



### Film and Media Studies Series

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## Beyond Bylines

### Media Workers and Women's Rights in Canada

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## CHAPTER 5

### **“My Body Belongs to Me, Not the Government”**

*Anne Roberts, Kathryn Keate and the Abortion  
Caravan Publicity Campaign of 1970*

In May 1970, shortly after Mother's Day, the *Toronto Daily Star* ran an editorial cartoon featuring a young feminist, chained to a heavy wood chair, being escorted from the House of Commons by a disgruntled RCMP officer. She carried a placard demanding “Free Abortion” and wore a sign over her stomach asserting, “My body belongs to me, *not* the government.” Commented the Mountie: “I wish your mother had thought of that!” The cartoonist clearly took his side, regarding her as undisciplined, immature and misguided. To further illustrate his point, he dressed her as a hippie, drew a Disney character on her purse and added the caption: “Taking leave of their census.”<sup>1</sup> The cartoon was a sardonic comment on a Parliament Hill protest involving 30 young women who had chained themselves to chairs and railings in the public galleries of the House of Commons, loudly demanding “abortion on demand” and catching police and security officers completely off guard. Their demonstration was the dramatic climax of the Abortion Caravan, a cross-country trek involving women from western and central Canada, and was the first sustained and well-publicized feminist action of the national campaign to decriminalize abortion in Canada.

The Caravan has been featured in detail in several book chapters, theses and feminist publications, some of which have appeared relatively recently as more scholars and activists take renewed interest in the “second wave” of the women's movement. Most of these accounts are based on the activists' oral or written histories of their involvement in the campaign, as are recent media retrospectives produced for its 40th anniversary. While the women discuss, to varying degrees, the extensive news coverage the caravan attracted in 1970, this is not the focus of their stories. They are understandably more intent on recounting this key phase of the





Cartoonist Duncan MacPherson's response to the Abortion Caravan disruption in the House of Commons. Copyright: Duncan Macpherson. Reprinted with permission—TorStar Syndication Services.

abortion rights struggle in Canada in the context of the charged feminist politics of the time.<sup>2</sup> This chapter will discuss the media strategies of two feminists who were directly involved in orchestrating publicity for the campaign in light of the print coverage the Caravanners subsequently received. As young journalists in training, Anne Roberts and Kathryn Keate, who is known today as Kathryn-Jane Hazel,<sup>3</sup> straddled the divide between news gathering and activism at a time when the feminist slogan "the personal is political" supposedly cut no ice in the newsrooms of the nation. All reporters, male and female, were expected to avoid any political conflict of interest or activities that would compromise their ability to write the news in a fair and balanced way, a basic tenet of journalistic objectivity that still exists today. Further, they were expected to absorb these attitudes as part of their professional identities for as long as they wanted jobs as reporters and editors. Roberts and Keate, however, were both committed socialist feminists and wanted to combine their activism with their journalism.<sup>4</sup>

By 1970 young women like them were beginning to find a home outside of the women's or so-called lifestyle pages, and were spending more time reporting on social issues and less on fashion and domestic concerns, but many of their male colleagues still resisted their growing demands for gender equality in the newsroom.<sup>5</sup> The fact that women journalists were still not taken very seriously allowed Roberts and Keate to subvert the ideals of neutrality and objectivity during the Abortion Caravan campaign, a freedom that became more difficult for them as their careers progressed and women became more accepted as news reporters. This chapter is primarily based on my interviews with them, on archival documents of the campaign—including important material in Roberts's private papers—and on the newspaper and magazine coverage the Caravan attracted as it travelled across the country.

The Abortion Caravan was born in the feminist ferment of the late 1960s. By that time, more women were attending university, joining the workforce, leaving their marriages and having fewer children. There was an increase in pregnancies among unmarried teenagers and college students, who did not have legal access to birth control until 1969, while pregnant married women who already had several children sought to limit their offspring to a number they could emotionally and financially afford. Reproductive freedom was among the many well-publicized demands that politically liberal women's groups brought to the public hearings of the federal Royal Commission on the Status of Women a year earlier. At the time, abortion for any woman was illegal unless the mother's life was at stake, but many of the briefs to the commission suggested wider, more compassionate grounds for the procedure, including a woman's difficult financial circumstances. A few left-leaning groups and individuals, including university students, did tell the commissioners that free abortions should be available to all women on demand. Both these perspectives were reflected in reader surveys conducted in *Chatelaine*, a general circulation magazine published in both English and French versions, with a majority favouring wider grounds for abortion and a substantial minority favouring abortion solely at the woman's request.<sup>6</sup>

Reproductive freedom was one of the political tenets of the socialist campus groups that were attracting more and more young men and women, already familiar with the anti-Vietnam War and civil rights movements and curious about Marxist-Leninist perspectives. Eventually the female members, tiring of the way the men assumed the leadership roles and tried to dominate them sexually, formed their own caucuses and, in many cases, consciousness-raising groups in which they could share their politics and their personal fears and experiences as women. The so-called sexual liberation era, which to that point seemed to have benefited men more than women, began giving way to the women's liberation movement, its members



galvanized by anger at the way society treated them. They questioned everything—love, sexuality, marriage, the family, maternity, women's work, including prostitution, and the many forms of violence that kept women acquiescent to men.<sup>7</sup> To their mind, capitalism was at the root of unequal treatment of the sexes, with patriarchy playing a supporting role.<sup>8</sup> These socialist feminist groups—of which there were about two dozen in Canada in 1970—included the Vancouver Women's Caucus (VWC), which Roberts joined, and Toronto Women's Liberation (TWL), in which Keate became involved. The two groups tried to work together on the abortion campaign, believing that women could not attain equality on the job or in the home unless they had control over their own bodies, and that decriminalizing abortion would put an end to the illegal backstreet operations that threatened women's lives and health. They were particularly angry about the new federal legislation governing reproductive rights.

In August 1969, as part of an omnibus bill, the Liberal government of Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau passed a federal law allowing very limited access to abortions, based on a medical model of need—if the woman's life or health was directly at risk—rather than just to save the life of the mother.<sup>9</sup> The new law meant that the pregnant woman had to persuade her own doctor that she was physically or mentally unfit to have a child. If she succeeded, the doctor would refer her case to a hospital therapeutic abortion committee (TAC), consisting of at least three other physicians. The provisos of this new law were ambiguous, however. For one thing, it did not define the extent of the threat to the woman's physical and mental health, which gave the doctors more leeway to decide on whether or not she needed an abortion but left the decision in their hands, not hers. The woman could not even appear before them to state her own case. Most of the TAC doctors interpreted the "health" provision as conservatively as possible. Further, while the law stated that only doctors in hospitals could perform abortions, it did not make it mandatory for all hospitals to strike therapeutic abortion committees. In short, a woman could get a timely abortion only if her physician and a TAC in a liberal local hospital quickly agreed that she could have one. Generally, that meant urban, middle-class women with money.<sup>10</sup>

Pro-choice advocates argued that the TAC system did little to prevent less fortunate women, such as married mothers with too many children to support or victims of sexual assault, from continuing to procure backstreet abortions, or trying to terminate their pregnancies themselves. They might resort to crude methods such as douching with household bathroom cleansers or similar solutions, or inserting knitting needles, coat hangers or slippery elm through their cervixes, which only endangered their health and their lives.<sup>11</sup> Feminist student activists, who believed any woman, married or not, should be free to have sex, pointed out that the birth control pill and other devices could fail and were not necessarily

medically safe; therefore, all women, including those living in poverty, needed access to free, legal abortions to guarantee their freedom of choice over child-bearing.<sup>12</sup>

The Vancouver Women's Caucus, who were determined to take their campaign for the decriminalization of abortion to the federal government in Ottawa, planned the Abortion Caravan very strategically. The twenty feminists participating would leave Vancouver at the end of April and arrive on Parliament Hill just before the Mother's Day weekend, provocative timing meant to underscore their argument that women should be able to choose whether or not to have children. Their vehicles would bear slogans urging that the abortion law be repealed, and one would carry a coffin in symbolic mourning for the women who died from botched illegal abortions every year. The Caravanners would stop at several cities and towns along the way to stage dramatic theatrical skits depicting the suffering women experienced when they tried to persuade doctors to give them abortions. In addition, they would hold public meetings, do interviews with the local media and pick up any woman who wanted to join the motorcade. Their local supporters would feed and billet them. The role of Toronto Women's Liberation was to organize the Caravan activities in their own city and help with the main events in Ottawa. In addition, feminists across the country would hold their own local demonstrations before, on and after the Mother's Day weekend. As political scientist Jane Jensen has written, "The Abortion Caravan of 1970 had the effect of both mobilizing support for abortion rights and providing a dramatic public announcement that a women's movement prepared for radical action had arrived on the scene, with abortion on demand as a key claim."<sup>13</sup>

Media historian Patricia Bradley has documented how news stories about "women's libbers" and their radical politics, challenging rhetoric, colourful street theatre and other agitprop actions were already becoming commonplace in the U.S. media, a double-edged sword for the participants. It guaranteed them attention while presenting the risk that their concerns would be dismissed.<sup>14</sup> The Caravanners understood that risk and planned their media campaign carefully. It essentially consisted of three phases: advance activism and publicity, the cross-country trek, and the demonstrations in Ottawa. Anne Roberts and Kathryn Keate were not in the Caravan motorcade but worked behind the scenes on its behalf. Roberts was involved in the local campaigns in Vancouver and supplied much of the advance publicity for the Caravan as it made its way across the country. She also wrote articles about the campaign for feminist and campus publications, and later as a journalist with the Canadian Press news agency in Edmonton, where she worked during the spring and summers of 1969 and 1970. Keate was a key publicity organizer for the Caravan's volatile demonstrations in Ottawa, writing about her involvement later in *Saturday Night* magazine. She did



not arrange this journalism assignment in advance, but agreed to it several weeks after the Caravan was over, when the editor, Robert Fulford, asked her to write a feature story from the perspective of someone who had been involved, in line with the contemporary, subjective trend in first-person New Journalism. It gave her a rare chance to write about her involvement in the mainstream media from the perspective of a feminist activist.<sup>15</sup> This chapter focuses on Roberts and Keate, rather than all the women involved in the publicity, as these two were the only ones who had professional journalism training and who continued full time in the field after the Abortion Caravan was over.

While Roberts's and Keate's childhoods were quite different, their socialist feminist outlooks were similar. Roberts grew up in a conservative Dutch-Calvinist farming community near Grand Rapids, Michigan, but her freethinking parents were well-educated Democrats, union supporters and atheists, which set them apart from their neighbours, as did their occupations. Roberts and her family lived in a house on her grandfather's farm, but her father, Richmond, supervised a metallurgy laboratory at General Motors. Once the youngest of their four children was in school, their mother, Barbara, worked as a librarian, as the editor of a local weekly newspaper, and later as the editor of five advertising weeklies. Although Roberts was not conscious of it at the time, she feels now that her mother was an influential role model as a woman who insisted on working outside the home. Her father "strongly resisted" his wife's decision to work for pay, given the social mores that dictated that men supported their families and married women with children were supposed to stay home. Roberts recalls that her mother always fought those expectations and was "quite a strong person ... to be able to kind of forge ahead. It was very important to her." She managed the household schedule with the aid of her children, who were expected to do home and farm chores. As the third child, and the eldest of the two girls, Roberts helped out mainly around the house, even though "I always wanted to be out on the fields and driving the tractor more than doing the dishes."

It was a busy life, but a limited one from her perspective. Given her family's relatively liberal outlook compared to the religious conservatism of the community in which they lived, she felt very much like "a minority, which I think gives you a certain perspective." Later, she attended Michigan State University, where she became involved in the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements. By the time she graduated with a degree in anthropology, she considered herself a Marxist. Taking a break from her studies, she worked for a year as a social worker in Detroit, and then, looking for a change, moved to Vancouver to attend graduate school at the University of British Columbia, expecting to become an academic. There she became involved with anti-war and socialist student groups and later with the Van-

couver Women's Caucus, an offshoot of Students for a Democratic University. Initially formed by graduate students from Simon Fraser University, the caucus welcomed any women interested in joining, and soon moved downtown to the Labour Temple to accommodate its growing numbers. The members wanted their own group where they were not expected to play second fiddle to the radical men and where they could discuss the issues that concerned them, such as equal pay and job opportunities, and the consequences of bearing children.<sup>16</sup>

Roberts, who was in her mid-20s, recalls, "Being young women, the abortion issue was very important to everyone, the right to birth control, the right to control your own sexuality.... It became very logical to set up our own women's caucus, to look at women's situation, but very much within the context of the radical left and of socialism." Even the term "feminist" was suspect because they associated it with consciousness-raising groups where women discussed their personal relationships with men. "Obviously, patriarchy was an element of it, but our main thing was capitalism ... capitalism and imperialism.... We thought women would never be liberated unless those economic systems were changed and ... the world was made more equitable and democratic and the great differential in power and wealth was changed." Roberts put her energy into women's issues, and anti-poverty and peace projects. In January 1970, for example, the caucus formed a Working Women's Workshop to learn organizing skills and to make connections with women in the union movement.<sup>17</sup> They had already quietly opened a weekly service, referring desperate pregnant women to TAC committees or to sympathetic doctors who would provide safe, if illegal, abortions.<sup>18</sup>

During her time at UBC, Roberts worked on the caucus' newspaper, *The Pedestal*, which operated as a collective, with everyone involved making decisions about what to include in the paper, how to lay out the contents and how to distribute it. The collective model was common for radical women's groups at the time, as it was meant to ensure that there would be no hierarchy and everyone would have an equal role, all of which had to be negotiated together. "It was a very heady time of sharing skills. We all learned about things.... We had endless meetings." She was not conscious of wanting to be a journalist as much as she was aware of the power of the media, having witnessed their impact on the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement. The VWC members wanted coverage of feminist issues, too, but on their own terms. "As a generation, we were very media savvy.... We felt that [the media] was so biased against our point of view that we should get our own word out." Nevertheless, they also courted mainstream media attention through staging demonstrations, even though "we had no confidence that our voices or our views would be accurately reflected. So we also had a huge reliance on our own media."



Roberts found working on *The Pedestal* much more exciting than looking for a job as a mainstream journalist, but in the summer of 1969, an opportunity came along that took her away from British Columbia, giving her the technical knowledge she needed to write effective publicity for the abortion campaign later. Through a male friend who had worked for the Canadian Press news agency, she found a summer job at its Edmonton bureau, mainly, she recalls, on the strength of his recommendation and her university education.<sup>19</sup> The CP bureaus in different cities wired news stories and photos to the agency's member newspapers across the country for their own use. The newspapers, in turn, sent their own locally generated news stories to the CP bureaus for distribution. Roberts was happy to divide her time between Vancouver and Edmonton, primarily to be with her partner, a Pakistani Muslim who taught at Simon Fraser University but did his post-doctoral fellowship at the University of Alberta. At the time, there was a great deal of racial prejudice against mixed-race couples, as well as moral disapproval of any pair "living in sin," so she did not talk about her personal life at work, but focused on learning as much as she could about journalism.<sup>20</sup> While she was at CP, Roberts was allowed to do almost everything its "newsmen" were trained to do, and did it so well she earned a raise. She rewrote stories from the local newspapers to send out over the wire to publications across the country, wrote radio copy from the same stories for CP's Broadcast News service, and occasionally did some reporting herself, although not for on-air newscasts. The private broadcasters who subscribed to the service did not consider women's voices authoritative enough, one of several male prejudices against female media workers at the time. Nevertheless, after her summer stint at CP, she decided that she wanted to be a journalist.<sup>21</sup>

She never met Kathryn Keate, who was born in Montreal, grew up in Victoria, and after completing her undergraduate degree in English literature at UBC in Vancouver, went on to graduate school at the University of Toronto. Keate was chosen as a key publicist for the Ottawa phase of the Abortion Caravan, partly because of her media background, which she came by naturally. Her father, Stuart Keate, was a veteran newsman and publisher of the *Victoria Times* and, by the late 1960s, of the *Vancouver Sun*. He was a liberal, pragmatic, quietly religious man who admired his young daughter's feistiness, and tried to instill in her and her brother a sense of responsibility for giving back to their community. His wife, Letha, had trained in physical education at Margaret Eaton College, University of Toronto, and then taught recreational activities to unemployed people, in order to keep them healthy and occupied. Like many middle-class women of her generation, she did not work outside the home once she was married. She was a very intelligent person who was always sharp in her assessments of other people and their motivations, Keate recalls.

Her parents accepted her strong-minded nature without letting her get out of control or squelching her, and they encouraged intellectual debates around the dinner table. Her mother, concerned that her "bookworm" daughter wasn't physically active enough, successfully interested her in swimming, dancing and theatre, but when she sent her to charm school at one point, the youngster objected. She "just couldn't handle [the] passive, smarmy, wear a pink dress, have your hair in curls, icky-sticky images of femininity" current during the 1950s and early 1960s. "And my mother would always say, when people would criticize her for letting me run around in overalls, 'Well, I'm working on her character. She can learn all that other stuff later.'"

Keate grew into a bright teenager, already familiar with the writings of Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan, whose feminist books had galvanized middle-class women across North America.<sup>22</sup> "I remember at 17 I felt so liberated, I started describing myself as a feminist and an intellectual. I must've been a real pain in the ass."<sup>23</sup> She made headlines when, as an undergraduate at UBC, she presented a brief to the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, complaining of quotas against women students in some university departments, and of the cultural pressure on them to put their femininity before any other considerations, no matter how bright they were. She also appeared on a local CBC television program, discussing media sexism with other panellists.<sup>24</sup> While she was still at UBC, she spent a few weeks learning about Marxism from the Young Socialist League, and felt that their analysis of capitalism held some merit. She was not familiar with radical women's groups, which were barely beginning to stir on campuses across the country.<sup>25</sup>

Keate learned the journalism craft during the summers, working successively on the *Lethbridge Herald* in Alberta, the *Toronto Telegram*, and the *Evening Times Globe/Telegraph-Journal* in Saint John, New Brunswick. They were all conservative newspapers editorially, although their newsroom editors and journalists tended to be more liberal, and some objected in varying degrees to management's biases. Her father arranged these summer jobs and, in turn, would hire the children of the publishers who hired her, a common mutual arrangement in the industry at the time. These were the offspring who had a talent for journalism themselves, as she recalled. "People in the newsroom were sort of expecting us to be the boss's son or daughter and not do much.... I would've felt badly if we had all been whiners and not willing to work, but all of us were keeners and could be said to be assets to the newsroom." After she graduated from UBC, she went to England and worked for a provincial newspaper group for a few months, but was not given many stories to cover, so she returned to Canada and worked for a while as an editorial assistant on *Monday Morning*, a teachers' magazine issued by Saturday Night Publishing.<sup>26</sup>



By then in her early twenties, she decided to take graduate studies in English at the University of Toronto, where she first attended a meeting of Toronto Women's Liberation (TWL), a Marxist collective. She joined because she wanted to be involved with the Abortion Caravan. She saw a poster for TWL, a common way of recruiting members, and "just showed up at a meeting." She moved into a house that was a political co-op and busied herself as a movement organizer, which included voicing phone announcements over a hotline, another way radicals kept up with each other's activities.<sup>27</sup> Schooled in literature and the arts, as were many young college women, she found that socialist feminist political thought challenged and engaged her. "It was so new and it was so, oh ... complicated and we were getting all these new ideas all at once. I mean there had been just enormous, rapid changes since I'd graduated from high school in 1965. When I look at my high school graduation picture and there I am in my below-the-knee skirt and ribbons in my hair and you know.... You never slept with a boy until you got married. And you never lived with anybody." Most women at the time worked for men in support roles, and needed the permission of male relatives if they wanted to be independent, she recalls. "Your career path was to be a secretary, a teacher or a nurse and you couldn't buy a car or own a house or anything without a [male] co-signer, or run a business." Suddenly, by the end of the 1960s, "all this incredible ferment was happening. You know, changes in the divorce laws. Birth control became legal.... The way women dressed completely changed. Everything was just so different and it happened in such a short period of time."

The TWL group was so large that the members spent much of their time meeting in smaller consciousness-raising groups in each other's homes, where they would talk about the politics of housework, or equality of opportunity in the workforce, and, like many young feminists, started questioning the assumptions behind the so-called sexual revolution. To the minds of many men, the availability of the birth control pill and other protection from pregnancy should have made the women more willing to engage in sex. "So we had no legitimate reason, as far as the men were concerned, for saying no," Keate recalled.<sup>28</sup> By that time, the TWL had set up a birth control clinic at U of T,<sup>29</sup> but access to abortion continued to be a concern, and not just because of the damage that backstreet operations still inflicted on women. "If they were to be independent, they had to be able to control their own bodies. They had to be able to determine when and how they wanted children," and be economically self-sufficient enough to support them.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, Keate would not accept the socialist feminist view of the world without trying to work through all the issues for herself. "I was an independent thinker." Although she essentially agreed with the Marxist analysis of women's oppression—that it boiled down to capitalism, with an overlay of patriarchy—she continued asking the "tough questions." For example,

she would challenge the idea that all women were "sisters" and that only they were oppressed. The class system, she felt, made economic victims out of men, because they were expected to provide financially for women, and sex objects out of women, because they were expected to use their bodies to court male protection and care.<sup>31</sup>

Their combined political and news training, then, encouraged both Keate and Roberts to become media activists in the socialist feminist cause. In the fall of 1969, Roberts returned to Vancouver from CP in Edmonton and rejoined the Women's Caucus, which began preparing its local abortion campaign and advance publicity for the Abortion Caravan, due to leave for Ottawa in the spring. Some of the members had recently attended a conference of feminists from western Canada and the United States, where abortion rights were high on the agenda. By December, they had set up workshops on the law and on abortion procedures, as well as the referral service, and made plans to send some of their members in a motorcade to Ottawa to confront Canada's federal lawmakers.<sup>32</sup> They planned stops in Kelowna, Calgary, Edmonton, Saskatoon, Regina, Winnipeg, Thunder Bay, Sault Ste. Marie, Sudbury and Toronto, before arriving in Ottawa, a distance of over 5500 kilometres.<sup>33</sup> They invited other Canadian women to join and assist them as they arrived in their towns and cities on the way to Ottawa, making their politics and intentions clear in their letter to feminist and leftist groups across the country. They wanted abortion taken out of the Criminal Code and wanted publicly funded, community-run clinics that would provide all reproductive counselling and services to replace the hospital TACs. They stressed the importance of sex education in high schools, and of challenging the capitalist culture and male dominance of medical practice and research. They also made it a point to say that they "could not tolerate" any birth control procedure being forced on poor, Aboriginal, racial minority and third world women in the name of medical experimentation or population control.<sup>34</sup>

The entire campaign, including the advance publicity, had to be talked through with other members of the Vancouver Women's Caucus, who were quite aware themselves of how to use the media, Roberts recalls, but were also concerned with the finer points of feminist thinking. "You know, there were lots of discussions, but it wasn't just around media strategy. It was the whole thing. What would be the message of it?... What were the politics of this?" It was controversial because the women had trouble agreeing on whether to focus on one issue, reproductive rights, or link it to others, such as equal pay. "How much to emphasize *just* abortion and abortion reform, or how much this fit into, you know, a whole wider picture of women's liberation. So, there were lots of differences within the group." She recalls that some members of the caucus felt that abortion was beginning to take too much priority over other political issues. "So there was a little bit of tension



around that, but ... at the time the Caravan was leaving, we would have wanted that to be the front page issue," certainly for *The Pedestal*. Roberts started writing up the first press kits for the abortion campaign—news releases, background information, fact sheets, caucus contacts, and any other material news reporters would need to know in advance before they cover an event. Given her CP training, "I probably just took that work on. I felt confident doing that."<sup>35</sup> They wanted the media to get the public thinking about the power that the medical profession and the state held over women's bodies.<sup>36</sup>

The caucus used *The Pedestal* to publicize the campaign, with the pregnant Justice gracing the front page, along with the headline: "Labouring Under a Misconception: Legalize All Abortion Now!" It was included as a poster in the press kit, along with the Caravan schedule.<sup>37</sup> As the campaign progressed, *The Pedestal* ran the caucus' demands in their letters to the prime minister, Pierre Trudeau, and other government officials, as well as detailed accounts of its marches, meetings and demonstrations in Vancouver. It also published articles and ads about the Caravan, exhorting feminists and their supporters to get involved.<sup>38</sup>

The VWC released its list of demands to the prime minister to the media: the women wanted decriminalization of abortion, including pardons for those convicted of performing them illegally and dismissal of current criminal charges; free reproductive health clinics across the country; and more funded research and medical training on safe birth control, sterilization and abortion. Citing the deaths of 2000 Canadian women a year and injuries to 20,000 others from botched abortions, they accused the government of declaring war on the women of Canada by making them suffer through unwanted pregnancies, regardless of their circumstances. The caucus would "declare war" on the Canadian government in return if its demands were not met by 11 May, after the Abortion Caravan arrived in Ottawa. "We are angry, furious women and we demand our right to human dignity."<sup>39</sup> For their part, the politicians were reluctant to reopen the same drawn-out acrimonious debates that had occurred when they changed the "daringly liberal" law the previous summer, even though there were clearly problems with it.<sup>40</sup> The federal Minister of Health, John Munro, said that revisiting the abortion legislation was not one of his priorities but that he would meet with the women of the Caravan when they arrived in Ottawa.<sup>41</sup>

Before the contingent left Vancouver, the caucus decided to tackle politicians and the medical profession in British Columbia on the grounds that some aspects of health legislation, particularly hospitals and clinics, came under provincial jurisdiction. At least they could argue that they had tried to go through the "proper channels" before they made their way to Ottawa.<sup>42</sup> They held what is believed to be the first pro-choice march in Canada, on Valentine's Day 1970, with Roberts, dressed as the health minister, taking



Anne Roberts, in striped tie and smoking a cigar, portrays the federal health minister, John Munro, as she marches in the Vancouver pro-choice demonstration, 14 February 1970. Photo by the late Saghir Ahmad, with the permission of Anne Roberts, from her private collection.

part. Their demonstration included agitprop theatre depicting TAC doctors denying abortions to several suffering women and a public talk with a sympathetic doctor.

A few weeks later, after a short, unsatisfactory meeting with provincial ministers in Victoria, they briefly invaded the B.C. legislature, displaying large banners and throwing red streamers onto the floor of the House in what would turn out to be a dress rehearsal for the Ottawa campaign. Some caucus members also had a brief verbal sparring match with Prime Minister Trudeau as he passed through the Vancouver airport. The local newspapers, and the alternative press, covered these events quite supportively.<sup>43</sup>

*The Pedestal* articles did not always include bylines, so Roberts's name did not appear there even though she wrote some of its abortion campaign publicity material. Her work appeared in the student press, as well. *The Peak* (Simon Fraser University) ran an "advancer," with her byline, explaining the events that were to take place in Vancouver on Valentine's Day, the limitations of the current law and the reasons for the abortion campaign and Caravan. She argued that the requirements for a legal abortion were not clear, that the TAC committee protocols unnecessarily delayed the decision until the pregnancy was well advanced, and, since the woman's financial



state was not taken into account, that the law discriminated against those who simply could not afford another child. *The Ubysssey* (UBC) ran exactly the same article under someone else's name two days later, which suggests that it was distributed and used freely. Roberts quoted birth control pioneer Margaret Sanger as asserting the need for women to have control over their own bodies, and supplied historical information that lay the blame for laws against abortion on the Roman Catholic Church. A shortened version of her article was produced as a flyer for the Valentine's Day demonstration, and she later wrote news releases about protests supporting Robert Markoff, a local doctor who had been arrested and charged with performing illegal abortions.<sup>44</sup> The following week, *The Peak* quoted Roberts as a caucus member and a "prime organizer" of the Valentine's Day march, demonstrating that her activism took other forms besides writing publicity material. Interviewed during the demonstration, she stayed on message: "Abortion is not a crime, it is our right. Women must be able to control their bodies and choose whether they wish to be mothers. Many thousands of women die at the hands of brutal hack abortionists or from self-induced abortions—these women have been murdered by the state."<sup>45</sup>

Roberts, who returned to Edmonton in late April 1970, got involved with the local Women's Liberation Movement, which was engaged in its own campaign to put pressure on provincial ministers in Alberta regarding the federal abortion law. The Edmonton WLM flyers in her personal papers cited the same Sanger quote and church history that she used in her *Peak* article and in other B.C. campaign material.<sup>46</sup> She had been unable to line up a summer reporting job in Vancouver, even at the *Sun*, whose news editor, she recalled, told her they already had a woman in the newsroom.<sup>47</sup> CP Edmonton, however, was glad to take her back, giving her the opportunity to publicize the Abortion Caravan nationally. She busied herself getting more advance press kits out over the CP wires to the news agency's bureaus and member newspapers across the country. "I gave all the background of how the Abortion Caravan was organized, where it came from, what it was trying to accomplish." The male reporter who had first recommended her for the CP job the year before, and who was also involved in the Left, helped her put the press kit together, but she believes no one else at the office, including the bureau chief, knew what they were doing.<sup>48</sup> She also drafted CP stories about the Vancouver Women's Caucus abortion referral service and another about unnamed doctors who were performing illegal abortions.<sup>49</sup>

While the CP wire service gave this material national distribution, how much of it actually appeared in the newspapers would have depended on their own editors. The stories were written in "pyramid style"; that is, with the most salient details in the lead, and, in descending order, information considered less crucial to the story, in line with the accepted newspaper

format. Upon receiving a CP story over the wire, the local newspaper editor would write a headline, decide whether to rewrite the lead paragraph, add local details or edit others. Since the amount of space available for it was another factor, the editor would also decide how much of the less important detail to cut from the bottom of the story, and whether or not to run any accompanying photographs. The same kinds of editorial decisions came into play in reverse; that is, when local reporters on the scene generated their own newspaper stories, these were copied and sent to CP for editing and distribution across the country. Consequently, each newspaper contained more or less of the Caravan's publicity material and comments from the participants, depending on decisions that were made at each editorial desk.<sup>50</sup> Roberts's advance story, a draft of which is in her personal papers, was released via CP before the Caravan left Vancouver, and received a fair amount of media play across the country.<sup>51</sup>

On April 27 the Caravan left Vancouver for Ottawa, with 17 women crammed into a truck, a big yellow convertible, and a Volkswagen van bearing the coffin on top. The front page of *The Pedestal's* May 1970 issue consisted of photographs of the motorcade, decorated and ready to go, with apt slogans, such as "On to Ottawa" and "Abortion Is Our Right."<sup>52</sup> This time, however, their statistics on abortion, "one thousand and more," became open to question. A CP Vancouver story attributed the figures to the Dominion Bureau of Statistics, a source that was apparently suggested to the caucus earlier by a sympathetic local doctor. According to CP, the DBS said there were an estimated 100,000 illegal abortions in Canada every year, 20,000 women being treated in hospital for complications, and 2000 deaths.<sup>53</sup> The DBS, however, denied it had issued these statistics, saying that it was still trying to compile its figures, and the 20,000 injuries included natural miscarriages and legal abortions. The confusion was not new; even before the 1969 law was passed, Canadian estimates of illegal abortions varied widely, but were commonly assumed to be about 10 percent of the figures given for illegal abortions, injuries and deaths in the more populous United States and Britain.<sup>54</sup> In their brief to Parliament, the Caravanners cited 100,000 to 200,000 illegal abortions and as many as 40,000 resulting injuries.<sup>55</sup> Inevitably, any use of statistics left them open to accusations from reporters, doctors, conservative politicians, anti-abortionist activists and newspaper readers that they were manipulating the figures, or that they were based only on their own surveys.<sup>56</sup> As the Caravan travelled across the country, few news stories quoted any statistics, suggesting that reporters and editors were alerted to the problem of attributing them with any authority beyond the "claim" the women made in their literature or their comments.<sup>57</sup>

While they were on the road, the Caravanners handled media strategy on their own, so it was carefully prepared in advance. The women were armed with one-page fact sheets, which "we feel is necessary so that every



time we talk to the press we can make sure we formulate things in a good way and so that we will cover all of the important points." Those points included their attempts to contact Prime Minister Trudeau, Minister of Health Munro, and the Justice Minister, John Turner. Turner refused to respond to their "threats and demands" and would not meet with them. The fact sheet reiterated the problems with the hospital TAC committees, and stressed the importance of women making up their own minds about their sexuality, without interference from male authorities. It also mentioned that researchers were raising questions about the safety of the birth control pill but did not condemn sterilization of, or scientific experimentation on, third world women, racial minority women or those living in poverty. Consequently, that point did not usually reach the media, even though it was in the brief to Parliament.<sup>58</sup>

The caucus initially had strict cooperative rules about who would handle reporters' questions, which would be done by each Caravanner in rotation so that no one would become a media star and all of them would learn how to handle the press. At each stop on their travels, two women—one experienced and another less so—would do the interviews, usually using their own names. Rather than reveal their true identities, the skit performers would adopt the names of famous suffragettes or other radical women of the past, such as Emma Goldman, although the reporters rarely caught on.<sup>59</sup> This policy against media stardom was not strictly enforced, however. Two participants, Dawn Carrell and Marcy Cohen, figured prominently as spokeswomen, which caused some disgruntlement among their peers, even though their comments, and the media coverage, effectively reflected the Caravan's agenda. The pair, whose real names and photos were published in the press, travelled ahead at different points in the campaign, laying the groundwork and helping with local arrangements. Carrell, for example, visited Ottawa in late April before the Caravan left Vancouver, was back in time to join the motorcade, and then left it at Winnipeg to fly to Toronto, accompanied by Cohen.<sup>60</sup>

The advance publicity supplied by Roberts had a domino effect, with stories about the Caravan appearing in a number of newspapers across the country. The Caravanners' demands and the reasons for them figured to varying degrees in the coverage, depending on the newspaper concerned, as did accounts of their public panel discussions, where some local women bravely recounted their experiences of abortion. Almost invariably, the reporters described the Caravanners as "militant," their stories featuring illustrative photos of them with raised, clenched fists, usually standing near the symbolic coffin. The imagery worked well with their declaration of war against the Canadian government. The grim skits may have been more effective with an audience than speech making, however, and certainly attracted media attention. So did their large banners, which also appeared prominently in

the newspaper photographs. "We Are Furious Women," "The Women Are Coming" and "Abortions Kill 12,000 Women"—the North America statistic. The story rarely made the front page, but was confined either to the local news pages or the women's pages, well inside the newspapers.<sup>61</sup>

The Caravanners' first public meeting, in Calgary, was uneventful, but garnered some coverage in the local *Herald*, which cited their demands for repeal, pardons and more research and medical education.<sup>62</sup> When they arrived in Edmonton, the local *Journal* sent a reporter, and CP sent Anne Roberts to cover it as well. She found that "quite exciting," she recalls, especially as she knew most of the women involved, including her sister members of Edmonton Women's Liberation.<sup>63</sup> They staged a skit that aimed to demonstrate the "alleged cruelty of the hospital abortion committees, which they claim force women to seek illegal abortions" unless the women had money to pay for them. Roberts either wrote the words "alleged" and "claim" herself or a CP editor inserted them, because to omit them would be considered unfair to the doctors, if not libellous, in journalism practice. She quoted Heidi Fisher, another Edmonton WLM member, who told the rally that the law discriminated against "poor and working women," as those with money could go to Britain or Japan, where abortion was legal. Dodie Weppler of Vancouver explained that the Caravanners were not going to "glorify motherhood" on Mother's Day in Ottawa, but demand that each woman have the right to "choose whether or not she wants to be a mother." Roberts also quoted Marcy Cohen as saying that they were gaining support as they travelled. "Together we are strong and we'll be able to force the government to remove abortion from the criminal code." The story, which appeared in the *Lethbridge Herald* and other papers, was nevertheless balanced with an alternative viewpoint, which is standard practice in mainstream journalism. Roberts included a comment from a young woman who told the rally "that she could not really afford another child but that she believed abortion is murder." A photograph of her holding an anti-abortion placard appeared in the *Montreal Star* version, along with added details from the *Calgary Herald* about the Caravanners' earlier visit there.<sup>64</sup>

After the Caravan left Edmonton, it visited Saskatoon, where derisive laughter and insults from shoppers and young people greeted the women's parade through downtown and their theatre skit as well. The local *Star-Phoenix* did not cite their demands, but did cover the public panel discussion with Caravanner Mary Trew, local law student Norma Simm and obstetrician Thomas Orr. Both Simm and Trew emphasized the inadequacy of the current abortion law for women, while Orr appeared ambivalent, saying at one point that perhaps the fetus had a right to be born. He had replaced another scheduled speaker and was clearly not particularly supportive of the abortion campaign. All in all, the Saskatoon visit resulted in decidedly mixed media messages, despite the Caravanners' publicity efforts.



Reportedly too tired to stage their skit at the next stop, Regina, they drove through the city and held a routine public meeting that night. Six more women from the city joined the motorcade, which now consisted of five vehicles.<sup>65</sup>

In Winnipeg, the coverage of the Caravanners was much better. The *Tribune* highlighted the women's threat of "war" on the Canadian government, and included their demand for community sexual health clinics as well as for repeal of the abortion law in a story that took up half a page.<sup>66</sup> The *Free Press* ran their "furious women" letter to Prime Minister Trudeau in full, the only mainstream newspaper to do so to date, also noting that six women from Winnipeg would be joining the trek.<sup>67</sup>

From Winnipeg, the Caravan headed into Northern Ontario. At Thunder Bay (a.k.a. the Lakehead), they ran into their first substantial opposition. A small group of Catholic anti-abortionists, likely alerted by an advance newspaper story, disrupted their meeting in a local United church, declaring that decriminalization would lead to promiscuity. The women retorted that most of those seeking abortions were married women with too many children. The meeting became so heated that the rector called it to a halt, according to one newspaper report. The other paper ran a photo of the Caravanners, but did not appear to have covered the meeting at all and missed the story.<sup>68</sup> The police were on the alert, which the Caravanners seemed to regard as harassment rather than protection, even though they had been frightened enough to hide their vehicles while they slept over in the town. They sent out a report to the caucus in Vancouver, for media use, saying, "Leaving Thunder Bay, the caravan has since been escorted by police cavalcades of the RCMP and the Ontario Provincial Police, with their bike patrol and a concerned citizens organization, all obviously enjoying the new game of cops and radicals."<sup>69</sup> Recent scholarship has revealed that the RCMP were routinely spying on radical groups, including the Women's Liberation Movement, mainly because a number of its members were aligned with the New Left. The RCMP were already carrying out surveillance on the Caravanners but, according to historians Christabelle Sethna and Steve Hewitt, did not take them as seriously as they did male radicals, and did not lay on enough officers to prevent them from following through with their demonstrations in Ottawa.<sup>70</sup>

The Caravanners received a much warmer welcome in Sault Ste. Marie. The women's editor of the local *Daily Star* had published Anne Roberts's CP news story of their stop-over in Edmonton, and devoted half a page to them when they arrived in the Sault for a routine public meeting. The women complained of the "unpleasantness" in Thunder Bay, which they felt had been deliberately organized, but maintained that otherwise they had attracted much supportive interest along the route. The generally positive reporter, Kay MacIntyre, was intrigued that most of them were young and

unmarried, but taken aback by their socialist rhetoric and their "hippy" appearance, "a factor which will not assist them in obtaining an unbiased hearing. There were several quieter girls, well groomed and intelligent, who made a far better but less vocal impression." Nevertheless, hers was one of the only stories from the trek that not only mentioned the necessity of better research on human reproduction but recorded the Caravanners' opposition to governments imposing birth control on Third World women. The story did not mention the police but did point out, as did a related CP report, that Trudeau and his ministers would not be available to see them in Ottawa.<sup>71</sup>

In Sudbury, after another routine public meeting, the local reporter reprinted, without quotation marks, phrases from material Roberts had written for *The Peak*, which was apparently being used as part of the Caravanners' press kit. "The process of obtaining a therapeutic abortion is complicated and prolonged, and forces a woman to degrade herself before a group of men who hold her future in their hands. As long as a woman cannot prove that she will commit suicide if forced to complete her pregnancy, she has only two alternatives: to bear an unwanted child, or seek an illegal abortion."<sup>72</sup> Roberts had laid the media groundwork effectively in that CP and almost all the newspapers in the cities and towns the Caravan visited covered their street theatre performances or panel discussions, or both, using the publicity material she helped supply. Generally speaking, the news stories about the Caravan were even-handed, quoting liberally from the Caravanners and their media material, despite the fact that these radical young women clearly did not comply with conventional feminine standards of speech, behaviour or dress, which was part of their media appeal at a time when women's libbers were still a novelty.

Although she acted as one of the Caravan's publicists and as CP's reporter on the story when it arrived in Edmonton, Roberts did not see these roles as a professional conflict of interest at the time, because she believed in integrating her activism and her journalism. "I did not accept some idea of journalistic neutrality.... I didn't think anyone in our office had any neutrality.... They would just have different biases than I would have." Although she would think harder about her actions now, she still rhetorically raises the question of whether or not it would have been any more ethical for a reporter who was sexist, a committed capitalist or a member of any political party to cover the Caravan. She thought it was important that it be seen "from the women's perspective and from my perspective."

It was also important to Roberts and her sister radicals to break down the barriers against women having "full choice" over their lives—if and when to bear children, the financial security to support them and the facilities they needed, such as childcare. Access to birth control and abortion were key points on the continuum of reproductive choice. The Abortion



Caravan, which was as educative as it was controversial, moved that process along as did the media coverage, as far as Roberts was concerned. "Each time women talked about it openly and frankly, each time someone learned about it, right? Each time, we were challenging a lot of ... *ideas* that people hadn't maybe even articulated. They didn't even know they had them until someone came along and challenged them.... I think with a lot of young women it was quite liberating to know that it was okay to get an abortion or that a whole group of women said it's okay. Right? That they did it publicly. They weren't ashamed. They didn't feel sinful.... And it wasn't just the Abortion Caravan, it was all the different ways that women were challenging things that ... over time were very successful. Yes, I think it did change many, many things."<sup>73</sup>

The Caravan's next stop was Toronto, where Kathryn Keate and the other members of Toronto Women's Liberation had already become involved in the abortion campaign. A six-page planning document outlined why it was necessary to decriminalize abortion, making essentially the same arguments as the Vancouver Women's Caucus. The TWL members wanted to work with the caucus on the Caravan and continue their own campaign in Ontario afterwards, so they made several proposals designed to lay the groundwork for both. They suggested networking among women's organizations, unions, and community and political groups, researching and issuing information pamphlets on abortion, fundraising, planning street theatre and demonstrations, and coordinating efforts to get media coverage. "The present media committee should include someone from the abortion campaign, and should be in charge of making decisions about the press in conjunction with the whole abortion caravan planning committee." One woman even suggested they practise interviewing each other on tape, "so that a lot of women could learn to speak to the press."<sup>74</sup> They didn't reveal to the media the disagreements they were having with a few of the other groups involved, including the New Feminists.<sup>75</sup> The NF was a radical feminist group that had decided patriarchy, not capitalism, was the primary root of women's oppression, and had split from TWL earlier because of this political disagreement. The NF insisted on attending the campaign activities anyway.<sup>76</sup>

By the time the Caravan reached Toronto there were 40 participants in the motorcade, double the original number. The caucus had sent letters to all members of Parliament, complaining of not being able to set up a meeting with Prime Minister Trudeau in Ottawa, and asking for their support.<sup>77</sup> Marcy Cohen accused him of "gross irresponsibility" in declining to meet with them, and again read out their declaration of war. As it turned out, Munro had to cancel his original plan to meet them because he was called to an international health conference in Geneva. Trudeau was packing for a trip to the Far East, and Turner, still irked at the women's demanding lan-

guage, was reported to have made plans to play tennis rather than attend their rally on Parliament Hill the following Saturday.<sup>78</sup> Margaret Weiers of the *Toronto Daily Star*, who was familiar with women's issues, was one of the few reporters to have the women comment on the four demands they were making, including the need for community reproductive health clinics and scientific research. That evening, the Caravanners held a successful rally in support of the Caravan, which was attended by 500 people, among them New Feminists and other groups, as well as parents with their children.<sup>79</sup> Caucus spokeswomen also appeared on radio programs.<sup>80</sup>

In Ottawa, a local Women's Liberation Movement group, whose members apparently consisted mainly of the "Waffle" or radical left adherents of the New Democratic Party, were active enough to demonstrate for abortion rights outside the annual meeting of the Ontario Medical Association the day the Caravan arrived in town. They also helped organize the march and rally to be held the next day on Parliament Hill.<sup>81</sup> Nevertheless, word had earlier been sent to Toronto that Ottawa feminists were having difficulty organizing media strategy for the Caravan activities on Parliament Hill. Keate was told that a number of them were federal civil servants who were supposed to be politically neutral, and they were afraid to risk their jobs by openly getting involved. Since she was out of work because *Monday Magazine* had just folded, and the winter school term had just ended as well, she was free to go and help out, planning publicity and writing press releases.<sup>82</sup>

She went to Ottawa by train in advance of the Caravan, staying in the home of a woman who was sheltering an American army deserter. At the time, young men were being drafted into the U.S. Armed Forces to fight in the Vietnam War, leading to numerous demonstrations on university campuses. Just after Keate arrived in Ottawa, the police opened fire on anti-war protesters at Kent State University in Ohio, killing four students. The incident upset young radicals everywhere, as most shared a sense of solidarity regardless of their immediate activities. Keate remembers her host coming to the breakfast table with the newspaper, saying, "My God, they're killing us now!" The shootings intensified their own sense of danger at the risks they were about to take by acting on their declaration of war against the Canadian government, but they persisted.<sup>83</sup> In its May 8 press release summing up the Caravan's progress to date, the Vancouver Women's Caucus declared that given the deaths of women from botched abortions, which they blamed on the state, "We see ourselves in a similar situation to the students of Kent, Ohio; correspondingly, peace can be kept not by the murder of innocent women but by listening and acting upon the demands of all oppressed people."<sup>84</sup>

The newspapers, however, paid more attention to the timing of their arrival, the Friday of Mother's Day weekend, juxtaposing catchy pictures and



lead paragraphs meant to draw readers' eyes to these unconventional women and their supporters. A reporter for the *Ottawa Journal* led his story with, "Just two days before the nation's tribute to Mother, the anti-unwanted-motherhood leaders gathered in Ottawa to protest against restrictive abortion laws." He also described their small rally of "shirt-and-pants attired women" and their "impromptu" skit at a shopping mall dramatizing the difficulty of getting safe, legal abortions. There was a photo of one woman with a clenched fist, holding a "Free Abortion on Demand" placard, and another of a car driven by the supportive husband of a local Women's Liberation member, with a message scrawled along its side, "If MPs Could Be Pregnant, Would Abortion Be Legal?" His one-year-old daughter could be seen in the car window. The story reported only one of the Caravanners' demands—that the abortion law be repealed—a demand that the prime minister had recently rejected when questioned in the House of Commons. Nevertheless, the Caravanners expected a thousand women from Toronto, Kingston and Montreal to join them for the Parliament Hill rally on Saturday.<sup>85</sup> In Montreal, radical francophone feminists who supported Quebec separatism, and therefore did not recognize the federal government's authority in the first place, sent their best wishes but decided to participate in their own local pro-abortion events.<sup>86</sup> At the same time, the *Montreal Star's* lifestyles editor, Zoe Bieler, produced two in-depth articles discussing the difficulties of getting doctors and TAC committees in Montreal to approve abortions. The section included a photo of an unmarried young mother holding her infant daughter, on their way to Ottawa. The accompanying article explained that although the woman did not feel ready to have a child, she had decided against a risky illegal abortion, and she wanted to support the Caravan, especially the women who had to face the same decision that she did. The main illustration for the feature was a large drawing of a nude woman, sitting atop a pedestal, snapping the chains that bound her there.<sup>87</sup> In the meantime, feminists in other cities, including Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton and Winnipeg, also held forceful demonstrations in support of the Caravan that weekend, initiating increased media attention to the abortion campaign.<sup>88</sup>

On the Saturday of Mother's Day weekend, the Caravanners marched to Parliament Hill, where they held an outdoor rally with about 450 supporters, and then a crowded meeting inside one of the buildings to hear the women's brief. When a Montreal doctor, Henry Morgentaler, began to speak, impatient women booed him, because they found him patronizing and, anyway, they wanted to hear from women rather than men. Most of them apparently did not know that he had already set up an illegal abortion clinic in Montreal, the beginning of a long legal battle that eventually led to the decriminalization of abortion in Canada in 1988.<sup>89</sup> Grace MacInnis of the New Democratic Party, the only female MP, suggested at the rally that they

take the two years necessary to organize petitions to the House of Commons, but they groaned loudly at her as well because they wanted action right away. They were far more inspired by a fiery address from Doris Power of the Just Society Movement, an anti-poverty organization from Toronto.<sup>90</sup> Power, who was on welfare and already had three children, was eight months pregnant because she had been denied an abortion. Some newspapers ignored Power, but ran an attention-grabbing CP wire photo of Gayle Nystrom, wife of an NDP MP, wearing a sign around her waist bearing the words "This Uterus Is Not Government Property," similar to the ones that other women were wearing. Other photos showed the Caravanners and their predominantly female supporters marching on Parliament Hill with their pro-abortion banners, contrasting them with a counter demonstration put on by an anti-abortion group, Campaign Life. A sidebar in the *Ottawa Citizen* quoted the Caravanners' full brief to the government, containing all its demands, which few other newspapers carried, although CP Ottawa had also listed them. Another *Citizen* article provided some of the colourful rhetoric from abortion supporters, including, "Trudeau says the government has no business in the bedrooms of the nation, but they're sure ready to catch you when you come out." In the *Journal*, a more conservative paper, a Campaign Life spokeswoman voiced her objections to abortion, calling it a "cancer." Several reporters also noted that no Liberal politicians came to hear the Caravanners out.<sup>91</sup> "The angry women of the Cross-Canada Abortion Caravan unfurled their Babies by Choice banners on Parliament Hill on Saturday, but no one from the government was on hand to get the message," the *Globe and Mail* reported.<sup>92</sup>

After the rally, the frustrated and angry Caravan participants and many of their female and male supporters immediately carried their cardboard coffin and crude abortion implements to the nearby official residence of the prime minister, at 24 Sussex Drive, demanding to speak with him before he left on his trip.<sup>93</sup> Most of the news stories about the weekend's events led with the details of this dramatic action, along with photographs. They reported that from 150 to 400 protesters, depending on the account, linked arms and "invaded" the grounds after "minor scuffles" with the few RCMP officers at the gates. The protesters held a sit-in on the lawn during which they roundly cursed the police, calling them "pigs," and booed a representative of the prime minister, who came outside to remonstrate with them. After the RCMP allowed them to leave a wreath, their coffin and the abortion tools behind, they quietly left. According to a retrospective media report, the RCMP persuaded the prime minister that images of the police arresting young women would not play well in the media so soon after the killings at Kent State.<sup>94</sup>

Keate was walking in the crowd near the rear of the march to the prime minister's house, and by the time she reached the gates, they had already



broken through the RCMP's defences. Later, in her *Saturday Night* magazine cover story, she gave her unique insider's perspective on her own feelings and those of the other women sitting near her on the lawn at 24 Sussex Drive. They decided to sit down partly because they were concerned for the safety of the children with them,<sup>95</sup> although Caravanner Margo Dunn said they were afraid the police would pull guns on them.<sup>96</sup> Dunn, whom Keate identified in her story as "Elsa," then read aloud the dangerous procedures women sometimes used in trying to abort their fetuses, including inserting knitting needles or injecting a corrosive household cleaner. It made Keate feel sick. Dizzy, she put her head between her knees, listening to the "violent sobbing" of the woman sitting beside her and the "horrified silence" of the others. The police allowed them to leave the coffin and the implements on the doorstep, and then they left, most of them walking with their sodden placards in the pouring rain. Her version was certainly more sympathetic than the other accounts in the mainstream media, and was not as critical of the participants' behaviour toward the RCMP and the prime minister's representative, whom the Caravanners regarded as patronizing. Keate couldn't resist a crack at Trudeau, "the millionaire Catholic bachelor [who] would not be interested in the deaths of more than one thousand women in his country each year from illegal abortions." At the same time, she really wanted her readers to appreciate that the women did not plan or carry through with their Mother's Day actions in a cavalier way, and why it was important to repeal the abortion law.<sup>97</sup>

On Sunday, Mother's Day, the Caravanners did not stage any protests, but met at their temporary headquarters—a disused downtown school—to plan their next move. Given that no government representative had agreed to meet with them, despite the fact that they had travelled halfway across the country, they felt that they had to do something more dramatic to bring public attention to their cause. According to Margo Dunn, they had been entertaining the idea of demonstrating inside the House of Commons all during the trek, and had discussed it with women along the route, but they had not made a definite decision.<sup>98</sup> Keate reported in *Saturday Night* that they talked well into the night, trying to decide how far to take their demands, as they knew the police were watching them. She, along with two other participants, had already been taken to the police station once after an off-duty officer caught them pasting Caravan posters on bank and storefront windows near Parliament Hill. They were not charged, as technically there was no law against doing so. On the Sunday night, the police continuously circled the school building and, near midnight, three plainclothes officers entered and searched their belongings, making Keate and the others nervous. She wrote: "I am more afraid than I have ever been, and I am angry that I am afraid, that I am letting myself be hassled. Discussion has been tense and confused since they searched us. Should we go on with our

plans, or do nothing? Should we risk being arrested? Is it worth it? But we must act. Some of the women have travelled 3,000 miles for this campaign. We just can't give up now." One of the women, who had been doing abortion referrals for three years, wept as she insisted that they chain themselves inside the Commons visitors' galleries because they owed it to all the women who had suffered so much from unwanted pregnancies and botched operations. The chains would signify the limits the state put on women's control over their own bodies, and would ensure that the MPs heard their message before security officers could detach them and get them outside. Tense, exhausted and sad, the women decided it was an action they must carry out, regardless of their fears that they could be arrested and perhaps injured. Keate's article was the only mainstream media account that explained the strategy behind their decision to disrupt the House of Commons the next day.<sup>99</sup>

The Caravanners planned their Parliament Hill action carefully. A number of them and their supporters would stage an outdoor protest, marching around the Eternal Flame in a silent vigil, wearing mournful black head coverings and arm bands and carrying the cardboard coffin and the implements of botched abortions. At a certain point, the women were to remove the black head coverings, revealing red ones underneath, meant to symbolize their rage, their declaration of war, and their intention to keep fighting for women's reproductive choices.<sup>100</sup> This demonstration served as a decoy to divert RCMP attention from their other more daring protest inside the public galleries of the House of Commons, until it was too late for them to intervene. Publicity was key, and it was important to make sure that as many reporters as possible were on Parliament Hill at the time, not just members of the press gallery, who would likely cover the House anyway. Contacting them all was Keate's job, mainly because she was willing to do it and knew what to say to get them on the scene. Some of the TWL members had mixed feelings about her involvement, she recalls. "I wasn't appointed necessarily because of my expertise as a member of the media. If anything that sort of made me somewhat suspect.... You know, I had worked as a journalist, the media was seen as being hostile to the women's movement and judgmental and sexist, and I had been part of that. And the fact that I wasn't willing to renounce my wicked past and I actually enjoy journalism on a certain level was really, really hard for them to understand.... I'm not an ideologue and definitely the women's movement was, and so journalists were seen as the bad folks. But, anyway, no one else was willing to call up the big bad media."<sup>101</sup>

There was no written news release. Instead, on the Monday morning, Keate phoned Canadian Press, all the newspapers and all the broadcast outlets in the city, using the most "inflammatory" and "outrageous" rhetoric she could.<sup>102</sup> "We knew that if we threatened violence the media would



all be interested. So, we said that we were declaring war on the House of Commons. When they'd ask questions, I'd say 'I'm not going to tell you, just be there,' and I gave the time.... And that was it. That was the extent of our media outreach.... I knew not to get into arguments or discussions or anything. I knew how to handle it. So my background had helped." She recalled that the news editors she phoned greeted her announcement with jocular skepticism, but alerted their reporters anyway. The media were not particularly friendly toward women's liberation at the time, regarding them all as "bra burners" and "weird teenagers," she added, even though most of the Caravanners were in their 20s and some were older.

Knowing they would immediately be suspect if they showed up at the Commons visitors' galleries in their usual women's liberation garb, the Caravanners prepared for a costume change. The inside contingent had to look respectable enough to get past the RCMP and the House security commissioners without questions being asked. They shaved their legs, switched from jeans to dresses and miniskirts, applied makeup, and, in some cases, chose male escorts, flippantly referred to as "beards," to complete their masquerade. Keate remembers that chain belts were a fashion accessory at the time, as were large purses, which were handy for carrying bigger chains and padlocks past the security guards.<sup>103</sup> At the time, the guards could prevent anyone carrying suspicious packages from going into the galleries, but they did not normally search women's handbags.<sup>104</sup>

The three galleries were ranged above and around the floor of the House, allowing a wide view of the seated MPs below. Only the public gallery was open to any visitor. The press gallery was reserved for reporters, and the guards routinely demanded guest passes, signed by MPs, before any of their constituents could enter the government and opposition galleries.<sup>105</sup> Keate's article did not mention how the women managed to get these passes,<sup>106</sup> but she recalled that they phoned the MPs' offices, pretending to live in their ridings. "We worked with the women inside the House of Commons to get passes from the members of Parliament and basically it was a question of us calling them up and pretending to be people from, you know, Saskatoon or Winnipeg or whatever, with fake names."<sup>107</sup> The ruse worked, allowing them to spread out as much as possible throughout the public and members' galleries. In the meantime, the decoy demonstration around the Eternal Flame was proceeding "like a Sunday picnic," Keate said, with a few RCMP officers watching the Caravanners but not interfering in any way, beyond locking the doors to the House of Commons to keep them out. The officers were too late, as the other contingent had already secretly entered the galleries, waiting for their three o'clock deadline, when they would stand up and declare war on the government of Canada.<sup>108</sup>

The journalists seated in the press gallery had a clear view of what happened next. The *Winnipeg Free Press* reported: "Complete disorder and

pandemonium took over in the House of Commons as 31 young women arose one after the other in the public and members' galleries and screamed at startled MPs, 'Free abortion on demand.'<sup>109</sup> The story made front-page news across the country. Most of the reporters paid far more attention to the disturbance in the House from the "screaming" women than to the reasons for their demands for "free abortion," the headlines reflecting the women's anger and their noisy "invasion" of the Commons. What was stunning for most of the journalists and the MPs was the effectiveness of their strategy and the fact that their demonstration forced the House to adjourn for the first time in its history. It was half an hour before it could resume business again. CP reported that the women apparently belonged to "the Women's Liberation Movement, the most radical feminist group in Canada." It mentioned that the women had held a rally on the Hill on Saturday, when "they didn't wear make-up, were in slacks, beads and shawls. It was hard to believe they were the same girls, wearing dresses and smiles, who took their places in the galleries Monday."<sup>110</sup>

They started their "ruckus" a few minutes after Justice Minister Turner gave a noncommittal answer to an MP from the New Democratic Party, Andrew Brewin, who asked him if the abortion legislation would be amended.<sup>111</sup> Brewin may have been standing in for Grace MacInnis, who was absent that day. One of the Caravanners stood up and started shouting out a speech in favour of repeal of the abortion law. She had managed to hook herself up with a microphone to the translation system, which was available at every seat in the galleries and on the floor of the House, so that her demands could be heard by everyone. As soon as a guard reached her, a woman in another area jumped up and began the speech again, and so on, in progression, until most of the women scattered throughout the galleries were yelling their slogans in unison. One security guard shouted, "Get those whores out of here," and others called them "sluts" as they struggled to get the women outside. It was a difficult job, given that about a dozen had chained themselves to their seats. The guards had to call for cutting pliers and hacksaws, which took more time, and it was not a gentle process, with the women yelling and resisting them. At least one of them bit a guard who tried to clap his hand over her mouth to silence her. Although several of the reporters said that the guards were not unduly rough, a few women complained afterwards of being gagged or choked. One of them said, "rubbing a chafed wrist, that they took the chains off after nearly breaking our arms." Beyond that, they were not injured, as they had feared, and, as it was not against the law for a member of the public to "disrupt the decorum of the House," none were arrested, although a few were questioned and photographed in the Speaker's Chamber.<sup>112</sup>

As the women were ejected from the House, arms linked, tears streaming down their faces and singing women's liberation songs, they ran over



to join the other demonstrators, including Keate, who were still marching outside, by this time numbering about 100 in all. Several publications ran a CP wire photo of the Caravanners burning a large facsimile of the abortion section of the Criminal Code, as well as other photos showing shouting women with clenched fists. No photographs or television images of the demonstration in the galleries were taken, as journalists were not allowed then to record the proceedings inside the House of Commons.<sup>113</sup> There was some broadcast coverage of the demonstration outside.<sup>114</sup> Marcy Cohen and other Caravanners explained to reporters that they had decided to disrupt the House after government leaders, including Turner, had refused to meet with them, and they attached themselves to the gallery chairs to represent Canadian women who were chained by the abortion law. Moreover, they would continue their “war” until the law was repealed.<sup>115</sup> Several of the politicians, apparently embarrassed that their names appeared on the women’s gallery passes, said they had been forged. Others raised the question of tightening security regulations governing access by the public.<sup>116</sup>

Although the Caravan had received generally good coverage up to this point, the editorial tone immediately shifted. Some newspapers drew parallels between the Caravanners and the militant British “suffragettes,” a misplaced stereotype in Canadian context, but one that was commonly used. Almost all the editorials and opinion columns condemned the disruption in the House of Commons, whether or not they agreed that the abortion law was inadequate, or should at least be reviewed. Nevertheless, most of them felt that the women’s demanding tone and protest would not, or should not, be enough to force the House to re-examine the legislation, although the usually conservative *Ottawa Journal* suggested that government leaders should at least meet the women as they had requested. One women’s page columnist, Pat Wallace of the *Vancouver Province*, felt the “emotional binge” of the “overly-militant” Caravanners had tarnished the respectable reputation that “lucid” and “rational” feminists had earlier earned with their briefs to the Royal Commission on the Status of Women.<sup>117</sup> Letters to the editor ran the gamut from support to outright condemnation. One *Globe and Mail* reader pointed out that it was easy enough to laugh at the Caravanners, just as it had once been easy to laugh at the actions of the suffragettes, but it was time to face the fact that abortion, although not a perfect solution to unwanted pregnancy, was the fairest one for the woman concerned.<sup>118</sup>

Keate herself was among the Caravanners captured in a *Toronto Daily Star* press photograph, shouting, her clenched fist raised, as she marched with the others around the Eternal Flame. The same image made the front cover of *Saturday Night*, doctored so that a spotlight hit her face, to accompany her account in the magazine. The photos inside showed the women



Kathryn Keate (centre, third from right) joins the Abortion Caravan protest outside the House of Commons, 11 May 1970. Photo by Errol Young. Published with the permission of Errol Young and TorStar Syndication Services.

### Abortion law protesters break up House sitting

WORLD COURT WATCHES ARCTIC POLLUTION LAW

—Photo by Errol Young

DEFENDING FREE ABORTIONS, a group of women stands with fists upraised in front of the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa yesterday, as they continue protest which began in the House of Commons, facing an adjournment for a half hour. The women, most of whom are in their late teens or early 20s, were part of a group of more than 200 who have been conducting an "Abortion Caravan" across Canada.

burning the large facsimile of the current abortion law, and carrying the coffin up the main steps outside the building. Two women in miniskirts, likely members of the gallery contingent, hugged each other.<sup>119</sup> Several readers objected to the actions of the Caravan participants, and the swear words some of them had used, intimating that women only had themselves to blame if men took advantage of them sexually.<sup>120</sup> Although it was not commonly done then, Fulford allowed the salty language to appear in print because, Keate recalls, she quoted it in context. It included a crude invitation from one of several passing male drivers who harassed her as she sat alone with her suitcase in the dark outside her Toronto commune after she returned from Ottawa. Their behaviour was unsettling enough to make her cry, she told her readers. “I can’t even walk out alone on the goddamn streets without being hassled. Some liberated woman I am.”<sup>121</sup>

Like Anne Roberts, she believes that the publicity she organized in Ottawa benefited the cause and was part of her duty as a feminist, as was her article in *Saturday Night*. She certainly didn’t write it for the money. The magazine was then in such dire financial straits that she was paid 50 dollars less than the rate she had been quoted, and she was told by an accountant at the magazine to cash the cheque quickly before it bounced.<sup>122</sup> Although she had worked on several newspapers and on *Monday Magazine* during her university years, Keate did not feel a conflict over her Caravan activism, mainly because she was not working full time as a reporter at that point and did not even consider herself a “professional” journalist. “I



had the mind-set and the training and the ability for it but I certainly didn't see that I was recognized as that." In the 1970s, "if you walked into the newsroom and said that, I mean, everyone would have fallen off their chairs laughing. Even just the word 'journalist' was suspect. That was a word that academics used. You were a 'reporter,'" and female journalists, who were mostly still relegated to the women's pages or "fluff" assignments, were taken even less seriously. She would have considered herself a very green wannabe reporter.<sup>123</sup>

Toronto Women's Liberation, however, felt she had engaged in a political conflict of interest because of her *Saturday Night* article. "I got hell for that, absolute hell." Two of TWL's leading members called her on the carpet, literally, on the floor of the U of T co-op daycare centre, for a three-hour "struggle session," during which they tried to convince her of the ideological error of her ways. They were particularly angry with her because she had revealed that some of the women involved in the Caravan demonstrations, including herself, had been afraid and tearful. Keate, however, was unbowed. "I told them the same thing I would tell them today. That's what happened, that's what made it a better story, that's what made it accessible to people, and that's what made it more of a triumph. Because it showed that even though women were scared and were frightened and were lonely and had enormous obstacles to overcome, that they did it and they did it through hard work and organization and cooperation and planning and it was a major success. Because of that. Not in spite of that, because of that, because it was part of the whole picture." Keate believes that radicals in general do not understand the function of journalism, or the mindset of journalists, who don't like ideological rules. As an activist, she believes that "you don't censor the struggle, you don't censor what people have to go through to get where they are. They don't understand that it bonds people like nothing else does."<sup>124</sup> Keate had written in *Saturday Night* that it angered and saddened her that feminists had to exert "tremendous pressure" in order to change the "terrible facts of life for women." From her perspective, it was necessary. After the Abortion Caravan was over, she and the other participants had become even more determined to do everything they could to help those who needed safe, legal abortions.<sup>125</sup> Presciently, she had concluded: "It's going to be a long, hard struggle."<sup>126</sup>

Both Roberts and Keate have followed similar career paths since the Abortion Caravan, juggling their need to earn a living with their political convictions, which, ironically, became harder for them to do as women journalists became more accepted in newsrooms but were also bound to follow the rules, written or unwritten.<sup>127</sup> Some months after the Caravan was over, CP fired Roberts after she appeared on CBC TV on behalf of the Edmonton Women's Liberation group and refused to promise her bureau chief that she would stop her political activism. He felt it compromised her

identity and work as a CP reporter, and she did not. She recalls that he was a member of a local business group, which she pointed out was a double standard where one's activism was concerned, but he didn't agree. She freelanced for a while and, after her partner died, returned to the United States, where she earned a graduate degree in journalism and reported on social issues for a Chicago-area chain of newspapers. Later she came back to Canada and worked at CBC radio in Edmonton, eventually taking a job as a journalism instructor at Langara College in Vancouver. She has two children with her current partner and has also been a Vancouver school board trustee and a city councillor with the progressive COPE coalition.

She always believed that there was a strong argument for including in all her news stories the perspectives of people who did not share her political beliefs. "Because I did have, still have, enormous confidence in people that if they read all the kinds of points of view and if they really understood what was going on,... most people would adopt a more socially progressive politics.... I felt that I was being fair to everyone, that I wasn't distorting people to achieve an end because I had such confidence that if people were fully informed they would make their best decisions."<sup>128</sup>

Toronto Women's Liberation apparently forgave Keate her political transgressions. Some months after the Caravan ended, she and TWL member Alma Marks appeared on the CBC TV program *Take 30*, explaining socialist feminism to host Adrienne Clarkson and a small group of skeptical women also invited to the studio.<sup>129</sup> Although, unlike Roberts, she was not working as a news reporter during the Caravan campaign, Keate was still bucking the common news industry attitude that no journalist, including one in training, should compromise his or her professional objectivity by becoming an activist of any kind.<sup>130</sup> But that was not her view at the time, nor is it now. Her goal all along has been to live "authentically," in line with her principles. "I want to practise what I believe. If I'm a feminist I want to act like a feminist in all spheres of my life—in the workplace, politically, socially, religiously, personally in my relationships with men and women." During her career she has worked on mainstream newspapers, including the *Daily Colonist* in Victoria, and with CBC Radio in Vancouver. After her marriage broke up and she needed to support her son, she opted for better pay and a more flexible schedule. She worked in public relations at the University of Western Ontario, among other positions. Nevertheless, she has twice quit a job when office demands clashed with her political convictions. All along, she has consistently volunteered her services to a number of political organizations, first the NDP and then the Green Party, as well as environmental, community and Unitarian congregation groups.

She now holds a Ph.D. in communication and in recent years, has taught media studies courses at Vancouver Island University in Nanaimo, BC. Like Roberts, she believes that one's political principles do not necessarily



compromise good journalism. "I have gone into interviews with people who I totally disagree with, and I may hate everything they stand for, but I have written articles that have expressed their point of view in an objective way." She likens the devil's advocate role that journalists often adopt to a "struggle session" during which one learns that one's own vision is not necessarily perfect.<sup>131</sup>

American media scholars are currently involved in debates over how much the abortion issue overshadowed other equality issues in the news coverage of the feminist movement, or how much liberal perspectives took precedence over radical ones.<sup>132</sup> In Canada, the media coverage of reproductive rights, including abortion, was generally liberal in tone, even when the Royal Commission on the Status of Women recommended, in December 1970, a compromise that amounted to decriminalizing abortion in the first trimester and an end to the TAC committees, suggestions the government ignored.<sup>133</sup> The socialist feminists behind the Abortion Caravan did not have the advantage of liberal respectability, perhaps, but they won their time in the limelight, mainly because the issue was controversial and they were familiar with the ways in which the news media work. As activists, they understood that reporters look for conflict, impact, timeliness and the proximity of the issue to readers who are familiar with it.<sup>134</sup> Given the focus in most journalism on some form of conflict, the Caravanners' dramatic rhetoric, such as their "war on the Canadian government," was a highlight in several of the stories, complemented by self-conscious photos of the women raising clenched fists, acting out their skits, yelling their demands and hoisting their banners. This is what they intended, as part of their radical, attention-seeking performance, which was fuelled by genuine anger, and these images, constantly repeated, became symbolic of their politics and reflected other images of so-called women's libbers that were quickly becoming a staple of media coverage in the United States, Canada and elsewhere. Descriptions of the way they dressed, and the swear words they used, only underscored the still prevalent expectation that young women should be ladylike, and these young radicals definitely were not, a perspective reflected in the editorial cartoon that opens this chapter.

As a result of the feminist publicity strategy behind it, the Caravan campaign had a high media profile from start to finish, which was notable given that the group started out with 17 women in a three-vehicle motorcade, although they had dozens of supporters at each stop along the way, and hundreds at the Ottawa demonstrations. Reporters took them seriously enough to cover the Caravan because their arguments struck a chord for many women of child-bearing age, who feared unwanted pregnancy but had little power over the outcome. It helped that the Caravanners' publicity campaign was well organized, a definite advantage in courting news coverage. Owing to the concerted efforts of Roberts, Keate and the other

women involved, the media were informed of their coming in advance and well briefed on the scene by Caravanners who had practised their scripts and their eye-catching street theatre performances. Consequently, their progress across the country and their demand that abortion be decriminalized was covered by just about every local newspaper, because they knew how to attract attention through their rhetoric and their actions. They were demonstrating that the highly contentious abortion issue was still not settled, that women's right to choose was at stake, and that women were still being harmed because of the situation. In response, the local reporters were much better than only "barely respectful"<sup>135</sup> of their efforts, although their news stories were not as broad-ranging as perhaps the Caravanners had hoped. Of their key demands, only the most dramatic one—abortion on demand—really caught the media's attention because they were expressing a radical solution to an age-old problem, one that would shift child-bearing decisions from doctor to pregnant woman, a revolutionary idea for all concerned. In addition, the law had only been recently changed after a great deal of public debate, and repealing it would mean the end of the hospital TACs. A few reporters did pay attention to the Caravanners' call for legal pardons for convicted abortionists, and also mentioned the need for independent, free community sexual health clinics, a change that would involve the sanction of the provincial governments. Only the individual journalists' interest, and the available space, allowed at least some mention of the need for sex education in medical schools, research on the medical safety of various birth control methods, and the Caravanners' opposition to controlling women's reproductive functions in the name of population control.

It was easier for reporters to refer to them simply as "militant" and focus on the pro and con arguments of the abortion issue itself, mainly because of the logistics and practices of news writing, especially the pyramid style of reporting that often deleted detail and context, and the "fairness and balance" that invited opposing viewpoints. Before the Caravan reached Ottawa, most of these stories were published on the women's pages, which some might argue marginalized them further. Historically, however, these sections have always been the first to carry news of equality rights that might not have been found anywhere else in the newspaper, and that was still true in 1970.<sup>136</sup>

Once the Caravanners became confrontational, bringing their "declaration of war" to the prime minister's residence and the House of Commons, the placement of the stories shifted to the front and inside news pages, as their actions were a direct, blunt challenge to the male political establishment that had tried to ignore them. The journalists, including press gallery reporters, scrambled to cover what was essentially dramatic spot news, having to explain to their readers that these determined women had caught everyone off-guard with the lengths they were prepared to go to in



pressing their case for "abortion on demand." Most of the editorials, taking House security and decorum as their benchmarks, condemned their actions but did not necessarily disagree with their sentiments. The same pattern applied to letters to the editor.

Roberts, Keate and the other participants in the Abortion Caravan campaign did not win further reproductive freedoms for Canadian women in the short run, nor could they, given the highly charged nature of the political discussions, right up to the 1988 Supreme Court decision favouring Morgentaler's clinics. Although that decision effectively took abortion out of the Criminal Code, the battle is still not over.<sup>137</sup> Today, the current generation of pro-choice advocates, many of them university students as well, are using the Internet to network with each other, lobbying to end the provincial health regulations that still make access to abortion uneven across the country. The media continue to track the debates.<sup>138</sup>

## CHAPTER 6

### Collective Visions

#### *Lesbian Identity and Sexuality in Feminist Periodicals, 1979–1994*

In December 1987, a group of laughing lesbians tumbled out of a closet onto the cover page of *Pandora*, Halifax's feminist-run quarterly. The headline read, "Too Visible?" while, inside, an editorial challenged all readers to accept the fact that the periodical's contributors would continue to write regularly about lesbians and their lives. A few subscribers had complained about lesbian content in an earlier issue, yet no one, the editorial continued, had questioned the amount of copy that *Pandora* devoted to any number of issues primarily of interest to heterosexual women. So why did the word *lesbian* have so much power? "For those who are homophobic, whether the word 'lesbian' appears once or a hundred times, it's too much. For them, the sore point is not the quantity, but its very presence."<sup>1</sup>

From the early 1970s to the turn of the 21st century, activist lesbians in Canada and their supporters used feminist newspapers, devoted to issues and events in the broader women's communities, to engage in far-reaching discussions about identity politics. For lesbians, it was important to take power over their sexuality back from the state, challenge social disapproval in the mainstream press, and express their feelings in ways they felt were true to themselves and their own emotional and erotic experiences. A number of historians, communications scholars and other academics have begun to track this history,<sup>2</sup> including coverage of lesbians in the mainstream media,<sup>3</sup> but they have not extensively analyzed the role of the feminist press as recorder and arbiter of debates about lesbianism.<sup>4</sup> This essay will highlight the roles of several editors and editorial collectives on three of the best-known feminist publications, explain the oppositional political climate in which they operated, and explore the complexity of the debates in their pages about lesbian identity and sexual practices.