

Not Quite the Death of Organized Feminism in Canada: Understanding the Demise of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women

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Abstract: In the mid-1980s the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC) was considered the main “face” of the Canadian women’s movement and a major player in Canadian politics. However, by the end of the decade, NAC began losing crucial federal funding and suffered internal divisions amongst member groups. By the 2000s, NAC slowly became a less relevant feminist political advocate and has since completely disappeared from Canadian politics. This paper explains the decline and disappearance of NAC from the 1980s to the present day to help understand the state of the national-level women’s movement in Canada. Drawing largely on the political opportunity structure approach and a neo-institutional focus on changes in federalism and the rise of neoliberal ideas in Canada, the paper argues with NAC gone, opportunities for the emergence of a new national voice for Canadian women are limited at best. Even though this does not in and of itself signify an end to organized feminism in the country, it does not bode well for the health of the national-level women’s movement.

Key Words:

National Action Committee on the Status of Women; neoliberal; feminist movement

Resumé:

Au milieu des années 1980, le Comité canadien d'action sur le statut de la femme (NAC) était perçu comme un emblème du mouvement féministe canadien et un joueur majeur de la politique canadienne. Cependant, dès la fin de cette décennie, le NAC commença à perdre des subventions fédérales cruciales et souffrit de divisions parmi ses associations affiliées. Au cours des années 2000, le NAC perdit de son influence et, depuis, est complètement disparu de la scène politique canadienne. Ce texte explique les raisons du déclin et de la disparition du NAC, des années 1980 à aujourd'hui, pour aider à mieux comprendre l'état du mouvement féministe canadien à l'échelle nationale. S'appuyant surtout sur une approche de structure des opportunités politiques dans un contexte institutionnel de changement du fédéralisme et de croissance des idées néo-libérales au Canada, ce texte estime que les opportunités d'émergence d'une nouvelle voix pour les femmes canadiennes sont, au mieux, limitées. Quoique cela ne signifie pas en soi la fin du féminisme organisé au pays, cela n'est pas de bon augure pour le mouvement féministe à l'échelle nationale.

Mots-clés:

Comité canadien d'action sur le statut de la femme; néo-libérales; le mouvement féministe

Academic and popular media studies addressing the supposed death of feminism and related pronounced declines in women's movement activity, like the proverbial 'bad penny,' always seem to turn up. When Ginia Belefante asked "Is Feminism Dead?" in a 1998 *Time* magazine cover story, as if posing the question for the first time, *Time* had already run 119 articles with a similar theme over the previous 25 years (Jong 1998). Feminist scholars have also lamented the state of the women's movement, particularly since the 1980s and 90s with the rise of neoliberalism in Western democracies and accompanying feminist backlash and post-feminist politics (see for example Epstein 2001). When all is said and done, however, most come to the conclusion that even though feminist women's movements in liberal democracies have gone through periods or "waves" of low key and less visible activity, those movements do not cease to exist and feminism remains alive and well (Staggenborg and Taylor 2005, Chappell 2002, Nash 2002, Tanguay and Newman 2002).

In Canada, similar hand-wringing about the state of feminism and the national women's movement has been evident.¹ Most, if not all, of these examinations have been spurred by the failing health of the country's first and largest national women's organization, the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC). In the early to mid-1980s, NAC was heralded as a strong voice for women that could legitimately communicate common feminist concerns to the national government while simultaneously acting as "an embryonic parliament of women" in all of its ethnic, ideological and linguistic diversity (Vickers, Rankin and Appelle 1993:4). Yet by the end of the decade, NAC entered an era of significant changes, including a gradual and ultimately complete loss of state funding alongside

internal divisions which left it broke and struggling to survive, particularly between 2001 and 2005. In 2006, NAC reportedly was on the mend and the familiar pattern of premature pronouncements of its death, so common to women's movements in a variety of political contexts, appeared to be repeating itself. Or was it? It is the purpose of this paper to examine the decline of NAC that has occurred primarily from the late 1980s to 2014. Is NAC's role as a leader of the Canadian women's movement effectively over? Or will it or a similar national feminist organization be able to re-emerge as a strong federalist advocate for the Canadian women's movement?

In order to understand the metamorphosis of NAC, the paper will employ the political opportunity structure approach to social movement politics. Louise Chappell has argued that in order to understand distinctions between the success levels of different women's movements in different states, it is essential to understand distinctions in state political opportunity structures (2002:35). Relatedly, shifts in political opportunity structures within states over time help us understand success levels of a movement over that same period. Even though NAC is not by itself equivalent to the Canadian women's movement, it has been its largest and most visible member and thus it is possible to draw some generalities about the state of the Canadian movement from NAC's experiences.

This paper will specifically focus on two central aspects of NAC's political opportunity structure: one institutional and the other ideational. Specifically, the paper will examine the shifting nature of federalism and its impact on social policy-making in Canada (a key lobbying focus of the Canadian women's movement at the national level) and shifts in

the dominant political ideology of the state, specifically the rise of neo-liberalism and post neo-liberalism and how this has impacted the degree of openness of the state to women's interests (Tarrow in Smith 2005:39). In so doing, the paper will argue that the growing paucity of positive political opportunities available to NAC has effectively rendered pronouncements of its *re-emergence* as premature and actually helps explain a more permanent state of demise. This leads me to conclude that the broader national level Canadian women's movement presently should be concerned about its future unless it or something or someone else can change the state of those political opportunities.

To illustrate these arguments, the paper will begin by briefly outlining the political opportunity structure approach and why and how it will be used to analyze NAC activity since the 1980s. I have chosen to begin the study in the 1980s at a time when NAC was considered to be a strong force in Canadian politics in order to contrast the political opportunity structure during that period to the one that was in place later during years of decline. The paper will then document shifts and changes in institutional (federalism) and ideational (neoliberal/post-neoliberal) contexts for this time frame. It will move to an empirical examination of NAC's history utilizing the political opportunity structure approach to help explain changes within the organization itself and its ability to act as a legitimate advocate for women's interests. It will conclude by answering the questions posed above and considering the future of the national level women's movement in Canada.

The Political Opportunity Structure Approach

The concept of the political opportunity structure was first introduced by Sidney Tarrow (1983; 1998) to help understand why social movements move through cycles of contention where they are sometimes more visible and

successful in their activism and at other times are less visible and less successful. Tarrow argues that these political opportunities are external to the groups involved in contentious politics and largely outside of their control, although others acknowledge that social movements and groups can at times alter those political opportunities to suit their own needs (Gelb 1989; Chappell 2002). Thus Tarrow contends that political opportunities in the form of "state structures and political cleavages create relatively stable opportunities" with the most obvious ones being "institutions and capacity for repression" (1998:20). Changes in political opportunities, then, can create important "openings" for groups and social movements to utilize in order to engage in contentious action (Ibid). The removal of previously positive political opportunities conversely can frustrate movement action. Thus, social movement activity is often cyclical in nature. As the cycle widens, opportunities for alliances between state and movement actors are created. Then when the cycle ends, the power to repress or reform movements shifts to state elites, and movements disappear as their issues are either accepted by the public at large or are discredited. This leaves movement actors to correspondingly be absorbed into power structures or to drop out of the public eye (Newman and Tanguay 2002:403). It is important to note that during downturns in cyclical activity, social movements often do not cease to exist, even though this is sometimes the end result. Instead they tend to fall into a period of latency where they are still active, particularly focusing on internal identity work, but are less visible to society (Melucci in Newman and Tanguay 2002:404; Bagguley in Sawyer 2006:120).

It is easy to see how the political opportunity structure approach and the cycle of contentious politics can help us understand the waves or cycles of women's movement activity in Canada and other Western democracies, briefly highlighted above. Because of this, the

approach is often employed by researchers studying feminist movement activity even though they can also be critical of its ability to explain the entirety of that activism (Gelb 1989, Bashevkin 2000, Young 2000, Chappell 2002). Therefore, while acknowledging the limitations in the approach, this paper will use it to help uncover the changing success levels of the Canadian women's movement since the 1980s focusing on a case study of NAC. Limitations of time and space mean that it would be impossible to map out all of the various opportunities available to NAC and the wider Canadian women's movement between the over 30 years under review, therefore I have chosen to focus on two specific aspects of that structure. One is institutional and the other is ideational, yet both are related as changes in dominant ideology have arguably impacted changes in relevant political institutions. I have chosen to focus on institutions and ideas following from a neo-institutional approach to understanding actors and decision-making inside the policy process.² Because much of the women's movement, and specifically NAC's, state-focussed activism has been aimed at impacting public policy, an examination of the institutional and ideational openings for the movement to access policy-making processes can help us understand how successful the movement and NAC can be in its lobbying efforts. Changes in social movement political opportunities shape the strategies of movement actors, the negotiation of their collective identities and the policy outcomes they are able to secure (Orsini in Smith 2005:39). According to Chappell, formal political institutions can provide openings or serve as obstacles to movement lobbying efforts (2002:9). Accessing opportunities can also be affected by state ideological contexts which can either facilitate lobbying efforts or resist them.

In Canada the institution of federalism is of key importance when women's movement actors attempt to influence the social policy arena. Constitutionally, many areas of social

policy (for example, health care and education) fall under provincial jurisdiction, but the federal government has also historically impacted these policy arenas in the name of the national interest through fiscal federal arrangements. These arrangements and the willingness of the federal government to play a guiding role in social policy delivery have changed significantly over the time frame under study. This has had a major impact on national women's movement activism and arguably helps us understand the struggles NAC have experienced remaining relevant as a national lobbying voice for women in Canada. Relatedly, ideological changes in state willingness to sustain the welfare state over time have also had significant impacts on women's movement activism in social policy arenas. Therefore, the paper will focus on each in turn to help understand how changing political opportunity structures have increasingly had a detrimental impact on movement activism.

The Changing Federal Context of Social Policymaking

Federalism has not remained static since it was first adopted in Canada and enshrined in the Constitution Act 1867. Many who chronicle the changes in federal arrangements between the national and meso (provincial/municipal) levels of government typify it as moving through periods of centralization (where the federal government was more powerful and able to exercise influence in areas of provincial jurisdiction) to periods of greater decentralization (where the federal and provincial levels of government have grown to share power more independently of one another, more closely following the delineation of powers in the written constitution). The advent of the welfare state after World War II has generally been seen to increase the influence of the federal government over areas of provincial jurisdiction through the use of the federal

spending power and specifically the advent of shared-cost programs in the 1960s and 70s (Cameron and Simeon 2002:50; Adam 2007). Cameron and Simeon refer to this era as one of cooperative federalism where “close professional relationships developed among provincial and federal officials and ministers within specific policy areas” (2002:50). Thus programs such as National Medicare and the Canada Assistance Plan were created and both levels of government had a say (to varying extents) in the development and nature of social policy under the welfare state umbrella.

However, over time, this more co-operative form of federalism gave way to a more collaborative version of federalism where competition between levels of government became increasingly apparent and national policy goals were achieved, “not by the federal government acting alone or by the federal government shaping provincial behaviour through the exercise of its spending power, but by some or all of the 11 governments and the territories acting collectively” (Cameron and Simeon 2002: 54). Thus federalism moved from a more centralized model to one where decentralized decision-making was more commonplace. Accordingly, the federal government began to lose the ability to easily intervene in areas of social policy that fell under provincial jurisdiction. Changes in shared cost program spending under the Canada Assistance Plan - a 50/50 split in expenditures on programs such as child care, anti-violence programs and welfare programs shared between the federal and provincial levels of government – began in earnest in 1990 with a cap on CAP payments to the three richest provinces (Ontario, BC and Alberta) and culminated in the replacement of CAP altogether in 1997 with the reduced and amalgamated Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST).³

Since 2006, the federal Conservative government has adopted what it refers to as “open federalism”. While any distinctions between collaborative and open federalism are

still largely undocumented, the 2007 Conservative budget stated its intention to respect the constitutional division of powers and to avoid treading on areas of clear provincial responsibility, particularly in the area of social policy. Thus the federal government promised to not act unilaterally in areas of social program delivery but would instead ask for majority provincial consent ahead of time and to allow the provinces the ability to opt out and receive compensation provided they offer “similar programs with comparable accountability structures” (Courchene 2007:17). This slight shift in federalism has demonstrated a willingness to further decentralize social policymaking power to the provinces and the municipal/urban level, which has clearly altered the nature of the institutional policymaking process and the opportunities for a national-level movement to influence social policy in areas that matter to women. We saw a shift even more substantively in this direction with the 2014 Canada Health Accord, where the Harper Conservative government unilaterally ‘re-negotiated’ health care transfers to the provinces without obtaining provincial input. But instead of increasing federal commitments, the 2014 Accord included decreased federal health care transfers to the provinces alongside the removal of any conditions associated with reduced federal funding.⁴

Ideational contexts: The rise of neoliberalism and post-neoliberalism

After years of frustration and deprivation following the Depression and the Second World War, Canada was open to the advent of a stronger state role in helping to alleviate societal ills and to get the country back on track economically. Thus the Keynesian welfare state era was born where state expansion of social policy helped define what would be known as the “golden age” of the Canada welfare state (Mahon 2006:1). Mahon refers to this era from WWII to the

early 1970s as social liberalism where “positive freedoms of opportunity and person development” were emphasized and state involvement in policy areas aimed to help citizens “develop their full potential even if this involved measures to counteract the impact of market forces” (Ibid: 3). Not surprisingly, the welfare state grew and federal involvement in Medicare and shared cost social programs was high during these years.

But again, a gradual erosion of these ideas began to appear in Canada and other Western democracies in the mid-1970s through to the 1980s. Eventually states began to adopt a neoliberal approach to the welfare state where less state involvement and reduced public spending was encouraged to essentially free up the market economy from the dangers of a culture of welfare state dependence (Kendall 2003). By the late 1980s and into the 1990s, the federal Canadian government had largely adopted a neoliberal approach to social policy-making and this approach informed both Conservative and Liberal government decisions to download fiscal responsibility for social program delivery to the provincial/municipal levels of government and to refocus national attention on debt and deficit reduction (Collier 2008).

By the mid-1990s many Western democracies began to soften this more draconian approach to welfare-state reduction and began to selectively re-invest in the welfare state. This new openness to selective welfare state reinvestment has been alternatively referred to as post-neoliberalism or “the social investment state” - “a hybrid welfare regime, combining elements of liberal and social-democratic welfare regimes” (Lister 2004 quoted in 2006:1).⁵ Although still informed by neoliberalism in that it aimed to integrate citizens into the market as opposed to protecting them from it, the social investment state remained different from the Keynesian social democratic welfare state that preceded it, but was not as closed to social program

delivery as neoliberalism had been. Any state investment, therefore, continued to uphold market values such as managerialism and program efficiency and was measured by how well it improved state competitiveness, particularly by promoting increased labour market productivity (Jenson and Saint-Martin 2003). Associated with these goals was an emphasis on gender-neutral frames to justify new social investment state policy. Thus, for example, post-neoliberal child care investments were framed as “children’s” issues instead of “women’s” issues and emphasized the benefits of investing in children instead of in working toward feminist goals of gender equality (Dobrowolsky and Jenson 2004). The state’s tendency to gender-neutralize very gendered areas of policy was not confined to the welfare state alone. Over time neoliberalism and post-neoliberalism also dampened the state’s willingness to address criminal and legal equality issues of particular interest to women.⁶ In the end, the shifting ideational context of social policymaking had the potential to negatively alter the impact of women’s movement actors such as NAC, particularly as the state lost sight of the importance of a gender-based policy approach. It is to an analysis of NAC’s ability to influence the state and, on a more basic level, to continue to function, that the paper will now turn.

Table 1 gives a brief overview of some of the key dates in the evolution of NAC from its inception in 1972 to 2012. NAC was created in response to the Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in 1970 in order to lobby Canadian governments to implement the 167 recommendations in the Report. It was structured as an umbrella organization incorporating member pro-feminist equality groups from across the country. As such, individuals were not *directly* members of NAC but were so through affiliation with specific, smaller scale equality member groups. NAC received most of its core funding from the federal government and

operated as a non-profit advocacy organization promoting women's equality across Canada.

For the purposes of this article, I will begin my analysis of NAC at arguably its highest point of strength as a representative of the women's movement and in its ability to impact the state, specifically with respect to social policymaking at the federal level.⁷ I will also highlight the relevant changes in the federal policy-making context and the ideational social policy framework as indicators of the shifting political opportunity structure from this time-point (mid-1980s) to today. As mentioned, this will not explain all of the ups and downs in NAC's development, nor will it provide a complete picture of the political opportunities available to it at particular time-points. It will, however, help highlight two of the main structural reasons for NAC's decline and eventual demise.

I start my analysis of NAC in the 1980s when NAC had arguably its strongest influence on the Canadian state. This can be seen in the lead up to the patriation of the Constitution in 1982 when NAC lobbied the Trudeau Liberal government to include key gender equality concessions in the Constitution Act, notably in Sections 15 and 28 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.⁸ Additionally, 1984 can be seen as a high point in the Canadian women's movement when NAC hosted the first televised leaders debate on women's issues for a federal election campaign. Even though attempts were made to repeat this feat in at least two other election campaigns, they were either relegated to broadcast on CPAC, involved a mix of federal leaders and "other" lesser party representatives, or suffered from last minute withdrawals from confirmed party attendees.⁹ By contrast, the 1984 debate was a nationally-televised event involving all three federal party leaders and for many it marked a watershed moment for NAC in its role as the leading representative of the national women's movement (Carmichael 2004b, Rundle 1999). Fiscal-federal relationships between the national and

provincial levels of government were still mainly centralized at a point in time when collaborative federalism was just beginning. Any major changes to intergovernmental shared cost arrangements were still approximately 5 years away and NAC and the women's movement still had open opportunities to influence federal action in this arena. Sue Findlay notes that the state was committed during these years to consulting with Canadian women regularly (in Vickers, et. al 1993:53). While neoliberal ideas were beginning to take hold in the United States and the UK, Canada was still being governed by a more centrist federal Liberal Party which remained, for the time being at least, relatively committed to the welfare state and open to consideration of women's equality rights. Ironically, even though NAC was a prominent player during the 1984 federal election the winning party, the Progressive Conservatives under Brian Mulroney, eventually began to more fully embrace a neoliberal approach to the welfare state, although the effects of this restructuring were not fully felt until a different Liberal government took office in the early 1990s.

Before the Mulroney Conservatives left office, however, they dealt the first serious blow to NAC as an organization in 1989 by cutting its federal Secretary of State program funding in half. According to Chappell, "the election of the Mulroney government essentially disrupted the existing positive POS [political opportunity structure] and replaced it with a set of political constraints" (2002:35). The greatest of these arguably was the full adoption of neoliberal policies and an exclusionary approach to the women's movement, preferring to see its advocacy agenda as a list of "special interests" (Sawer 2006:127). According to Janine Brodie, this willingness to view the women's movement as falling outside of normal politics eventually led to a "disappearance of the gendered subject", "a process of invisibilization beg[inning] with the

delegitimization of women's groups", and ultimately to a "dismantling of much of the gender-based policy capacity within the federal government" – a process that accelerated in the 1990s (Brodie 2008).

Table One: The Evolution of NAC¹⁰

1970	The Royal Commission on the Status of Women released its report
1972	The National Action Committee on the Status of Women was formed to lobby government to implement the RCSW recommendations. It represented 289 member groups.
1976	NAC met with the Liberal government and opposition parties in the first annual NAC lobby
1981	NAC's lobbying efforts help secure equality rights protections in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982)
1980s	The federal government provided NAC with approximately 90% of its overall budget
1984	NAC organized the first (and only) televised leaders debate on women's issues for a federal election campaign. It was nationally televised in prime-time and was a major milestone for the women's movement
1986	NAC grew from 289 to 458 member organizations
1987	NAC campaigned against the Meech Lake Constitutional Accord
1989/90	Secretary of State Women's Program Funding was drastically cut and NAC's grant was cut in half
1992	NAC campaigned against the Charlottetown Constitutional Accord
1993	Sunera Thobani was elected NAC's first woman of colour president
1994	NAC received \$270K (27% of its annual budget) from the federal government. Carried a \$60K operating deficit
1995	Internal politics began to divide NAC but NAC grew from 550 to 677 member groups
1997	Under the leadership of new president Joan Grant-Cummings, NAC's member organizations rose from 650 to 730
1998	Total federal funding to women's groups shrunk from a high of \$13mil in 1989 to \$8mil
1998	NAC lost federal core funding when Status of Women switched to an exclusive project based funding program. NAC began to lay off staff under a cloud of a \$100K deficit
2000	NAC elected its first aboriginal woman president, Terri Brown

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- 2001** NAC's newly elected president, Denise Andrea Campbell, resigned a few weeks after her position was announced due in part to NAC's inability to pay her
- 2001/02** NAC did not hold its AGM in '01 and '02
- 2002** NAC laid off all but one of its paid staff members
- 2002** The federal government refused NAC's request for project funding to hold a restructuring conference
- 2004** The media reported that NAC was unable to pay staff to answer its phones and its answering machine was cut off
- 2004** NAC's website declared that it remained the largest feminist organization in Canada with over 700 member groups
- 2005** NAC was finally granted \$150K from Status of Women Canada to fund restructuring conferences and consultations titled "How NAC Relates"
- 2005** NAC continued to lobby the Canada Revenue Agency for debt forgiveness on \$30K it owed in interest payments on unpaid taxes
- 2006** NAC announced that the majority of women it consulted (over 400) on the "How NAC Relates" project expressed a "need for a national equality-seeking organization like NAC"
- 2006** NAC elected new president, Dolly Williams, and held its first AGM in 4 years. Consensus at AGM was that NAC should continue on
- 2006** NAC continued its restructuring project and announced the intention to be financially self-sufficient by encouraging increased donations from individual members
- 2006** The federal Conservative government removed the goal of "equality" from the mandate of the Women's Program at Status of Women, and cut \$5mil from its operating budget forcing the closure of most of its regional and provincial offices. It also disallowed groups that conducted research or advocacy from accessing Status of Women program funding
- 2006** The Canadian Labour Congress formally withdrew membership and participation in NAC
- 2007** NAC submitted a brief to the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women's hearings into the "Potential Impact of Recent Funding and Program Changes at Status of Women Canada" but is not invited to make a presentation to the committee
- 2008** NAC's website still listed 2001 President Denise Campbell as acting President, contained outdated "news" on its lobbying efforts and goals for the 2004 federal election and contained the wrong address for its recently located head office in Toronto
- 2012** NAC's website www.nac-cca.ca redirected visitors to a site offering the domain name for sale and it no longer was listed at its last-known headquarters in Toronto
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As Table 1 shows, while NAC continued to increase its representation among member groups to a high of 730 in 1997, it also continued to suffer successive cuts in its federal funding during this time period. By 1998 all core funding was eliminated and NAC began laying off staff under the cloud of a \$100,000 deficit (Rundle 1999). Although the initial decreases in NAC's funding came during the Mulroney Conservative regime, the bulk of the cuts occurred under the watch of the federal Liberals. The latter was a party that was once very open to women's movement lobbying but over-time absorbed the neoliberal approach to state support for women's issues.¹¹ The Liberals proceeded to systematically and permanently alter the financial structure of NAC, which at one time relied heavily on federal funding. Faced with the daunting task of trying to raise core funds through individual donations while remaining an umbrella organization representing member groups,¹² NAC quickly took on a sizable debt and struggled to continue acting as an effective representative of the Canadian women's movement. Also during the 1990s, NAC faced internal struggles over the effective representation of the diversity of women that belong to the women's movement in Canada. While a full discussion of these struggles is beyond the scope of this paper, these difficulties further compounded NAC's efforts to right its ship after successive hits from the federal government.¹³

At the same time that NAC was struggling to survive under a neoliberal state, significant decentralizing changes were occurring in fiscal-federal delivery mechanisms in the social policy arena. As was mentioned, the 1997 introduction of the CHST, which replaced the shared cost CAP program with a reduced amalgamated lump sum transfer to the provinces for health care, education and most other social welfare policies, had detrimental effects on the political opportunity structure of the national level women's movement.

Essentially, the ability of the federal government to dictate social policy directions from the national level, say for example for a national child care program, were significantly undermined by this shift. Thus, the provinces and relatedly the municipalities inside of the provinces, became the main arenas of social policymaking and delivery increasing the level of diversity across the country and creating 10 separate provincial and three territorial autonomous sites for a national-level women's group to lobby to achieve pro-feminist policy change. As Vickers et. al note, NAC's umbrella national structure was never equipped to readily deal with a decentralized federal system. They argued in 1993 that the chapter-based organization of the National Organization of Women in the United States "which mobilizes women at the local and state levels in ways an umbrella structure cannot, might be a better model in a decentralized system" (1993:30). NAC's umbrella structure would be unable to mobilize quickly at the provincial/territorial levels and they predicted this may hurt the organization if the Canadian federation became further decentralized (Ibid) – a scenario that increasingly played out in the 1990s and into the 2000s. NAC's ability to mobilize women across the country from its Toronto headquarters was, unsurprisingly, further compounded by its rising debt and loss of federal funds throughout the 1990s. Young and Everitt note that almost all of NAC's regional representative positions on its executive were vacant in 2003 and had been for several years previous (2004:50). In 1990, when the federal government cut women's centre funding across the country, including in St. John's Newfoundland, NAC was unable to mount a quick and appropriate response, leaving Newfoundland women to fend for themselves. According to NAC's Newfoundland representative during this crisis:

I was almost embarrassed to be the NAC rep. Women from St. John's were calling me and asking what was going on. Weeks were passing,

and I remember feeling very torn, because I agreed with the women in St. John's who really felt NAC had let them down. We had about twenty-four member groups in our Province at the time. This was one of the biggest fight backs that we'd ever had, and where was NAC when we needed them? (Joyce Hancock in Rebick 2005:233).

Clearly, NAC was unprepared to deal with the changing nature of federalism inside of the political opportunity structure. As decentralized federalism was further compounded by neoliberalism and then post-neoliberalism's unwillingness to acknowledge gender issues, matters grew steadily worse for NAC into the 2000s.

Again referring to Table 1, we see that perhaps the worst of times for NAC came after the turn of the century. Beginning in 2001, financial difficulties and compounding debt resulted in the premature resignation (only weeks after her appointment) of newly-elected youth president, Denise Andrea Campbell. Campbell reportedly left due in part to the fact that NAC was unable to pay her (Habib 2003:9). Between 2001 and 2005 NAC fell into what one commentator would call "a debt-imposed five-year exile" (Yuen 2006). During these years, volunteers kept a skeleton of the organization together to continue some level of lobbying,¹⁴ meaning that NAC did not completely fade away during these years. However, it was unable to continue with volunteers alone.

In an effort to save itself from eventually disappearing altogether, NAC made a submission to Status of Women Canada to provide one-time project funding to help it reorganize its members and to assess the future of NAC. The first request in 2002 was denied, but the federal Liberal government eventually agreed to fund a restructuring consultation project called "How NAC Relates" in 2005. Liberal MP Hedy Fry, who was Status of Women Minister at the time that NAC's core funding was cut, was sceptical of NAC's ability to regroup, suggesting a new national women's

group may need to be created instead. "We need to bring in women from all walks of life who can feel that they belong to an organization that speaks for all of them," she said. "Do we need a new vehicle to do it? I think we might" (in Carmichael 2004b: 3).

Armed with the new Status of Women funding, NAC held consultations with over 400 women and equality-seeking women's groups to establish whether or not a national women's group was still necessary in the current political context. Plenary sessions considered three different options:

1. The renewal of NAC, with a review of NAC's present structure, policies and by-laws.
2. The shutting down of NAC, with NAC and its members simultaneously taking action to found a new national equality-seeking women's organization to take its place.
3. The shutting down of NAC, without NAC and its members taking action to found a new national equality-seeking women's organization to take its place (PAR-L Archives, Mar. 2006, wk1: 57).

The majority of those consulted agreed that there was still a need for a national women's organization and therefore both options 1 and 2 were to be put to a vote at the NAC AGM in May 2006 (Ibid). At the AGM, NAC announced its plans to continue on, reaffirming option 1, and electing a new executive director, Dolly Williams, to lead its reconstruction. A key part of that reconstruction involved a shift in funding to rely more heavily on donations from individual members (Yuen 2006). While many were sceptical of NAC's ability to secure enough donations and be able to rebuild its representational base (compounding this was the fact that no Quebec women were in attendance at a subsequent September 2006 restructuring meeting), there was renewed hope that NAC could rise from the ashes after years of virtual invisibility on the political scene (Ibid).

However, a look at the political opportunity structure since 2006 explains why this renewal never happened. As mentioned above, the Harper Conservative government elected early in 2006 was determined to further decentralize the federal system (under open federalism) going further than any previous federal regime in the past. Alongside the unwillingness of the federal government to interfere with provincial jurisdiction in areas of social policy - demonstrated clearly with the 2014 Health Care Accord as well as Harper's particular interpretation of a national "child care" policy¹⁵ - was a return to a stronger neoliberal approach to women's interests and the welfare state, further denying the relevance of gender in policymaking and further demonizing the Canadian women's movement.¹⁶ In 2006, the Conservatives removed the goal of "equality" from the mandate of the Women's Program under Status of Women, cut \$5 million from its operating budget thus forcing the closure of most of its regional and provincial offices and disallowed women's organizations involved in research or advocacy to access SWC program funding. According to Alexandra Dobrowolsky, the Harper government thus "swiftly swept away the last vestiges of the status of women machinery in this country and did its best to wipe out any other avenues for equality seeking by the women's movement. As a result, the women's movement's multilevel action coordination and its capability to be a signifying agent have been seriously and negatively affected" (2008:172). Apparently, some long-time members of NAC's coalition agreed. The Canadian Labour Congress made the decision to formally withdraw "its membership and participation from NAC" in 2006. Shortly thereafter, other members of the labour movement, including PSAC, followed suit (Bromley and Ahmad 2007:69, note 15).

Clearly, political opportunities for NAC had all but dried up. In 2007, NAC attempted to be heard during the House of Commons

Standing Committee on the Status of Women's hearings into the "Potential impact of recent funding and program changes at Status of Women Canada," but was only allowed to make a one-page submission to the committee and was not invited to make a formal presentation (Ratansi 2007). In 2008, NAC's website was ostensibly abandoned, listing Denise Campbell as its "current" president (although she left after two weeks in 2001), containing "current" news on the upcoming 2004 election campaign and the incorrect address for its recently re-located head office in Toronto. The 2007 "Ad Hoc Coalition for Equality and Human Rights" formed to fight for "women's rights at the federal level in Canada," did not list NAC as one of its coalition members.¹⁷ A visit to NAC's website address in 2012 redirected users to an alternate site offering the domain name for sale. According to Rodgers and Knight, NAC continued to exist in name and as a registered charity in 2011 (2011: 575), but in reality the once mighty representative for women's voices across the country was effectively silenced.

Conclusion

At times in Canada the political opportunities for the successful establishment and operation of a national feminist women's movement were very positive. Particularly as the federal government expanded its role in the welfare state under a broad political framework of social liberalism intent on building a solid social safety net for Canadian citizens, it is easy to see how a national umbrella organization of member groups from across the country could be created to promote women's rights and equality. It is even not too difficult to imagine a time when the federal government would be open to debating women's issues on the national stage during an election campaign, believing that the federal government had the right and duty to establish strong national social policy in areas of concern for women and that

those areas of concern were important enough to view through a gendered lens. Yet changes in the fiscal-federal social policymaking framework from one that was more centralized to one that was quite decentralized and willing to download responsibility for social program delivery to sub-state levels of government, changed the lobbying landscape for a national women's group. How could a group effectively lobby the federal state for universal social programs when this was the last thing the federal state was willing to entertain as it would circumvent provincial responsibility and would upload successfully downloaded fiscal pressure back onto the national level? At the same time, a shift toward the neoliberal and post-neoliberal state that for the most part was more interested in retrenchment of welfare expenditures instead of new investments meant that women's movement lobbying would fall on largely deaf ears. Compounding this was a tendency to ignore the importance of gender altogether, which led to a discrediting of the women's movement and unwillingness to see gender inside of policy circles. With such a negative institutional and ideational opportunity structure, it is not surprising that NAC faltered in the 2000s and eventually ceased to exist.

This leaves one to ponder the state of the national level women's movement in Canada, beyond NAC. Clearly any nationally focussed equality-seeking feminist organization would face the same challenges as NAC when it comes to the negative political opportunity structure currently in place. What can those organizations do to circumvent this negative POS or to try to change it as Chappell has indicated as a possibility (2002:27)? Vickers et al, suggest the answer may lie in a different type of national level organization that is better able to mobilize members at the provincial and local levels, more in the mould of the American NOW (1993). This would help tackle the

change in federalism and the fact that a national level organization today must be able to lobby separate provincial, territorial and municipal levels of government, as each sub-state level's importance in social policymaking continues to rise. As far as the neoliberal and post-neoliberal state is concerned, I have argued elsewhere that there are more opportunities to penetrate this ideational framework with left-wing regimes at the provincial level. Although these regimes have not fully escaped neoliberal and post-neoliberal external pressures, they have been more willing to see gender in social policymaking and have traditionally been more open to women's movement lobbying than parties of the center or right (Collier 2008 & 2009).

In the end, it is unlikely that a national women's organization similar to the size and influence of NAC during its heyday would be able to overcome the challenges of the current Canadian political opportunity structure. According to one feminist activist participating in Rodger and Knight's 2011 study of the Canadian women's movement, NAC's disappearance, in particular, has left a huge hole in the national level movement:

NAC nurtured a certain kind of feminist or strong woman leadership and what's fostering that now? I don't know that there is anything that's fostering that now (quoted in 2011:576).

Whether or not NAC or any national level feminist women's movement organization can reinvent itself in such a way in order to meet the challenges of the current POS in Canada, remains to be seen. But until that hole is filled, the Canadian women's movement will in all likelihood remain an ineffective player in national level politics.

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Endnotes:

¹ See for example, "The Death of Official Feminism" Ottawa Citizen, February 20, 2005, C.2.

² See for example, Campbell 2002 and Skogstad 2005.

³ This was split into the Canada Social Transfer and the Canada Health Transfer in 2004 but was not significantly altered to reflect greater federal expenditure levels (see Collier 2008).

⁴ This contrasts sharply to the previous Health Accord negotiated by the federal Liberals under Paul Martin in 2004 which tied federal funding to specific health care goals such as wait times guarantees (Norquay 2011).

⁵ Note that some authors argue that this is not necessarily a departure from neoliberal practice (see Mahon 2009).

⁶ See for example the Harper government's unwillingness to launch a national inquiry into missing and murdered Indigenous women in 2014 and the lack of feminist consultation during redrafting of prostitution legislation in 2013-2014.

⁷ It's important to note here that I am largely focussing on NAC's work influencing policy on behalf of the English Canadian women's movement or the movement outside of Quebec. As the Quebec women's movement, represented largely by the FFQ, has tied its equality-seeking advocacy work intersectionally to the cause of Québécois nationalism and has achieved more success in this advocacy by largely lobbying exclusively at the provincial level, much of its interests get left out of an analysis that focuses on NAC's lobbying efforts made toward the national government. Issues of fiscal-federalism and national influence in areas of provincial jurisdiction take on new and trickier meanings with respect to francophone feminists in Quebec. This diversity has also plagued NAC in its efforts to fully represent all women in Canada (see Vickers, et. al 1993 for more). It is beyond the scope of this more limited analysis to deal with this aspect of the Canadian women's movement, although I certainly do not discount its importance overall.

⁸ The Liberals had not initially considered women's equality rights until concerted lobbying efforts by NAC during the lead up to patriation. For more see for example Rebeck 2005.

⁹ In 2000, NAC organized a leaders debate on women's issues with 3 out of the 5 leaders confirmed to appear. In the end all parties ended up sending other representatives to the debate, with the NDP deciding not to send its leader Alexa McDonough only the night before the debate was scheduled (See PAR-L Archives, November 2000, week 3 (#47). See Lisa Young (2000:79) for a similar attempt in 1997 which McDonough actually attended as the sole representative of party leaders.

¹⁰ *Sources:* Landsberg 1997; Rundle 1999; PAR-L Archives (June 2000, wk2; January 2003, wk4; March 2006; wk1); Habib 2003; Carmichael 2004a and 2004b and 2005; Canada NewsWire 2006; Yuen 2006; Status of Women Canada 2007; Bromley and Ahmad 2007; www.nac-cca.ca (accessed May 2008 and July 2012).

¹¹ Elsewhere I have argued that different party governments at the provincial level have adopted neoliberal policy approaches to various extents with left wing governments generally being better placed to resist neoliberal pressures to a certain extent (see Collier 2008). However, left-wing parties (such as the NDP) have not been successful at the national level in Canada and there has been less variation between Liberal and Conservative party approaches on this point. I do discuss some smaller variants in federal party approaches, but note that these can be summarized under neoliberal and post-neoliberal labels and shifts between the two ideational frameworks correspond to different party governments in power at the national level (see Collier 2009).

¹² Arguably, NAC's umbrella structure itself was an institutional constraint hampering NAC's ability to adapt to the quickly changing neoliberal environment.

¹³ For more on these internal struggles see Vickers et. al 1993, Dobrowolsky 2007 and Young 2000.

¹⁴ One example was a letter from NAC VP Kripa Sekhar to Prime Minister Chrétien dated February 6, 2002 voicing concerns regarding a recent cabinet shuffle which decreased the number of women in cabinet and reassigned the Status of Women portfolio (PAR-L Archives, Feb. 2002, wk1:31).

¹⁵ For more on the Conservative's universal child care benefit and child care space initiatives and how they failed to come close to lobbying requests from the Canadian child care movement, see Collier and Mahon 2008. Also see the 2006-2007 Departmental Performance Report of Status of Women Canada which clearly states SWC's desire to work closely with its provincial and territorial counterparts because it believed that "policy areas of concern to women are the responsibility of provincial and territorial governments" (SWC 2007:12).

¹⁶ This wasn't confined to areas of social policy which are shared with or in many cases were the sole responsibility of the provinces. It arguably also was evident in policy areas of importance to women that fell under sole federal responsibility, including criminal law, economic policy, employment insurance and immigration. A good example in the area of criminal law is the federal Conservative government's proposed reforms to Prostitution legislation (Bill 36) forced onto its agenda by the Supreme Court 2013 *Bedford* decision. During the 2014 committee hearings for Bill 36, women's groups and feminist perspectives were not well represented. For more see MacCharles 2014.

¹⁷ The Ad Hoc Coalition listed other equality groups such as CRIAW, FAFIA and the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada as coalition members (www.womensequality.ca).