We are all equal now

Contemporary gender politics in Canada

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Abstract This article examines the Canadian case, focusing on the ways in which the political rationalities that have informed the Canadian variants of post-war social liberalism and neoliberalism have opened and then closed spaces for the articulation and institutionalization of gender-based equality claims-making. The article recounts how the Canadian welfare state underwrote a unique gender equality infrastructure inside the state and a thick field of gender organizations in civil society and later how this potent political and symbolic node of social liberalism became a critical field of contestation for those promoting neoliberal political rationalities. The article describes a protracted war of position in which the gendered politics and identities of the 20th century have been displaced and marginalized, but not fully consumed by neoliberal idioms, representations and policy interventions.

keywords *gender equality, neoliberalism, political rationalities, social liberalism*

> 'When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.' 'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you can make words mean so many different things.' 'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master – that's all.' (Carroll, 1988: 196)

Introduction

In the fall of 2006, the Honourable Beverley Oda, Minister of Canadian Heritage (a catch-all portfolio that includes the Status of Women), confidently informed a House of Commons standing committee that 'this government does fundamentally believe that all women are equal' (quoted in Beattie, 2006: A12). Oda had been called before the Standing Committee on the Status of Women to explain why Stephen Harper's Conservative government's recent two billion dollar 'fat trimming' exercise, conducted within the context of a ballooning federal surplus, had been achieved largely at the expense of Canada's equality-seeking groups and, especially,

Canadian women. In the eyes of many observers, the minority Conservative Party appeared bent on silencing a diverse range of governmental and non-governmental organizations that had, over the course of a generation, advocated for citizenship equality both in the courts and in the policy process. The Court Challenges Program (CCP), which provided public funding for individual and group challenges to public policy under the equality provisions of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, was terminated, as was the Law Commission of Canada (LCC), which provided independent research on pressing and controversial legal questions, many of them grounded in equality claims such as same-sex marriage.

   Although this fat trimming exercise also sliced through aboriginal health, adult literacy, and youth employment programmes, the Status of Women Canada (SWC) – the core interdepartmental agency responsible for promoting women's equality within the federal state – appeared to be the new government's primary target. Its operating budget was cut, most of its regional offices were closed, its Independent Policy Research Fund was eliminated, and funding was withdrawn from non-governmental organizations that conducted research, lobbied Canadian governments, and engaged in advocacy on behalf of women's equality. Even more telling, the word 'equality' was purged from the SWC mandate and from its website. 'Equality', Oda explained, 'is enshrined in the Charter and there was no need to repeat it in the mission statement of Status of Women Canada' (quoted in O'Neill, 2006: A17). 'Every part of the federal government has to be founded on the belief of equality,' she continued, and thus the government as a whole, rather than designated agencies, was 'responsible for the development of policies and programs that address the needs of both men and women' (quoted in Beattie, 2006: A12). This unilateral declaration of both women's equality and the redundancy of the federal government's gender-based policy machinery had not been telegraphed either by Harper's previous commitments to Canadians to advance women's equality, or by the weight of documentation (much of it emanating from the federal government itself) which pointed to the persistence of long-standing indicators of gender inequality as well as the emergence of new barriers to equality, linked to women's increased workforce participation, multiple family forms, widening income gaps, inadequate social policy supports, and ethnic and racial discrimination. During the 2006 election campaign, which resulted in the election of his minority Conservative government, for example, Harper repeatedly attempted to appease well-founded apprehensions among the voting public about his commitment to social programmes and gender equality, promising that he would 'take concrete and immediate measures, as recommended by the United Nations, to ensure that Canada upholds its commitments to the women of Canada' (quoted in Young, 2006: A17).

   Research generated by Statistics Canada in 2006 also indicated that, on a variety of fronts, gender equality remained an elusive goal of public policy. Statistics Canada's *Women in Canada: A Gender-based Statistical Report* (2006) noted that the increased participation of women in the paid workforce, and especially of women with young children, was one of the

most significant social trends of the past thirty years. In 2004, 58 per cent of women aged fifteen and over were employed, while the participation rate among women with children under three (65%) and children aged three to five (70%) had effectively doubled since 1976. Still, the report found that compared to their male counterparts, women were far more likely to lose time at work because of personal or family responsibilities, work part-time, and earn less. In 2003, Canadian women working full-time (full-year) earned 71 per cent of what men working full-time (full-year) earned. Similarly, 38 per cent of families headed by lone-parent mothers lived below the poverty line compared to 13 per cent of male lone-parent families and 7 per cent of two-parent families. Statistics Canada also reported that, in 2004, females were six times more likely than males to be victims of sexual assault and far more likely to experience criminal harassment, stalking, and spousal abuse (CCPA, 2006: 29). If these and other broad indicators of persistent gender inequalities were not sufficiently convincing for the new federal government, the results of a national consultation on gender equality, conducted by SWC in 2005, betrayed the new government's assertion that gender equality had been realized. This stocktaking, the first conducted since the mid-1980s, coincided with a number of significant milestones in the unfinished struggle for women's equality in Canada. Thirty-five years had passed since the release of the agenda-setting Royal Commission on the Status of Women (1970) and it had been thirty years since Canada launched the SWC and declared 1975 as the International Year of Women (IYW). Although gender equality had been on the federal government's legislative agenda for more than three decades, the SWC underlined that progress toward this goal was uneven and, in some cases, reversing. Just as disconcerting, the SWC observed that there was a growing perception, especially among women's organizations, that Canada's governments were not taking their 'commitments to women seriously', while many other Canadians had the impression that 'gender equality had been achieved' (SWC, 2005: 1).

Conjunctural politics

Political rationalities, as governmentality theorists explain, are shifting and always contested 'procedures for representing and intervening' (Miller and Rose, 1990: 7). They embody particular ways of seeing the social and political terrain, and privilege specific vocabularies, styles of truth-telling and truth-tellers. In so doing, political rationalities fashion and reward commensurate subject positions as well as legitimize and institutionally embed specific idioms of claims-making, forms of political engagement, and zones of conflict (Foucault, 2003; Rose, 1999; Dean, 1999). This said, political rationalities rarely find their mirror image in the daily practice of politics. While a successful transition from one political rationality to another, for example, from post-war social liberalism to 21st century neoliberalism, necessarily requires fundamental changes in identity formation and political practice, its imprint on both the subject and the collective is always mediated by institutional constraints, different forms of

resistance, the cultural traces of previous political rationalities that have become integral parts of both personal and national narratives, and emerging political quandaries that lie outside of extant political frameworks (Clarke, 2007). There is a substantial feminist literature that tracks the myriad ways in which neoliberalism has progressively eroded the foundations of the post-war welfare state, the male breadwinner model of social provision, and the gender identities and relations that underpinned this governing paradigm (Brodie and Bakker, 2007; Peterson, 2003; Lister, 2004). Neoliberalism's prioritization of the market and market logics over the public sphere and practices of collective intervention, the erosion of post-war social citizenship rights and the social safety net, the privatization and commoditization of social reproduction, and the valorization and incessant inscription of the self-sufficient *Homo economicus* in contemporary state discourses and public policy, all have been identified as having disproportionate and deleterious impacts on women, especially those marginalized by economic and social difference (Brodie, 2008). At the same time, these and other gendered outcomes are perhaps too often read off of the formal logics of neoliberal political rationality and the classical economic theory that it privileges. After two decades of the unfolding of the neoliberal project, it is increasingly apparent that the practice of neoliberalism is often contradictory, if not at times incoherent, and that the interface between neoliberalism and gender is far more complex, contested, and contextualized than formal logics might project or allow.

This gap between the prescriptions of theory and the diversity of practice, John Clarke argues, is characteristic of eras of transformation in which a dominant political rationality is superseded by another. During these conjunctures, change is neither total nor achieved without sustained contestation, which may yield only partial victories or outright defeats, around critical cultural and political nodes. The ascendancy of a new political rationality (in effect, a new way of seeing and truth-telling) is invariably impeded by the residuals of the descending governing order. Previously cultivated identities, political consensus, and cultural ideals, which are deeply embedded in social life, and tell us who we are and what we stand for, constitute obstacles to the promotion of a new governing order, and its particular way of representing and intervening (Clarke, 2007). Raymond Williams further explains:

> The residual, by definition, has been effectively formed in the past, but it is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present. Thus certain experiences, meanings and values, which cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of the dominant culture, are nevertheless lived and practiced on the basis of the residue . . . of some previous social and cultural institution or formation. (1977: 122)

In addition to residues, an ascendant political rationality is also challenged by emergent risks, frictions, and ruptures that neither it nor its predecessor projected or imagined. The dominant, residual and emergent cohabitate political space in dynamic tension with each other. Characteristically,

the dominant aspires to extend its dominance by demobilizing, marginal-izing, silencing and sometimes adopting alternative possibilities (Clarke, 2007).

The obvious gap between the rhetoric of Canadian governments and both the research findings of governmental agencies and the lived realities of Canadian women is neither new nor unique to Canada. Since the mid-1980s, gender has been progressively erased from the policy agendas of advanced democracies, especially those that have embraced the central tenets of neoliberal governance. Claims-making on the state in the name of gender equality and inclusive citizenship, in turn, have been deprecated as unrepresentative and self-interested. As Anne Summers, a former head of the Australian Office of the Status of Women, concluded from her study of policy developments in that country, it appears as if 'we have come to the end of equality' (Summers, 2003: 6). The degendering of politics and public policy, across Anglo-American democracies, has been attributed to many different factors, including the apparent cyclical or wave-like history of the organized women's movement, the fragmentation of gender as a coherent category for political analysis and mobilization, and the neo-conservative backlash against second wave feminism (Sawer, 2006). While not dismissing the importance of these contributing factors, this article focuses more directly on the ways in which the political rationalities that have informed Canadian variants of post-war social liberalism and contem-porary neoliberalism have opened and then closed spaces for the articu-lation and mobilization of gender-equality claims-making on the state. This article also builds upon Clarke's important insights into the dynamics of conjunctural politics to track both the consolidation of the unique inter-face between the post-war Canadian women's movement and the welfare state, and the unrelenting manoeuvres, paralleling the ascendancy of neoliberal political rationalities, to displace the identities, discourses and institutional machinery that channelled claims-making on the state in the name of women's equality and structural disadvantage. The following provides a schematic discussion of the ways in which the dominant thread of second wave feminism in Canada emerged out of and, in many ways, embodied the key pillars of post-war social liberalism and, thus, has consti-tuted a critical residual and obstacle to the entrenchment of neoliberal ways of seeing and truth-telling. As a result, the terrain of gender politics in a neoliberalizing Canada has been marked by a protracted war of position between the dominant and the residual over both the political salience of gender as an organizing principle in Canadian political life and the legitimacy of equality-based claims-making on the state.

The 'emergent' woman and the Canadian welfare state

Canada's 'liberal' variant of the welfare state never achieved the levels of collective provision and social insurance realized by many of its European counterparts in the second half of the 20th century. Yet, similar to its Western counterparts, Canada's welfare state was both conceived and subsequently elaborated within the ethos and ambitions of post-war social

liberalism or what Alain Lipietz has termed as 'liberal progressivism' (1994: 342). While post-war welfare states differed widely in how they implemented the prescriptions of social liberalism, all embraced three foundational principles that marked a radical departure from the political rationalities of laissez-faire liberalism which, by the 1940s, was widely understood as a failed experiment in governance (Polanyi, 1957). First, social liberalism redefined the relationship between the state and the market. Post-war welfare states were grounded on the principle that the market could and should be regulated by democratic governments with the goal of maximizing economic and political stability and the collective welfare of all citizens. Second, social liberalism required that public administration be infused with a new ethos of planning and impersonal procedures, which prioritized the formal equality of citizens. Finally, and importantly, social liberalism prescribed that all citizens could make claim to a measure of equality, social security, and collective provision as a right of citizenship (Young, 1990: 67). The idea of gender equality, as advanced by second wave feminism, was not part of, but instead emerged out of the discourses of post-war social liberalism and the institutions of the welfare state. The foundational documents of the Canadian welfare state reflected the settlement between capital and labour, mapping out a social policy regime which protected workers from the risks of unemployment, sickness, and injury, and provided a measure of collective provision for those unable to work. This post-war regime also promoted the idea of a living family wage through social transfers, the protection of collective bargaining, and labour reforms, designed to protect the male breadwinner. The Marsh Report, regarded as the initial blueprint for Canada's post-war social architecture, assumed and advanced a male breadwinner model of social provision, recommending social insurance and social assistance for the expressed purpose of 'meeting the needs of the family unit' and investing 'in family stability' (Marsh, 1943: 57, 273). To the extent that women were recognized in this new governing formula, they were viewed through the lens of the nuclear family as wives, mothers, and widows. In fact, women did not campaign for Canada's first universal social programme, the Family Allowance Act, which provided an escalating monthly allowance to mothers, depending on the number of children they had. Instead, the baby bonus was promoted as a way to combat the poverty associated with large families and to shore up the family wage. In its earliest manifestation, then, Canada's welfare state did not speak to women as a social category or as equal citizens but rather through mothers in order to reinforce a particular family form and model of social reproduction. Women's interests were conflated with family interests.

Feminist interpretations of the welfare state, in Canada and elsewhere, have consistently pointed out that social liberalism's commitments to universality, equality, and social security were decidedly gendered, not the least because social citizenship rights were largely premised on full-time employment (Christie, 2000). The resulting valorization of the citizen worker, combined with programmes to support a family wage, meant that men gained the entitlements of social citizenship while women were cast

as dependent citizens – dependent on individual men, family, or state-funded and delivered social welfare that often involved surveillance, conditionality, social stigma, and lower levels of compensation (Young, 1990; Brodie, 2002). As Elisabeth Wilson, a pioneer in the study of women and the welfare state summarized, the welfare state was both a set of services and a set of ideas about the woman as the linchpin of the family (1977: 9). Subsequently, feminist scholars demonstrated that this particular articulation of the gender order excluded the experiences of many poor, unmarried, lesbian and minority women who rarely had the luxury of private dependency on a male breadwinner. Feminist scholarship thus increasingly viewed the welfare state as producing and reproducing an inequitable and gendered citizenship regime in which women were invariably cast as marginalized, bureaucratized, dependent, and disciplined subjects (Brown, 1992: 30). This popular assessment of the gendered underpinnings of the welfare state, however, tells only part of the story of women and the welfare state. As the Canadian experience demonstrates, political rationalities do construct and reinforce commensurate subject positions through dominant discourses and social policies, but these same interventions also create spaces of friction, possibility, and resistance. Post-war social liberalism, for example, promoted the male breadwinner model of gender relations and, at the same time, provided an idiom and discursive space for women and a nascent women's movement to pronounce themselves as something different from and more than wives, mothers, and dependent citizens. Social liberalism's promise of citizen equality, its promotion of state intervention to mediate structural inequalities, and its commitment to social planning and social justice laid the foundation for new forms of politics, identity formation, and political mobilization.

This new politics was 'dependent upon the identification of an interest group with a shared identity' that could be shown to have been 'denied their full and proper legal and/or human rights' (Smart, 1995: 107). This kind of politics, moreover, presumed the existence of a welfare state because it assumed immutable linkages between social rights, social equality, and social progress. Social liberalism, in other words, provided language for the systemically disadvantaged to talk back to the welfare state, and to make claims as citizens who had been actively denied its promise of equality, redress, and progress. The promise of social liberalism thus quickly stretched beyond a settlement between capital, labour and the nuclear family to myriad equality-seeking groups that located the source of disadvantage in systemic discrimination. Yet, the manner in which these new social movements engaged with the welfare state varied significantly among themselves and across Western democracies. What is noteworthy about the Canadian case is the way in which the dominant thread of the women's movement, especially in English Canada, and gender agencies inside the federal government grew up within and were mutually constituted by social liberalism's commitments to citizenship equality. Although the federal government had incrementally set in place the foundations of the welfare state across the 1950s and early 1960s, it was not until this new state form was consolidated in the mid-1960s, with

the implementation of universal social welfare regime and health care, that the mainstream of the second wave of the Canadian women's movement took form.[1] The appointment of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women (RCSW) in 1967, in response to the demands of a small group of influential women, many with direct ties to the two major federal parties, was critical to the development of this unique symbiotic relationship. The RCSW was mandated to 'recommend what steps might be taken by the Federal Government to ensure for women equal opportunities with men in all aspects of Canadian society' (Canada, 1970: vii). The RCSW was clearly informed by a liberal feminist analysis of gender relations that was consistent with ambitions of social liberalism (Begin, 1992). It applied an equal opportunity framework, which depicted women's subordination as a problem of inadequate access, unwarranted discrimination, and a lack of education (Findlay, 1988: 33). Reporting in 1970, the RCSW made over 160 recommendations, most involving tangible recommendations for remedial action by the federal government.

One unintended outcome of the RCSW was the consolidation of a growing and increasingly politicized women's movement that fixed its eyes firmly on the federal government and the task of breaking down legislative and social barriers to women's equality. In 1972, an ad hoc committee of prominent feminists saw the formation of the frontline organization of the Canadian women's movement – the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC). It reflected a collective resolve that a women's organization outside the federal government was needed to pressure the federal government to implement the recommendations of the RCSW and to monitor its progress. In many ways, NAC was an iconic expression of the emergent politics of social liberalism, namely, that armed with a solid argument, the federal government could be pressured to take the necessary steps to flatten out structural disadvantage, and realize women's equality, if not the equality of all disadvantaged groups. In fact, for the next decade and more, government officials met annually with NAC leaders to give an account of the federal government's progress in achieving the goal of gender equality. Paralleling these developments, the federal government began to build up a gender-based policy machinery to advance gender equality inside the state and to cultivate a robust and diverse constituency of women's organizations, which provided both political currency and policy advice. In 1971, the office of the Coordinator for the Status of Women was set up within the Privy Council Office (PCO) and a year later the Women's Program (WP) was set up in the Citizenship Branch of the Secretary of State. The placement of the WP in the citizenship bureaucracy was not accidental but, instead, reflected the prevailing assumption that state funding of disadvantaged groups to participate in the policy process enhanced both democracy and public policy (Pal, 1993). The WP was specifically mandated to support 'the development of a society in which the full potential of women as citizens is recognized and utilized' (Burt, 1994: 216). Guided by this commitment, federal funding for the Women's Program grew from two hundred thousand dollars in the early 1970s to twelve million in the late 1980s. This funding sustained the operating

budgets of a wide range of national women's organizations, including NAC, Federation des femmes du Québec, the National Association of Women and the Law, the Native Women's Association of Canada, the Disabled Women's Network, and the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (Burt and Hardman, 2001: 204).

This gender-based infrastructure was further elaborated in 1973 with the establishment of the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women (CACSW), an arm's length organization, designed to provide policy advice to the federal government and to liaise with the organized women's movement and a network of provincial advisory councils on the status of women. In 1976, the Office of the Coordinator was moved out of the PCO and expanded into an interdepartmental coordinating agency – Status of Women Canada (SWC) – and linked into the federal cabinet through the creation of a Minister Responsible for the Status of Women. In 1993, SWC defined its role as advancing 'the equality of women by addressing women's economic, social, political, and legal situation' and listed, as one of its key objectives, the promotion of women's involvement in the policy process (*Kitchener-Waterloo Record*, 2006: A3). Within a few years, these initiatives had successfully generated a montage of national feminist organizations with the resources to undertake research on women's issues, and to lobby state actors to make public policy, especially social policy, more responsive to an ever-more inclusive conception of women's equality and policy interests. As well, local communities were populated with a vibrant mix of grass-roots women's organizations that provided education, shelters, and services to victims of violence against women, women immigrants, and poor women (Brodie and Bakker, 2007). In what Sue Findlay describes as the 'consultative period', the federal government, the gender-based bureaucracy and women's organizations collaborated on a spectrum of issues, ranging from pay equity and sexual assault to divorce reform, working 'hand in hand' to enhance the status of women (1988: 7). As Marjorie Cohen, a feminist economist long active in NAC recounted, by 'the 1980s government and employers had accepted our right to speak on daycare, reproductive choice, pornography – anything that could be seen as a women's issue' (Cohen, 1992: 217). In turn, Canada emerged as a leader among Western welfare states with respect to the development of policies and agencies designed to promote women's equality and to open spaces for equality-seeking groups in the policy process.

This close relationship between the federal government and the public face of the women's movement was somewhat unique among advanced liberal democracies and, as critics of the interdependent relationship often argued, rendered the women's movement vulnerable to shifts in governmental policies and funding priorities. In the 1970s and early 1980s, however, the relationship proved extremely fruitful, underwriting an exponential growth in the influence of the organized women's movement, a proliferation of federal and provincial agencies, and initiatives that advanced a gender equity agenda, the constitutional entrenchment of a sexual equality clause in the new Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and the formation of the Court Challenges Program to fund equality-based

claims-making in the courts. By most measures, then, the women's equality infrastructure had become a potent political and symbolic node of post-war social liberalism, which sought legislative and judicial remedies to structural barriers to citizenship equality, and reached deep into personal identities, community organizations, policy discourses, and political processes. However, almost as quickly as this node of social liberalism was consolidated, it was contested and subsequently eroded by the ascendance of neoliberal political rationalities. The collision of worldviews between the Canadian women's movement, and especially NAC, its flagship organization, and the emerging neoliberal order began shortly after the election of a hesitantly neoliberal Conservative government in 1984, and intensified across the 1990s and early 2000s, under federal governments of differing partisan stripes.[2] Importantly, this new zone of conflict only indirectly revolved around so-called 'women's issues', or post-war Western feminism, although feminists continue to be maligned in partisan rhetoric as being offensive to the ambitions of the new governing order. Instead, leading feminist organizations were increasingly vocal opponents of the emerging neoliberal vision of good governance, which prescribed a reduced state, minimal social programmes, the end of universal entitlements, and empowered markets. They were also critical of continental trade liberalization, which threatened the ethos of social liberalism and its capacities to underwrite the pursuit of citizenship equality.

The politics of displacement

The past two decades have witnessed a relentless gendered politics, aimed at disassembling the remnants of social liberalism that informed the dominant thread of post-war feminism in Canada and, indeed, of all equality-based claims-making on the state. The campaign against the very idea of gender equality is a critical component of a broader struggle between residual and dominant political rationalities, that is, between the identities, aspirations, and institutions generated by social liberalism over the course of a generation, and the governing assumptions and practices of the neoliberal project. Although the erosion of social liberalism has proceeded on multiple terrains, I here examine how, despite the persistence of gender inequalities, the idea of gender equality has been progressively erased from Canadian political rhetoric, policy goals and bureaucratic machinery. There is now a substantial literature that traces the ways in which neoliberal reforms have redefined the objects of social policy from the structurally disadvantaged citizen and bearer of social entitlements to the self-sufficient and genderless individual, the consumer and the market actor, the self-sustaining patriarchal family, and the disembodied child, who stands virtually alone in contemporary social policy as a deserving claims-maker on the state (Brodie, 2008; Paterson et al., 2004; Sawer, 2006; McKeen, 2003). This shift from passive to active social welfare regimes has been premised on and buttressed by what Ruth Lister calls the 'politics of renaming' (2004). Framing policy interventions in the language of individualization rather than gender orders or other systemic

inequalities is not simply a matter of rhetoric. As Alexandra Dobrowolsky and Jane Jenson remind us, 'representational adjustments to the names of claimants is significant' in understanding how social policy is framed, which actors are considered as legitimate claimants, and what kinds of policy interventions are considered appropriate (2004: 172). At the same time, the politics of renaming is not confined to the discourses and instrumentalities of public policy: it also involves the targeted dismissal and silencing of oppositional voices emanating from the margins and the residual.

As already noted, the progressive delegitimization of a 'women's voice' in the Canadian policy process began in the mid-1980s and coincided with the ascendancy of neoliberal governing practices. When NAC began to contest the foundational assumptions of neoliberal governance, its interventions were at first discredited and then actively attacked as being unrepresentative of public interest and common sense. As Marjorie Cohen recounts of the gendered politics of the late 1980s, when 'we began to talk about economic issues like the budget, trade policy, privatization, deregulation, and the general structure of the Canadian economy, we were going too far' (1992: 218). Feminism and feminists were soon disparaged in political debate and in the popular media, and, along with other equality-seeking groups, labelled as 'special interest groups'. According to this construction, 'special' interests stood outside of and in opposition to the interests of 'ordinary' Canadians, while federal funding of such groups only served to skew policy priorities and to waste scarce (and undeserved) public resources (Brodie, 1995). The rhetoric of special interests, largely imported from the American social conservative movement, veiled a broader backlash against mainstream feminism and its interface with the post-war welfare state. During the past two decades, the most vitriolic case against post-war feminism has been advanced by REAL (realistic, equal, active for life) Women. Labelling itself as 'Canada's Alternative Women's Movement', REAL Women's motto is 'women's rights but not at the expense of human rights' (www.realwomenca.com). Although small in size and generally unrepresentative of public opinion, this socially conservative group borrowed language, images and arguments from American neoconservatives and developed strong ties to emerging neoconservative and neoliberal partisan forces in Canada. REAL Women argued that feminist organizations such as NAC, which, in the 1970s, received the bulk of its operating funds from the federal government, did not represent the interests of the vast but silent majority of Canadian women and could not speak for them in the policy process. As a result of their intensive lobbying, combined with the support of some government backbenchers and members of the Reform Party (a regionally based social conservative party), the Mulroney Conservatives changed the eligibility rules of the WP in the 1980s, allowing for the funding of groups that promoted traditional roles for women as well as patriarchal family values (Dobrowolsky and Jenson, 2004: 164–6). Having broken what it saw as a 'cozy conspiracy' (Sawer, 2006) between feminists inside and outside of the federal government, REAL Women subsequently refrained from seeking federal funds. This

refusal was flagged as a mark of legitimacy. REAL Women, with its support base firmly lodged within the white middle-class, refused to recognize the differing capacities of Canadian women to stand on their own two feet in the competitive and often expensive game of political lobbying.

The increasingly unchallenged construction of equality-seeking groups as special interests also contributed to the waning influence of gender-based agencies within the federal bureaucracy. From the mid-1980s onward, federal funds designated to improving the status of women were progressively cut back and previously established gender equality targets began to disappear. Between 1987 and 1990, for example, the Conservative government cut funds to community groups, shelters, and targeted services while meagre injections of new funding were largely confined to the Canadian Panel on Violence Against Women (1991) as well as related educational and infrastructural initiatives following the 1989 Montreal Massacre of fourteen women engineering students (Burt and Hardman, 2001: 205). In fact, many increasingly cash-strapped women's groups shifted their focus to violence against women initiatives in order to secure at least some of the dwindling federal funds designated for gender-based initiatives. Yet, even in this case, the problem of violence against women was progressively renamed and policies reformulated as one of 'family violence' and funding targeted to women's groups doing anti-violence work was cut substantially. The dismantling of the federal government's gender-based policy capacity accelerated in the 1990s, especially after the election of the Chrétien Liberals in 1993. It had its eye firmly set on elim-inating the federal deficit, devolving responsibilities to the provinces, and reducing the federal government's long-standing financial commitments in the social policy field (Brodie and Bakker, 2007). In 1995, the CACSW was closed, the WP was folded into the SWC (Dobrowolsky, 2004: 176–82), and the Minister Responsible for the Status of Women was downgraded to the lower status of a Minister of State Responsible for the Status of Women. Thus, a designated space for the articulation of women's interests around the federal cabinet table was lost. During these same years, the SWC was progressively downsized and shifted to the margins of federal power, most recently being housed under the umbrella of the Department of Canadian Heritage, which has a wide range of responsibilities, including arts, sports, diversity and identity. Gender, in other words, was coded as just one of many identities that make up the much-celebrated Canadian multicultural mosaic, rather than as a structural barrier to citizenship equality and as a basis for claims-making.

The downsizing and reorganization of the federal government's gender units in 1995 was not generally attributed to government's seemingly singular focus on eliminating the deficit. Instead, according to official rhetoric, this reorganization reflected the federal government's renewed commitment to gender equality, which would now be advanced through gender mainstreaming, as prescribed by the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action and the Federal Plan for Gender Equality, released in the following year. The federal plan endorsed an encompassing implementation of gender-based analysis (GBA) in the development and evaluation of federal

policies, programmes, and legislation. Consistent with experience else-where, however, the language of gender mainstreaming has been used by governments that are not sympathetic to gender equality to legitimate the dismantling of units with expertise in promoting equal opportunity for women and designated groups (Sawer, 2006). Somewhat paradoxically, gender mainstreaming can mean that gender-based analysis is both 'every-where and nowhere' in government. This metaphor is especially appropri-ate in describing the fate of gender-based analysis in the Canadian case. In 1995, the SWC was given primary responsibility for GBA building capacity within the federal bureaucracy and, in conjunction with the GBA Directorate, established in 1999, it developed a six-point strategy for implementing the federal plan. This strategy consisted of training, tool development, policy case studies, research and education, evaluation and accountability, and coordination (Canada, 2005: 7). A 2005 Report of the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women found that 'Despite ten years of effort . . . GBA is still not being systematically incorporated into policy making in all government departments' (Canada, 2005: 31). The Standing Committee found that the departments did not want to take on the responsibility for gender mainstreaming, and that the job was often taken up by 'individuals who champion gender equality' (Canada, 2005: 31). Departments, moreover, had few incentives to replace such individuals when they moved on or when a department was restruc-tured. The committee concluded that, after a decade of implementation, there was 'decreased interdepartmental capacity to ensure gender equality' (Canada, 2005: 2). In effect, the strategy put gender everywhere and found it nowhere.

We are all equal now

The 2006 declaration by Beverley Oda that all women are equal, the deletion of all references to women's equality in the mandate of the SWC, and the termination of funding for groups that advocate in the name of gender equality must be placed within the context of a prolonged war of attrition between dominant neoliberalism and the residuals of social liber-alism harboured within the 'gender equality' node. Many observers predicted that this war of attrition would unfold into an outright battle with the election of a minority Conservative government in 2006. Restruc-tured in the early 2000s, Harper's Conservative Party was built around the remnants of the old Progressive Conservative Party, the defunct Reform Party, and a diverse coalition of forces long antagonistic to social liberal-ism including neoliberals, devotees of Leo Strauss, libertarians, the religious right, and advocates of 'family values'. Many key members of this new regime, including Harper, had a long history of opposition to the ideas and infrastructures advanced by post-war social liberalism. Ian Brodie, for example, a political scientist with libertarian leanings and Harper's Chief of Staff, was on record for denigrating the Court Challenges Program because 'they were in favour of as stringent a feminist interpretation of the equality section as you could possibly have, to the exclusion of all others

– they're heavily funding the one side. It happens to be the gay-rights side, the pornography side, the feminist side, the abortion side'. He asserted that 'the government here is not acting as a neutral arbiter between competing claims of what social policy ought to look like in Canada. I'm outraged as a taxpayer' (quoted in Russell, 2006: 43). Although Harper's Conservatives were fundamentally opposed to social liberalism's equality agenda, the campaign to eliminate the SWC was initially spearheaded by several pro-Conservative blogs, including the SWC's nemesis, REAL Women. Its website posted the case against SWC in the summer of 2006: 'Since 1973 the federal Status of Women has given millions of dollars to feminist-only groups on the false premise that women in Canada are victims of a patri-archal society. Although some women may be victims, the vast majority of Canadian women are perfectly capable of making their own decisions about their lives.' The website urged readers to write letters to the Prime Minister and Members of Parliament 'in order to offset this national feminist effort to protect feminist control of Canada' (Landolt, 2006).

Although the federal government did not frame the restructuring of the SWC in 2006 in such anti-feminist rhetoric, its actions clearly were designed to terminate the post-war gender equality agenda and to cut the transmission lines that had been cultivated between the women's movement and the federal state. As already noted, the terms 'equality' and 'advocacy' were erased from the terms and conditions of the SWC mandate, and replaced with an innocuous mandate of 'working to promote the full participation of women in the economic, social and cultural life of Canada'. The new funding guidelines explicitly prohibit the WP from providing 'funding for . . . domestic advocacy activities and lobbying of federal, provincial and municipal governments' (SWC, 2007). At the same time, the new guidelines open up the possibility for for-profit groups to receive WP funds, as Oda explained, for such things as award events, mentorship programmes and gatherings for entrepreneurs designed to improve their business.[3] In addition to these changes to the core mandate of the WP, the SWC's Independent Research Fund (PRF) was eliminated. The latter had funded and published over seventy-five studies, which had often proved to be critical and credible resources for policy-makers, policy advocates, and equality litigants. The cancellation of the PRF effectively put an end to the capacity of the SWC to generate policy research and to assemble independent expertise to advocate for women's equality inside the federal government (PSAC, 2006). Few if any remaining women's organizations have the skills or the funding to replace this lost gender-based policy research capacity. The reasons offered for these fundamental changes rehearse many of the rhetorical strategies that have been deployed against the post-war gender equality agenda and are now performed as common sense. As already noted, equality seekers are labelled as special interests and their political interventions as ideology; in other words, as distorted and self-interested.

A second strategy is to claim that women do not constitute a distinct political constituency with identifiable interests and needs because there is no such thing as a 'women's issue'. According to Oda, 'a lot of issues are

not women's issues, they are Canadian issues . . . We don't need to separate men from women in this country' (quoted in O'Neill, 2006: A17). A third and related device is the assertion that there is no longer any need for separate gender-based policy machinery within the federal government. This argument is advanced on both theoretical and practical grounds. The theoretical case, one cultivated by the implementation of gender main-streaming in 1995, asserts that the SWC is redundant because, according to Oda, 'all ministers in our government are working for the benefit of Canadians – both men and women' (Oda, 2007a: A11) and that 'every part of the federal government has to be founded on the belief of equality' (quoted in O'Neill, 2006: A17). The creation of the SWC, Oda reasoned, actually undermined the realization of gender equality because this separate agency 'relieved' other policy-makers 'of responsibility for making progress on equality' (Oda, 2007a: A11). More than this, however, the government claimed that the SWC was simply an inefficient way of spending taxpayers' dollars. Speaking before the House of Commons Standing Committee Responsible for the Status of Women, Oda explained that research and advocacy had not led to significant improvements in the lives of women: the SWC was 'always advocating but not effectively' (quoted in Ditchburn, 2006: A06). Thus, it was time to shift money to communities, to meaningful interventions, and to women that needed such things as mentorship and retraining (Greenaway, 2006: A4). Oda under-lined this theme in a standardized letter that was issued from her office: 'The Conservative government was elected to deliver value for taxpayer dollars. Programs are being reviewed to ensure every taxpayer dollar is spent to achieve results that benefit Canadians. The savings are being invested in programs that will deliver real results in the communities where people live' (Oda, 2007b: 1). The money saved from cuts to research and advocacy would be targeted to women that need help rather than to 'more studies on well-known issues in inequality' (quoted in *Edmonton Journal*, 2006: A6). These kinds of 'meaningful' and responsible govern-ment expenditures would be targeted to women who actually need government help, particularly aboriginal women, victims of abuse, and the elderly.

Oda rejected any suggestion that the restructuring of the SWC was designed to silence equality-seeking groups. She responded to her critics with her personal observation that 'If I know one thing about women, they will speak loudly and with great clarity' if they disagree with her govern-ment's approach (quoted in *Edmonton Journal*, 2007: A7). But the govern-ment's cut generated immediate criticism, especially by women speaking from social liberalism's residual site. Dolly Williams, President of NAC, told its Annual Meeting that 'the government thinks that it has found a way to silence us and our sister organizations, but . . . women will not stand by passively while this minority government unravels the work accomplished by the equality-seeking women's movement and its social justice allies over the past 30 years' (2006). Similarly, Michele Asselin, President of the Fédération des femmes du Québec, one of the many organizations that had its funding cut, chastised the federal government for undermining

democracy. 'It is fundamental to Canadian democracy', she argued, 'because all groups and lobbyists aren't all equal . . . that's part of a democratic society to finance groups that defend rights' (quoted in CBC, 2006). This reasoning was reiterated by Alia Hogben, executive director of the Canadian Council of Muslim Women. The loss of WP funding for her organization, she argued, 'makes it very difficult because if you don't lobby and you don't advocate, you're not going to make systemic changes' (quoted in CBC, 2006). Oda's response was unconvincing: 'I mean the thing is that we're not stopping anyone from advocating. We are not stopping anyone from lobbying. There are many, many interest groups that still advocate, still lobby, but not on the taxpayers' dollar' (CTV, 2006). Oda's defence of the restructuring of the SWC is both critical and instructive. It represents a rupture with the gendered identities and politics of the post-war welfare state and the imposition of a genderless and individualized social imaginary as a matter of common sense. This imaginary dismisses both the relevance of gender difference in the calculation of public policy and the force of structures in the production and reproduction of systemic inequalities, not only for women, but for all equality seekers. This discourse attempts to relieve the neoliberal project from the challenge of mediating structural barriers and opening spaces for the systemically disadvantaged to exact strategies for redress. Tracking gender politics in the 1990s, Dobrowolsky concludes that neoliberalism has 'diminished political space for women, metaphorically and literally' (2004: 188). The most recent round of gender politics described in this article indicates that it is not simply space that has been diminished, but also the shared identities and idioms of equality, progress, and collective welfare which evolved from post-war social liberalism.

Conclusion

This tracking of contemporary gender politics has addressed neither the diversity of feminisms that are part of the Canadian political landscape, nor the well-founded critiques of mainstream feminism that have challenged its uncritical reliance both on an unmodified category of 'woman' and on liberal equality discourses. Instead, my discussion has focused on the ways in which the post-war welfare state underwrote the formation of a unique women's equality infrastructure in Canada and, subsequently, how this potent political and symbolic node of social liberalism became a field of contestation for ascendant neoliberal political rationalities. After a protracted war of position between the dominant and the residual, the gender politics of the 20th century have been displaced, marginalized, and trumped by neoliberal idioms, representations, and interventions. If we are all equal now, it is because we are all invited to become enfranchised and empowered by the market, and to become self-sufficient Canadians, and citizen-taxpayers, who neither expect nor tolerate the recognition of systemic barriers or the inefficiencies of collective redress. Yet, this invitation to neoliberal citizenship is also a platform for contestation, reversals and invention. It is vulnerable to internal movements, particularly its

neoliberal and social conservative threads which simultaneously cast gender as being irrelevant and wives and mothers as critical to the reproduction of families, family values, and society. The dominant similarly is destabilized by traces of social liberalism, which have been thickly interwoven into individual subjectivities and the Canadian national identity, as well as by emergent frictions between the dominant imaginary and the diversity and inequalities of lived experience. Although the enactment of neoliberal political rationalities may frame politics as if gender no longer matters, the gendered underpinnings of social and political life do not disappear. In fact, they often intensify as gendered income gaps grow, as migrant women and women of colour endure the weight of social exclusion, and the iconic subjects of the new governing order, struggling to balance work–life commitments, discover that neoliberalism's promise of choice and self-sufficiency are, although not named as such, masculinist constructs. These problems may no longer be rendered visible through the lens of social liberalism or the language of citizenship equality, but they also cannot be contained or sublimated by the conceits of the neoliberal project.

Notes

1. The universality of Canadian social welfare was limited but the 1966 Canada Assistance Plan promised social assistance to anyone in need.
2. For more on the stream of factors that led to the erosion of post-war social liberalism see Brodie (2002).
3. In the spring of 2007, the WP was further restructured to include a Women's Community Fund, which provides meagre resources for community groups to provide services to targeted groups of women, such as aboriginal women, victims of abuse, and senior women, and a new Women's Partnership Fund, which provides seed money for groups to leverage resources through community partnerships.

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