rhetoric by REAL Women would temper that consideration.²¹ The exclusion of LGBTQ groups from nominations for medals certainly speaks to a socially conservative base as does the creation of a special office of Religious Freedom within the Foreign Affairs Department (Blanchfield 2012).

In analysing the interaction between REAL Women and the women's movement one needs to assess not only clear victories and defeats but also the more complex and subtle changes each has exacted from the interplay. For the women's movement, despite the disappointment with the equality clause in gaining substantive justice, the decisions on divorce, abortion, LGBTQ rights and same-sex marriage have all been victories. They have also made inroads on a number of issues including gender violence, sexual harassment and pay equity. However, they have lost in the fight for more substantial collective responsibility in child care and in the care function more generally (Kershaw 2006). The considerable accomplishment at the international level can also be viewed as a victory. For REAL Women these are all defeats, particularly when it comes to the courts, as they have been opposed to most decisions. However, the Harper government's decisions on the reducing and defunding the Women's Program, eliminating the Court Challenges Program and legislating the child benefit in place of the Liberal child care initiative were among the victories. Internationally, the exclusion of bracketed language in UN documents and the ratification by the UN General Assembly of the Doha Declaration on the family were victories (Doha, 2005).²²

²¹ For example Real Women criticized church leaders, including the Catholic church for not supporting the distribution of anti-gay flyers

²² The Declaration was prepared at the UN Doha International Conference for the Family in Qatar in 2004 and was subsequently ratified. Canada dissented because it does not include family 'in its various forms'. It is a declaration of support for the family but is ambiguous, never defining the family or marriage. It speaks of parents but never mother and father and emphasizes marriage but ambiguously. For example, "We emphasize that marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses and that the right of men and women of marriageable age to marry and to found a family shall be recognized." The document also acknowledges the creation of an international Institute for Study of the Family by the Emir of Qatar see <http://www.law2.byu.edu/wfpc/UN%20Publication%20--%20Official%20version%20of%20the%20Doha%20Declaration.pdf>

However, the engagement between REAL Women and the women's movement has produced less conspicuous and more complex changes. Surprisingly, given REAL Women's extreme views, the women's movement has suffered much more from the perception that it is radical. REAL Women's simply taking a stand as *women* undermined the women's movement but their active media strategy in the 1980s, portraying themselves as 'feminine' and homey and NAC 'feminists' as extreme radicals, played into the media's ambivalence towards the successful women's movement (Gill 1989). As Donna Gill has argued the media focused on REAL Women's anti-feminism ignoring their anti-liberal underpinnings and at the same time portrayed the women's movement as radical even though they represented "a set of beliefs which had already been widely diffused throughout the social fabric" (Gill 1989, 2). This also played into NAC's more critical stance in the late 80s and 90s in response to its own intra-movement challenges and to a more general political trend towards the right.²³ Moreover, REAL Women's challenge played, and continues to play, into a deep well of moralized and normalized representations of the conjugal family constructed through utilitarian concerns of the state as well as the theory and practice of the disciplines over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; it remains despite the feminist movement and is reproduced by market liberalism (Rose (1999 [1989]; also see Corrigan 1981; Brodie 1996). As mentioned above, Dubinsky observed at the time, that these representations appear to be normal and so REAL Women's appeal 'fits' (1985, 38). The result is that, as REAL Women's deeper core beliefs remain obscure, they are able to make acceptable criticisms while the women's movement struggles with the very language they developed as they search for collective action frames.

The encounter with the women's movement has shaped REAL Women's strategies in ways that produce subtle and complex outcomes. In appropriating language, strategies and political opportunities the group has enabled the group to continue its semblance of representing the "vast majority of women' for whom feminism poses a problem" (Feminism 2008, 1). As already demonstrated above, they have adopted the language of equality, choice, human rights and development. This language has given the group the tool to tone down its rhetoric, play down religion and speak in contemporary terms. In this way they are able to continue their semblance of representing "a broad spectrum of Canadian women who, until our formation, did not have a public forum in which to express their views".²⁴ They can portray the women who need their representation as women who "will chart their courses on their own terms, in their own individual way, according to their own and their families' needs " (Feminism 2008, 9). Using the tools of language, strategy and political opportunity has also enabled the group to maintain a semblance of political bargaining that obscures the rigid and polarizing positions derived from their core principles and beliefs and that has important implications for policy-making. For example, in the report prepared for Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) in September of 2006, although they disclose a preference for informal (family-based or close neighbours) arrangements and present some reasons for preferring for-profit providers, they

²³ Pal certainly argues that the PC government's sympathy with REAL Women, and the decision to fund it, was strengthened by NAC's stand on free trade (Pal 1995, 89).

²⁴ <http://www.realwomenca.com/page/aboutus.html>.

present quite evenly several choices the government might take in assisting in child care including non-profit, for-profit, community-based (cultural or religious), school-based and informal options and include a final mention of the need to be able to provide government money for informal care (Submission 2006). Yet their goal was much more focused on payments to individual families. McDonald (2010) demonstrates that pro-family groups were key in Harper's development of the child care allowance, groups for whom this was the only solution (2010, 80). Encounters between REAL Women and the women's movement have enabled such subtle and complex outcomes.

REAL Women, the Canadian Christian Right Movement and the Polarization of Politics

An organized Canadian Christian Right (CCR) countermovement has formed over the past two decades with some discernible strategies and goals and REAL Women is an important player in that movement. This is not to portray the movement as monolithic. There is much work to be done to map the CCR and an analysis of this movement is beyond the scope of this paper. However, I will consider some of REAL Women's connections to it in relation to its evolution and how it reinforces the polarization of politics. While the American Christian right has been an organized player in formal politics for decades, Canada's Christian right has not (Bean et. al. 2008; Harrison 2008; Malloy 2009; Rayside and Wilcox 2011). McDonald (2010) identifies the beginning of such a movement in the early 1990s when Charles McVety formed the Canada Family Action Coalition (CFAC) as a politically focussed organization that would be operated separately so as to preserve the charitable status of his other concerns (67). She argues that both McVety and the head of the Calgary branch of the CFAC, Brian Rushfeldt, were heavily influenced by the American movement and both felt that Canadians had to get more organized like the Americans. By the early 2000s several organizations, including REAL Women, were set up in Ottawa but unlike the American movement the organizers preferred to keep their new organizations low key and more acceptable to mainstream society, using the Fraser Institute as a model (McDonald 2010). This new institutionalization encompasses a range of organizations including: youth groups such as Christian Canadian nationalist organization 4MYCanada run by a young woman who hold TheCry, a public charismatic national healing meeting based on the American TheCall; research institutes promoting family values, such as the Institute of Marriage and the Family; law associations such as the Christian Legal Fellowship, the members of which are lawyers who consider the old and new testaments the supreme authority and who are affiliated with the US Alliance Defence Fund, a legal training institute which gives course in exchange for pro-bono hours; and, legal training, such as Faith and Freedom Alliance, similar to Alliance Defence Fund and providing training on cases of religious freedom for pro-bono hours on cases (McDonald 2010; Faith 2004).²⁵ The growth of institutions focussed on the legal system is indicative of the CCR's focus on litigation and the role of the courts and the Charter, both of which are held to blame for the turn away from religion (McDonald 2010, 277-307; also see Hoover and den Dalk 2004). These new organizations are part of the network of the CCR that has gained in sophistication over the past decade and a half and has direct connection with and several endorsements from the Conservative Party and the Harper government (McDonald). For

²⁵; also see <http://www.faithandfreedomalliance.ca/Default.aspx?cat=0>.

example, both Jason Kenney and Stockwell Day, attended the opening of the Institute of Marriage and the Family and Harper provided an unsolicited written endorsement of 4MYCanada (McDonald 2010). Finally, McDonald also maps out Canada's peculiar connection to the Endtimes and the second coming of Christ as put forward by Watchman for the Nations whose National House of Prayer has become a fixture in Ottawa. While it is common in the American and the Canadian movements to identify the strengthening of Israel in preparation for the second coming, Canada's role as outlined by the Watchman has not: Canada must become Christian again in order to facilitate the second coming (2010, 122-140). This has been the focus of youth organizations such as 4MYCanada (McDonald 2010). In this case, then, the CCR 's work is to prepare for this role.

Since its pro-life beginning, REAL Women has been a organization that has played a role in supporting and building coalitions and has evolved into a key role in the CCR , sharing its targets as well as its many of its values and goals. Organized by The Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada in 1986 under the banner of Coalition for Family Values, REAL Women joined forces with The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, The Conference of Catholic Bishops and The National Citizen's Coalition to oppose the Ontario amendment to add sexual orientation to Human Rights Code (Herman, 1994). In 1993, Focus on the Family Canada orchestrated and funded a joint effort by REAL Women, The Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada, The Salvation Army and The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada in the *Mossop* case.(Herman 1994, 275).²⁶ In 2004 REAL Women joined with the Catholic Rights League, Campaign Life and other organizations to create the Defend Marriage Coalition which was organized and run by McVety's CFAC (McDonald 2010, 71). REAL Women also joined forces with the Catholic Civil Rights League and the Christian Legal Fellowship, which provided pro-bonum lawyer, to act as intervenor in an Ontario Superior Court case challenging Canada's prostitution laws in 2009 (Prostitution 2008).²⁷ REAL Women have also promoted both the Christian Legal Fellowship and Faith and Freedom Alliance. As already mentioned REAL Women is instrumental in providing a Canadian presence in the CR UN and actively contributes to The World Congress of Families, creating global ties to the CCR. While REAL Women maintains its anti-feminist stance it has developed a much more focussed agenda of religious freedom both nationally and globally.

There is not a direct connection between REAL Women and the Endtimes scenario but there is an identifiable propensity to use the same apocalyptic language in their writings. They describe feminism both in Canada and internationally as a totalizing system of dominance as

²⁶ *Canada (Attorney General) v. Mossop*, [1993] 1 S.C.R. 554. In this case a federal translator asked for grievance leave for the death of his partner's parent and was turned down because the partner was same-sex. It was taken to human rights and then to the Federal court and finally to the Supreme Court. The Court decision did not mention the family and simply said that the law should come from Parliament so left the issue of the family open (see Herman 1994).

²⁷ *Bedford/Lebovitch/Scott v. Canada* in which three sex workers challenged the constitutionality of Canada's prostitution law and won. It was appealed to the Ontario Court of Appeal and appeal was won in 2012 when the decision was rendered to strike down bawdy house provision and amend living off the avails to when there is exploitation.

hinted at by Byfield's talk reported in REALity and mentioned above. This is a very common theme in apocalyptic thinking and identified with the 'antichrist' which has been identified as the spread of communism in the past and as the spread of homosexuality more recently (see Herman 1997; McDonald 2010, 62). In a pamphlet REAL Women argues that feminism "overtook Canadian society and insinuated itself into the cultures of education, work, government and societal life" (Feminism 2008, 1). In the same pamphlet they also identify the Marxist roots of the destruction of the family which are "identical to present day feminist objectives" and early cooperation between PC Liberal and NDP women is viewed as "seizing power" (Feminism 2008, 3). Such totalizing descriptions are given to the feminist oriented UN which, when visited, appeared as a "whole "underground city" in the New York headquarters, where numerous rooms and chambers were filled with people publishing documents to re-educate the world on human rights" (McNamara 2009). Finally there is also an apocalyptic view of Canadian politics, reminiscent of Canada's crucial role in the Endtimes, in which,

[T]here is a monumental struggle shaping up in Canada between organized religion and the State. We are now only at the periphery of this struggle, and hear only faint rumbles of thunder in the far distance. However, within a few short years, the thunder will be directly overhead as the storm breaks around us (Religion 2007).

The portrayal of a religious struggle also comes into the factum for *Bedford/Lebovitch/Scott* in which the intervenors maintain that criminal law is based on religious belief and the Charter on the supremacy of God. They also claim that the majority of Canadians are religious and their voting is "invariably associated to religious affiliation" (8).²⁸ Lydia Bean et al. (2008) argue that after the triumph of rights cases, particularly gay marriage in 2005, evangelicals in Canada see themselves as a minority and are more concerned about being discriminated against. The evidence here starts to identify a more assertive push in which REAL Women plays an active role and which may very well bring about an escalation in the polarization of anti-feminist and anti-liberal politics.

Conclusion

REAL Women has been a unique player in the countermovement against women's claims for equality, reproductive autonomy and human rights in Canada. As a group claiming to speak for women against feminism, REAL Women played a pivotal role in the backlash against the women's movement and feminism in the early pro-life and pro-family countermovement. It has also endeavoured to move the countermovement to the international level in joining with the American CR UN to counteract the transnational women's movement's success in gendering the agenda at the UN. The group has also played a pivotal role in the later period to build and support the bigger evangelical and Catholic pro-family and anti-liberal CCR countermovement that developed particularly against gay and lesbian rights and in conjunction with the growing social conservative support in formal politics, culminating in the election of the Conservative party under Stephen Harper. They have also joined with the American CR UN to build and

²⁸ See factum at <http://www.ccr.ca/index.php?id=5067>

support a global pro-family and freedom of religion countermovement of conservative and religious states.

In affecting the form of the women's movement, REAL Women entered the political terrain and gained the necessary tools to effectively portray itself as anti-feminist while playing down its deep roots in religion. Feminist claims of equality and reproductive freedom struck at the core of the group's self-described Judeo-Christian -based belief in the 'natural' family and the natural but complementary differences between men and women. Yet, the appropriation of feminist language enabled REAL Women to speak to women and other political actors in more contemporary and, thus, more acceptable, terms and arguments. There is considerable evidence that this semblance of movement politics with its evolving tactics does not lead to a productive exchange of ideas and compromise in policy-making but, instead, makes more obscure the evident impulse towards the politics of polarization. As evidenced in its core beliefs and activism within a wider countermovement that has evolved into a coalition for religious freedom, based, at least partially, on apocalyptic visions of Canada's unique role in the Endtimes, REAL Women's ideology against feminism has not evolved but solidified; the rhetoric has been toned down to bide time rather than create compromise.

There is no doubt that REAL Women contributed to formal political back peddling and marginalization of the women's movement. How effective REAL Women and the larger countermovement will be in the future, given the still fairly small base and abstruse beliefs, is not easy to predict. However, given REAL Women's activity and its talent for affectation within a countermovement that is anchored in formal politics but obscurely so, the potential for polarized politics is quite high. At the very least the countermovement will produce caution, as it has in the women's movement, nationally and transnationally. In this case Mottl's argument about the divergent impulses of movement and countermovement either towards reform or protecting vested interests, respectively, can be of use. Any course for feminist action in this disconcerting time of polarized politics would do well to be informed by, and maintain, that impulse in meeting the challenges women face. There is much evidence that feminist activists, in the face of challenges from within and without, can move on and benefit from clarifying ideas, developing new understandings, re-imagining collective identities and creating new coalitions in order to create new ways of sustaining collective action rather than trying to 'protect vested interests'.

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