



ANN THOMSON

WINNING CHOICE ON ABORTION

How British Columbian
and Canadian Feminists
Won the Battles of the
1970s and 1980s

uons about 'ire' virtually revise theology, so that the fetus seems to nudge Jesus Christ aside and take his place. I think readers will see that anti-abortionists are less concerned with the 'unborn' than with controlling women's lives as closely as the Taliban in Afghanistan. Beyond that, they want to impose an evangelical Christian dictatorship on our multi-cultural, multi-faith Canada.

Nonetheless the best part is, this is a story of victory. Here is one truly concrete triumph won by Canadian feminism. It deserves to be honoured and better known. It tells of a struggle that relied mainly on the strategies of educating on the issue, building broad-based coalitions, and demonstrating in the streets. But this is also a story that hasn't come to an end yet. Anti-abortionists still hope to turn back the clock. Feminist consciousness so alarms the rich and powerful that an avalanche of attacks has been unleashed in recent years. It has partially succeeded in re-casting middle class females as joyous 'ho's', who are obsessed with sex, clothes, and celebrities. Poor women are shoved deeper into poverty, and forgotten. Anti-abortion pledges rise again in every election campaign. So another reason I've written this book is to alert feminists of all sexes to the need to keep fighting.

See you on the barricades!

Ann Thomson 2004

FEMINISM ARRIVES AT SFU



Women's Liberation appeared in British Columbia at Simon Fraser University in the turbulent year of 1968. It was inspired by the new feminism sweeping across North America, and, in the beginning, it was also a branch on the burgeoning tree of radical campus politics. But it quickly developed its own character and became an important feature of the social landscape.

Most of the major issues of the women's rights movement popped up in the Women's Caucus, founded by students at SFU. Equal opportunities in education. Equal jobs, equal pay, and rights for women workers. Child care. And, of course, birth control and abortion. Some members of Women's Caucus were lesbians, although they did not begin to organize for lesbian rights until later. The major demand to end rape and violence against women took only another year or two to develop in Vancouver.

This book will trace the pursuit of women's right to control their reproductive lives from the time of BC's first feminist group, founded in 1968, through the opening of Everywoman's Health Centre, British Columbia's first free-standing abortion clinic, in 1988. When the struggle began, abortion was illegal, and everything to do with women's sexuality and reproductive capacities was treated as dirty and taboo. When this account ends, the law had been overturned, abortion was fully legal, and, in still-rare parts of Canada, women could end a pregnancy on demand.

Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, adjacent to Vancouver, opened in September 1965. Faculty members' political views ranged from left to right, and in a highly-politicized period, these had an impact on campus life. The university also attracted a student body for whom the major issues of the day vied with the curriculum for interest. In its short history, three radical student groups had already succeeded one another at SFU. It was a volatile time. There was intense interest on North American campuses in worldwide movements for peace and against nuclear weapons; in the US civil rights' struggle and development of the Black Liberation Movement; in the growth of the student left and its leadership in opposing the war in Vietnam; and in achieving respect and authority for youth. Leftist students and faculty felt the electric sense of a new era, not just a new university, opening up.

The 1968 summer term at SFU began amidst an avalanche of meetings, as both faculty and students of all political stripes discussed the university's future. The president had been forced to step down, when the Canadian Association of University Teachers had censured the administration and supported left-leaning faculty in a charge of discrimination in hiring. In the furor, few noticed the beginnings of a new constituency that would demand unthought-of rights. Feminism spoke up through a term paper for a course in the Political Science, Sociology, and Anthropology (PSA) Department.

Eighteen-year-old Marcy Toms had plunged into campus politics at the founding meeting of SFU's Students for a Democratic University (SDU) on January 22, 1968. She had attended her first anti-Vietnam war march the previous term. A Vancouver native, Toms recalls a defining experience from 1957, the year she was seven:

...one thing was watching the integration of the schools in Little Rock, Arkansas, on black and white TV...I can remember it like it was yesterday, seeing that little black kid with her pigtails and her white bobby socks walking up the stairs escorted by US marshalls ...this huge, huge, huge mob of people and one woman with her hair in curlers and a white kerchief...spitting at her...¹

In secondary school, Toms was assigned to write an essay on "self-determination or not for Vietnam." That, too, helped form her political views.

During her first year at SFU, Toms took a Sociology course for which the one assignment was "to rewrite in modern terms...with a contemporary view, the Communist Manifesto." Into Toms's hands had recently fallen a pamphlet written by leftist women in Toronto. It was called, "Sisters, Brothers, Lovers...Listen."² In a tradition that grew out of the US civil rights movement — and some of the Toronto authors had been active in registering southern blacks to vote — it was a catalogue showing that women were not taken seriously by the 'new left'. Toms found in it the inspiration for her course assignment, which she wrote in partnership with some classmates. Looking back over the term and their own restricted role in SDU, these student activists noted, sardonically, that "what we were doing in SDU...wasn't exactly equal to what the guys were doing."³ It seemed the "guys" were making the decisions and getting the glory. Toms and her writing partners called their term paper a "new manifesto for women" and titled it the "Feminine Action League."⁴ It ended with the call: "Women of the world unite. You have nothing to lose but your apron strings."⁵

Soon afterward, a meeting was called to form a real Feminine Action League on campus. Toms and her friends eschewed the word 'feminist' at first. It had already been tinged by anxiety, aroused by the founding of the National Organization of Women (NOW) and other radical groups of the women's liberation movement in the US. The newly conscious women at SFU were determined to be taken seriously and wanted to avoid the deri-

sion heaped on NOW. Lest men dominate the meeting, they were barred from attending. That was enough to turn the founders' boy friends into clowns. Frantic to prevent the women in their lives from becoming independent, the male students tried to force their way into the meeting. Included were two prominent male activists and a photographer from the campus paper, *The Peak*. Toms described the scene to writer Frances Wasserlein: "...at least those three people were peering around the windows, they were knocking on the door, they were peering through the slit in the door to try to find out what was going on."⁶

The next issue of *The Peak* carried a front-page photo of some tense, but self-assured young women, seated around a table. Snapped just before the door was locked, the photo was captioned "Pussy Power Strikes at SFU." Those in the photo were identified as "the women of [male] [student] council members and sundry hangers-on," and readers were warned they were up to the same "diabolical plot" as *Lysistrata*, in the play by Aristophanes, in which the women of Greece withheld sex from their husbands until they stopped going to war.⁷ The robust male chauvinism at SFU was threatened indeed.

A brisk retort appeared in the next issue of the paper. Using transparent pseudonyms, Marcy "Jones" [Toms] and Patty "Harding" [Hoffer; now Davitt] of the Feminine Action League, outlined the main points of their manifesto for change. It charged that society excluded women from economic production, confining them entirely to reproduction. Women were "appropriated as sex objects," and socialized into the narrow and obsolete channel of the nuclear family. *The Peak* headed the letter "Pussy power strikes back" and bracketed it between twin photos of a female breast.⁸ The Feminine Action League was undeterred but met only two or three times.

Later that summer, fifteen women met in a Kitsilano apartment to continue the project. Not all were students, but all were supporters of activist politics, and they were not interested in introspection, or "consciousness-raising," which was then a major feature of budding feminist groups. The SFU women wanted to plan "what we should actually do, on the campus or even off the campus."⁹ From the start, their gaze was fixed on changing the world, as well as changing the status of women. That did not mean their commitment to campus politics was diminished. The nucleus of women that met that summer continued to throw itself into SDU and to participate vigorously in ongoing political struggles. When classes resumed in the fall, the new group held a formal, founding meeting on September 11, 1968, and took the name of Women's Caucus. Beginning immediately, and for the next several years, Women's Caucus was intensely active, and it left an indelible mark on the Canadian scene.

The name Women's Caucus meant different things to its participants. Some considered it to be a caucus of women in Students for a Democratic

University (SDU). Others preferred to see themselves as a caucus of the human race, a group of those long disenfranchised.¹⁰ Although women had belatedly been recognized in Canada as "persons" (1938) and had the vote, they could not get credit, enter most professions, or even get a library card without written permission from a man — father or husband. More importantly, they had no control over their own bodies and were required to carry every pregnancy to term and devote themselves to raising children.

From the start, Women's Caucus drew in activists with a variety of ages, occupations, and backgrounds. Many were students, but one of the founders was Margaret Benston, who was beginning a well-respected career on the Chemistry Department faculty.¹¹ Another was Andrea Lebowitz, a faculty member in the Department of English. Like Benston, she came to SFU from the United States. Other members had male partners who were students or faculty members at SFU. One was Liz Briemberg, who came to Canada from England, where she met her Edmonton-born husband while both were students. In 1968, she was at home with two children, feeling isolated from her husband's exciting work as one of the faculty members who had initiated the CAUT investigation.

Another Women's Caucus founder was Anne Roberts, a journalist from Michigan, whose partner was an assistant professor in the PSA Department. Marge Hollibaugh came to SFU from California. Though not a student, her husband was; he held such posts as Ombudsman and President of the Student Council. Marge, energetic and outgoing, was in her mid-forties at the inception of Women's Caucus, and was perhaps its senior member on the campus.

Jean Rands, originally from Regina, had accumulated an impressive record of political work before becoming a typesetter for the SFU student newspaper, *The Peak*, in September, 1968. Her commitment to leftist politics and women's issues made Women's Caucus a logical step for her.

The bulk of the members were students, of course. Among those who were influential in Women's Caucus was Marcy Cohen, who had done extensive progressive political work while an undergraduate in Calgary and at York University. She entered the graduate program in Education at SFU in January 1969 and was led to the Women's Caucus through SDU. Margo Dunn was doing graduate work in the Drama Department when she was drawn into Women's Caucus activities.

Cathy Walker, from a Burnaby working class family, was drawn into SDU and Women's Caucus because of her strong interest in politics. Like Jean Rands and several other women's liberation activists, Walker went on to become a leader in the labour movement. She served for several years as an executive officer of an independent Canadian union, CAIMAW, which has since disbanded. Pat Davitt, then Hoffer, from Saskatchewan, came to SFU for graduate study. Later, she served as president of the

Vancouver Municipal and Regional Employees Union (VMREU), and of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) local that succeeded it.

Some members of Women's Caucus were studying not at SFU, but at the University of British Columbia. Candace Parker, from California, was a graduate student in sociology at UBC when she got involved in Women's Caucus. Ellen Woodsworth, great-niece of J.S. Woodsworth, founder of the CCF, and cousin of Grace MacInnis, was also studying at UBC. Women's Caucus was important to her as a women's organization, "but it was also a Marxist organization ...with a comprehensive social analysis, and...it was doing practical things...I wanted that kind of an organization. I needed it. I thought that that was where sanity was."¹² Donna Liberson, from Winnipeg, got an education degree from UBC, then opened a day care centre and, later, a Gastown boutique. She socialized with radicals from SFU, attended Women's Caucus meetings, and especially enjoyed guerrilla theatre.

Women's Caucus had wide-ranging activities, and it's not possible to name every participant. These women, mostly in their mid-twenties, were joined by others, some from the campus, and, later, by several vital women from the general community. When the moment came to apply their energies to women's needs, these products of the repressed 1950s became dynamos.

Marcy Toms announced the new group in the September 18, 1968 issue of *The Peak*. Women's Caucus, she wrote, was a "significant development within the student movement at SFU", and newcomers were invited to help draft priority issues for the group. In short order, a priority issue was addressed. The next edition of the weekly *Peak* featured a Women's Caucus comment "on abortion," written by Maggie Benston.¹³

This was, perhaps, the first time in the lower mainland that the horrific and taboo 'A' word was raised by politicized woman. Committed to feminism though she was, Benston approached the topic a bit gingerly. She made the basic points that women were illogically and unfairly denied control over their reproductive lives, and that poor women suffered most when access to birth control and abortion were not allowed. The piece was meant to be educational. It made no explicit call for a change in social policy or in the law, ending with the truism, "Until women are free, it should be clear that no one will be free."¹⁴

Three weeks later, Women's Caucus was ready to launch an ambitious plan, and it contacted the SFU administration and the Vancouver Family Planning Centre for help. It wanted to use the campus health centre two evenings a week "for an advisor on family planning and for medical examinations" — because of "concern about a pressing student (and societal) problem, the problem of unplanned and unwanted pregnancy."¹⁵

Access to birth control was then, and had long been, illegal in Canada,

although to Women's Caucus activists it was vital. They needed it themselves. But unplanned pregnancies were genuine emergencies. While investigating possible ways of getting an abortion in Vancouver, Women's Caucus went ahead and placed a small ad in the October 9, 1968 edition of *The Peak*. It read:

Girls — need help? in trouble? Contact the Women's Caucus Counsellor by letter c/o SFU Student Society or phone her at 299-**** evenings for information.

The response was immediate. Many phone calls came from students in the Vancouver area, as well as some from Alberta and Saskatchewan. The desperation of women seeking abortions was assuming volcanic force, irrevocably demanding to be addressed. Women's Caucus found it had bitten off more than it could chew, for it was nearly impossible to find practitioners of abortion to whom it could steer those who contacted it.

Those who now identify the 1960s as a time of hippies, free love, and psychedelic irresponsibility magnify the extent of such influences at the time. Even as the 'sexual revolution' gained steam, the overwhelming majority in Canada, and the world, remained strait-jacketed by suffocating sexual repression. Sex was a topic banned from thought, language, and discussion, associated with obscenity, and considered 'filthy.' But sexuality was not nearly so fearsome and despised as the question of abortion.

The American writer and crusader for birth control and abortion rights, Lawrence Lader, wrote "The abortion issue in 1965 was enveloped in a conspiracy of silence just as ruthless as the slavery issue in 1831."

To be against slavery, dangerous as it was in Boston in 1831, gave the rebel a philosophic nobility. To be against abortion laws in 1965, however, involved one in a dirty business.¹⁶

Its practice was presumed to be, and often was, controlled by organized crime. Lader continued:

"Abortion was a soiled and forbidden word. Many newspapers and broadcasting stations would not use it on their media. To advocate the right of abortion meant tearing down the key bulwark against immorality. Whether for the single girl or married woman, it meant destroying the ultimate punishment of sex, and allowing the pleasure of sex for its own sake without the concomitant obligation of childbirth. Abortion stood at the apex of all our nightmares and inhibitions about sex, and to tamper with it meant that the whole system could come tumbling down."¹⁷

Women's Caucus fumbled for contacts in the netherworld to which the illegal practice of abortion was consigned. It involved making whispered inquiries in veiled language to find someone who might know of a practitioner. It was a panicky search, for the dangers grew as pregnancy advanced. Often, it took weeks to find an abortionist — a person swathed in shadows to escape the law, who might or might not have any medical

training, who invariably charged hundreds of dollars more than the desperate woman could afford, who might be a con artist, who might rape her instead of aborting her. To this person, who might operate in a back bedroom or on a kitchen table with little care taken against infection, whose methods one could not inquire about in advance and which ranged from simply packing the vagina with unsterile gauze, to the rare competent evacuation of the womb, the woman must deliver herself in trust. Whatever the abortionist did to her, no anaesthetic would be given. She would have to endure the pain without crying out, lest attention be drawn to the illegal operation. She would be expected to leave quietly, even if she were fainting or could barely walk, as soon as the 'doctor' was finished. Often, the woman was sent off to suffer alone, with no more than a promise that miscarriage would occur within a few days. If she hemorrhaged — as many women did — she was on her own. She would not know the abortionist's name, and there might be no clear link between him and the location to which she'd gone. If there was permanent damage that left her crippled or sterile, or if she died, there was no recourse. And even if it went well and her pregnancy was ended, the woman faced insurmountable taint and shame if she were found out by her family or the community at large.

Why should the female half of the human race be subjected to such sadism? Why should the law and all the institutions of society enforce it? Women go through hundreds of fertility cycles in a lifetime, each lasting up to a week. Why should a natural function for which our bodies were designed — getting pregnant — plunge so many into such agony? Why should society label sexuality disgraceful and make unwanted pregnancy a criminal offence? The only answer is because these are features of women's bodies, women's lives. And women have been a despised sex since prehistory, every aspect of whose lives has been ruthlessly dominated by men, and the economic and social institutions created by them.

The search for abortionists to help the women who wrote to Women's Caucus was seldom successful. The impasse the group met fuelled an important new stage for the fledgling feminists, one that developed in the coming year.

Yet the crust on the issue was buckling. Few in BC were aware of it, but change was afoot elsewhere as well. It happened that a revised law on abortion was under discussion in the House of Commons when Women's Caucus was founded. But the approaches of the feminists and parliament did not mesh well, and an explosive confrontation was in the works.

THE ABORTION INFORMATION SERVICE



After a busy spring and summer, Women's Caucus members Marcy Cohen and Jean Rands reported on their work to a September, 1969 conference of the "Simon Fraser Left":

Last February, Women's Caucus in Vancouver was a series of discussion groups which were discussing organizing but not organizing...Now Women's Caucus has regular monthly membership meetings, an office in the Labor Temple, a mailing list of over two hundred, most of whom are not students, and a newspaper.¹

Women's Caucus had moved off campus. For \$30 a month it was renting a small basement room in the Labor Temple, headquarters of the union movement, at 307 W. Broadway, near Cambie. It had produced the first issue of *The Pedestal*, a remarkable newspaper that continued publication until 1973. The *Women's Caucus Program*, drawn up in the spring, was printed as a four-page pamphlet, and as many as 20,000 copies were distributed between March and August 1969.² A public meeting, held with teachers studying at UBC, had discussed the channelling of female students into narrow vocational fields. Prime Minister Trudeau had been picketed when he visited the Seaforth Armories, shortly before the inadequate new abortion law took effect. The first Women's Caucus demonstration had taken place, to protest discrimination against women in hiring and promotion. And plans were nearly complete for a major event, the Western Regional Conference on Women's Liberation, to be held on the Thanksgiving Day weekend in 1969. Women came from all the western provinces and several US states to this conference, which then focussed the energies of Women's Caucus over the next eight months.

Cohen and Rands's "Report Back to the Simon Fraser Left" defined feminism as a "legitimate part of the movement against capitalism." Stung by the SDU male leadership's dismissal of them as lightweights in political theory, Women's Caucus members had prepared an impressive series of papers that explored the political ramifications of women's liberation. One was, in fact, published by the prestigious *New York Monthly Review* in September, 1969: "The Political Economy of Women's Liberation," by Dr. Margaret Benston.

Marxism had a big following among politicized youth in North America and Europe, which led student occupations and protests on every domestic

and international issue. A politically eclectic alternative media mushroomed, reporting on both politics and the counter-culture. The *Georgia Straight*, Vancouver's underground press, was full of protest against the established order, praise for cannabis, cartoons by R. Crumb — and endless photos and drawings of naked women. It was cool to be misogynist.

Four issues were listed in the Women's Caucus's Program as top priorities: abortion and birth control, equal pay and equal work, child care, and channelling in the educational system.³ The group set out to organize around these issues simultaneously. It also put out *The Pedestal*, which was published twice in the fall of 1969, and became a monthly in early 1970. Equal status for all was enshrined in the organizational structure, and there were no officers. One became a Women's Caucus member by declaring herself to be one. No oath of support was required, no membership dues or even duties. Every woman attending a meeting, including her first, and no matter how infrequently she came, had full voice and decision-making rights. As with the student left in general, Women's Caucus considered itself part of a movement, swimming in the sea of a like-minded populace — rather than a mere organization.

The move to Vancouver drew in several new women who were to play vital roles in Women's Caucus over the next year. The first was Betsy Wood, then known as Betsy Meadley. In her early forties, with prematurely white hair and the misleading appearance of a mild and conventional matron, Wood was recently divorced and was raising four children alone. She was a clerical worker in the BC Fire Marshal's office, and her bids for a better-paying job were routinely turned down. She sought out Women's Caucus after hearing about it on her car radio. "I went because I was interested in equal pay for men and women, and especially for myself."⁴ She remembers being received with open arms.

Wood's job plight was perfectly suited to Women's Caucus concerns, and, indeed, it inspired the demonstration held on August 26 to protest discrimination against women in the workplace. For the initial issue of the *Pedestal*, Wood wrote an unsigned front page article, lambasting the sorry record of a BC government that supposedly pledged to uphold its employees' human rights.⁵

Equal pay and rights on the job were not the only issues of importance to Betsy Wood, however. Possessed of a shrewd sense of what the public was ready for, she believed abortion was the issue of the day. Women were just becoming aware of how much the heavily-touted abortion reform law, which took effect on August 28, 1969, cheated them. Wood's antennae picked up the rustle of incipient rage. She had already tried out a bold proposal on fellow members of the NDP, who chuckled admiringly but waved her idea aside. Wood wanted to revive the 'On to Ottawa' trek, which had set out from Vancouver to demand jobs and rights for the unemployed in

1935. This time the demand would be for repeal of the just-enacted abortion law. "But nobody took a serious interest in it," recalls Wood, until "I hit the Women's Caucus." She had a native understanding of what Cohen and Rands meant when they wrote "that all our demands [will] be raised in the context of building a mass, extra-parliamentary movement of women."

Also drawn to Women's Caucus that fall was Mary Stolk of Richmond. She was a nurse, staying at home to raise her family, active in the NDP and the anti-Vietnam war movement, and she saw feminism as "an organic part of these activities."⁶ Mary Trew arrived from Toronto in September 1969, at age 19, and enrolled at Vancouver Community College. Her first experience with Women's Caucus came when she attended the Western Regional Conference. Like Wood and Stolk, Trew jumped into Women's Caucus immediately.

In the hippie era of the late sixties, Donna Liberson did not find it strange that, one day, a man she'd never met stopped her on a Gastown street. He introduced himself as Harvey Karman and told her he ran an abortion centre in Los Angeles. Karman invited her to refer women needing abortions to his clinic. He explained that he was not a doctor, but that he used the latest technique and charged women relatively little. Liberson was very interested in what Karman had to say.⁷

But, she thought, why should Vancouver women have to go to LA for an abortion? It was now legal in Canada. Liberson began to look into the possibilities for obtaining a local abortion. At the Planned Parenthood family planning clinic, she explained, "Look, it's legal for people to have abortions. But we need doctors...that will work with us [Women's Caucus] [from] within the system." The doctor misunderstood and assumed Liberson was pregnant. He told her the women he refused to abort later thanked him "as if he were a god."⁸

Next Liberson tried talking with her family doctor, but he wasn't interested in her plan. Both doctors, however, told Liberson: "...if any women have abortions, (tsk, tsk), do send them to us afterwards and we'll clean them up."⁹ It was clear that the medical profession had not caught up with the new law, and didn't regard an unwillingly pregnant woman as qualifying for medical attention, unless, after a botched backstreet operation, she suffered from hemorrhaging or septic infection, and was close to death.

Abortion was not specifically on the agenda for the Western Regional Conference, held at UBC and attended by about 130 women, but Liberson invited a spokesperson from Karman's clinic to speak. Mary Stolk, for one, was fascinated by what the young woman from Los Angeles told them. Betsy Wood circulated the room, getting a bounce on her idea for marching to Ottawa. As adjournment neared, Wood proposed this plan to the plenary session, and it was enthusiastically received.

Donna Liberson reported that the conference had focused on "specific

ideas to deal with the economic oppression of women," in the *Georgia Straight*. Her final line mentioned that "an intensive campaign to legalize all abortions will be undertaken." The groovy crew at the *Straight* topped the article with a drawing of a bare-breasted dominatrix wielding a whip — their idea of what was meant by women's liberation.¹⁰

Betsy Wood remembers: "...I know that people in the Caucus were upset because abortion seemed to be taking the lead, and they didn't want that to happen. They wanted the four [issues] they were interested in to move ahead together. But the fact was, people weren't interested in equal pay for women at that time. But they were interested in birth control and abortion, so it was just a natural that it should move ahead."¹¹

"*Abortion Campaign*" announced page one of the second issue of the *Pedestal* in December, 1969. Adjoining an article by Mary Stolk was a reproduction of the Women's Caucus poster, which showed a toga-draped, pregnant Justice, holding scales, described as "Labouring Under a Mis-Conception." "LEGALIZE ALL ABORTION NOW!" was the demand. In small print it said, "Ideology Surpasses Love" and gave the phone number for the Women's Caucus.

The article reported plans to educate women about the revised law. "Additionally, every Tuesday night at the Women's Caucus Office in the Labor Temple, legal abortion counselling will be available." This was the first public announcement of what some called The Abortion Information Service (AIS). Mary Stolk's article was reprinted in the *Georgia Straight*, and she was soon interviewed by both the *Province* and the *Sun*.¹² The tone of both daily papers was respectful. The *Sun* made much of Stolk's training as a "former nurse" and the fact that she was married and the mother of six children. A respectable, as opposed to a 'bra-burning', feminist.

Stolk is modest about her role in AIS and insists that "Donna [Liberson] was surely the catalyst and the leader" of the counselling service. Helen Potrebenko was another important player, and Melody Rudd, Janis Nairne, and possibly others were involved in the project. "We were very aware that we were opening a can of worms. In fact that was our firm intention. We wanted to blow the hypocrisy of the status quo sky-high," recalls Stolk. "The new legislation had gone through and women had less access to abortion and reproductive choice than before, because the medical profession was too timid to take the ball, run with it, and go as far as they could. Instead they'd held back, muttering about 'breaking the new law' and getting the advice of lawyers. It was a total bottleneck..."¹³

"Our position was that doctors could interpret the term 'health' in the new legislation according to the United Nation's definition, which, if memory serves me, included physical, mental, and social well-being. They argued they could not. What they meant was they would not. At least not until they, and not a bunch of upstart feminists, made the decision."¹⁴

Pulling no punches, Stolk wrote in *The Pedestal* the new service would inform women "about the options open to them under the present inadequate system." These were, almost entirely, illegal options, but "without them the whole system would collapse."¹⁵ The Abortion Information Service intended to locate sympathetic doctors who would present pregnant women's cases to the required hospital Therapeutic Abortion Committees. "And Harvey [Karman] would be our backup," Stolk recalls.

They were a bit nervous and they were immediately swamped. Before AIS opened its doors, Donna Liberson began fielding calls made to her home by desperate women. "Where did you get my number from?" she asked, and discovered the doctor from the family planning clinic was sending abortion requests her way. "That was the man who gave me the lecture about being a god," she splutters.¹⁶ "The doctors were very hypocritical."

From the outset, fifteen to twenty women showed up on Tuesday nights for AIS sessions at the Labor Temple. There were no divisions in the room to provide for privacy, and Stolk remembers "we just sat by the person we were talking with and dealt with their individual situation."

Liberson, Stolk, and Potrebenko had expected the women to be distraught, unsure whether they were truly pregnant, and needing a shoulder to cry on. Helen Potrebenko, then driving a taxi to pay her way through SFU while working on her first novel, was a trained laboratory technician. Although short of money, she bought pregnancy kits out of her own pocket and stood by to test urine samples.¹⁷ "We felt that this service would be an inducement in itself, and it was," remembers Mary Stolk. Ordinarily, a woman could not confirm her pregnancy without going to a doctor, who then sent her specimen to a lab. That often took a week, and for a woman seeking an abortion, time is of the essence. At AIS, free pregnancy testing was done on the spot.

Potrebenko found that the women coming to AIS had "already made up their minds; they didn't want to talk about the abortion operation, they wanted to know what to do about [their pregnancies.] So counselling on making the decision wasn't needed."¹⁸ To protect the women's identities as much as to protect themselves from possible criminal charges, the counselors made no notes or records. Despite the law's revision, it was still illegal to counsel a woman about abortion, and AIS suspected its sessions and phone calls were tapped by the police. Cautious about being overheard giving out names and telephone numbers, AIS wrote that information on slips of paper and women then made their own contacts.¹⁹ "However, we were very anxious for follow-up and I remember making some effort to keep track of at least a first name, so that when they phoned me with follow-up, I knew something about what their plans had been," recalls Stolk.

By the second session of AIS, a questionnaire was ready for women at the door.²⁰ No copy has survived. but in Donna Liberson's recollection it

asked "How did you hear about us?" and "What's your term?" But there were no names, just ages and stuff." A surprising number were directed to the clinic by their doctors, and they wrote the doctors' names on the questionnaires. Later, that information proved useful.

What options could AIS suggest to the women? There weren't many, after all. The best outcome would be to get the medical establishment to open up the channels permitted by the new law. But local hospitals were reluctant to change their habits. After all, they saw the purpose of the new law to be, not a boon to women, but a cloak to keep the occasional legal abortionist out of jail.

Once a hospital bowed to the inevitable, it found creating an official Therapeutic Abortion Committee a cumbersome process, since the law required TACs to consist of at least three doctors, none of whom actually performed the operation. Many hospitals in small communities were lucky to have three doctors, altogether. In larger ones, many doctors were unwilling to condone legal abortions. Looking on from the outside, the women of AIS saw "a great deal of infighting, boycotting, backbiting and bitterness among doctors at VGH" as the hospital struggled to come to terms with the new law.²¹ There was a shortage of operating room time, a lack of equipment, and widespread ignorance of how to perform an abortion — something medical schools didn't teach. Most hospitals' first response was to add tricky regulations, such as residency in the immediate area, on top of the byzantine requirements of the law, in order to stem the tide of demand. Little wonder that, for the next twenty years, only four or five hospitals in BC's major urban centres — Vancouver and Victoria — did abortions at all.

Those hospitals required women to locate at least two doctors willing to refer them to the requisite Therapeutic Abortion Committee. It came down to finding a psychiatrist who would claim the applicant's mental health was jeopardised by her continued pregnancy. Extraordinary anxiety, emotional trauma, shame, fear of scandal, and disruption of the woman's plans and/or economic situation frequently did accompany unwanted pregnancy — but true psychosis was rare. To enlist the help of a psychiatrist meant that women had to lie, to threaten suicide, and submit to being labelled unstable in their medical records. And that was only the beginning. Many times, TACs ruled against a woman's request, and the law allowed for no appeal. The TAC might or might not issue its ruling before a woman's pregnancy was too far advanced for an abortion. The arbitrary cut-off date used in BC was the end of the third month. It was a lengthy and uncertain ordeal. For some time, AIS was stymied in getting its clients into hospital settings.

So telling women about Harvey Karman in Los Angeles was the only option AIS could offer, at first. Of course, most hadn't the money or time to go there. Eventually, a doctor with a thick east European accent and "an extreme cloak and dagger approach" was located. "He made all his phone calls from pay phones and actually wore dark glasses and a trench coat,"

recalls Stolk. This man was fully trained as a doctor, but he wasn't licenced to practice in Canada. "His [medical] procedures were safe and professional", says Stolk. "He kept a small cabin in Point Roberts where he took his patients. Most of the women who used his services were satisfied, although awed by his secrecy and sometimes unhappy with his brusque manner."

Then the man was arrested and charged with performing illegal abortions. Illegal, because they weren't done in a hospital, and his patients had not been humiliated by a TAC. To be sure of a conviction, he was also charged with income tax evasion. Stolk's information was that he fled to his home country, thus escaping imprisonment.

Donna Liberson's search for sympathetic doctors got underway in earnest when a questionnaire for doctors was hastily typed on a stencil and run off on an ancient mimeograph machine. The result looked anything but professional. Never mind, it was mailed off to all the MDs in the local phone book. It was a frustrating search. Out of hundreds of inquiries, supportive replies were received from fewer than half-a-dozen doctors. They were invited to a meeting at the Labor Temple. Stolk recalls, "I think about three came."

They included Drs. Marion and Roger Rogers, who were pleased to learn about AIS. Their own efforts had turned up a new contact — Dr. Franz Koome, of Renton, Washington. A rebel, Dr. Koome had written to the governor in November, 1969, to inform him about his illegal clinic, where 140 abortions had already been performed, and to argue for a liberalized law. Abortion laws in the US were being reformed very gradually, state by state; there was no blanket federal law as there was in Canada. The Drs. Rogers had invited Koome to their home and were satisfied with the quality of his service. He then accepted their referrals from the lower mainland. At the next AIS session, several women were referred to Dr. Koome, and Stolk recalls, "they all phoned back and said they'd gotten appointments, no problem." Finding Dr. Koome was a great relief to both the Rogers's and AIS, because he was relatively inexpensive, close-by, and yet far enough away to assure privacy to the Canadian women who attended his clinic.

In the Drs. Rogers, AIS found what it had hoped for. Dr. David Claman and Dr. Gerald Korn were also supportive, and all worked to get Vancouver General Hospital to implement the new law. The Rogers's agreed to shepherd women sent them by Women's Caucus through the complex system for getting a legal hospital abortion. In Stolk's recollection, "we had to be very selective about which women we could, in fact, refer through legal channels. Married, white, middle class were best. I remember the first patient who we counselled to try the legal route and who was successful. She fit the above profile and was early enough in her pregnancy to have the time [for the time-consuming application process.] I remember how excited we were when the system went without a hitch. But it was clear

that this was the exception, not the rule."²²

However, there was a Vancouver physician who performed abortions in his office, and whose reputation for care and scrupulous cleanliness made him a godsend. His practice was an open secret. Dr. Robert Makaroff, located near UBC, was admired by the Drs. Rogers, who invited him, as well as Dr. Koome, to their home, and sent many women his way.

Dr. Makaroff was anonymously profiled in the *Georgia Straight* in January, 1970, under the by-line "Gratton Gray." In "Abortion, North American Style," Gray quoted extensively from a "Vancouver physician who had performed two illegal abortions last week, and was preparing to perform another while I spoke to him." "This doctor was a reformer, arguing that "The law is the murderer," and saying that, despite the threat to his liberty and medical licence, and to the living he provided for his wife and children, there were women in need whom he could not turn away. Introducing his prospective abortion patient to Gratton Gray, the doctor said:

What would happen to this girl? She's perfectly healthy, mentally and physically. A hospital committee would likely not approve a therapeutic abortion. In desperation she might find someone who would penetrate her uterus with a rusty coat hanger. She might, or she might not, be admitted to a hospital in time to prevent a fatal hemorrhage or infection.²³

Gray noticed an unmarked police car parked opposite the doctor's office when s/he left it at 11:14 pm. The writer declared, "I personally know of seven physicians operating [illegally] in Vancouver." AIS wished it knew of so many.

The women from AIS soon heard of Dr. Makaroff themselves and went to inspect his services. "It was a lovely, clean office, almost as large as a clinic. All these little rooms," recalls Potrebenko admiringly. Necessarily working alone, Makaroff provided his patients with a preview of what they could expect, by playing an audio tape that described the surgical procedure. Women received a D&C, or scraping of the uterus, under general anesthetic, and most said they had little pain afterwards.²⁴

"He was a particularly fine human being who had allowed his inability to turn away desperate women to get him in too deeply to get out. I suppose a lot of other doctors, who found it useful to have such a service available, had helped push him to the point where he totally gave up his other practice," says Mary Stolk. Liberson saw him as "kind of an innocent." She realized it would be unfair to flood him with referrals from AIS. First, because "we knew he was quite compassionate," and "would never refuse anybody." Although Makaroff's standard fee for abortion was \$500 — which was more than it cost women to go to either Dr. Koome or Harvey Karman — Liberson knew he frequently charged less to poor women. (The doctor described by Gratton Gray was charging the nineteen-year-old student in the article \$100.) Makaroff knew that he could lose his licence. He explained up-front that he charged a high price to enable him to hire a

defence lawyer, when the time came. The second reason why Liberson wanted to use him sparingly was to help lessen the heat, in the hope that Dr. Makaroff might stay in practice longer.

Still, AIS was set on making doctors and hospitals live up to their responsibilities to provide *legal* abortions. The response to the new law was maddeningly slow. Reforming the law had not put legal abortions within reach. How to unblock the ice jam of the lordly medical establishment? "A lot changed because of the pressure of women," reflects Dr. Roger Rogers. "...if there hadn't been a groundswell, where women became really very outspoken and very aggressive," he believes doctors would have continued to ignore them.²⁵

The AIS crew was invited to be guests on a radio talk show. Donna Liberson acted as spokesperson; she was informally regarded as the leader of the group. In Potrebenko's recollection, on air, Liberson threw caution to the wind and said, straight-forwardly, that the clinic was having little success directing women toward legal abortions, so it usually helped them get illegal ones. "God, I admired her guts," recalls the gutsy Potrebenko. However, she began preparing to be arrested, and she bought some jeans to wear in jail. Mary Stolk also bought a sweater to keep her warm in a prison cell.²⁶

But there were no such repercussions. In retrospect, Potrebenko estimates "We could have set up a clinic at Granville and Georgia, and no-one would have cared — the time was right!"²⁷

AIS was contacted by people with ties to the Unitarian Church who wanted to document whether or not the new law was working. This group wished to follow the case of a woman who would pursue the steps for obtaining a legal abortion. She would be directed by AIS to its short list of sympathetic doctors and make a bid to a hospital TAC. If she were found to qualify for an abortion on the only permitted grounds, as the doctors interpreted them — then hooray! If she were turned down, then the church group would pay her expenses to Harvey Karman's clinic. Mary Stolk remembers that "the young woman we chose had a low-key personality, a sense of humor, and a pretty street-wise manner." This woman's doctor referred her to a gynecologist, an essential first step in the process. But while she waited for an appointment with a psychiatrist, her pregnancy advanced too far for her to qualify for a hospital abortion in Canada.

So she flew to Los Angeles — her first time on a plane — and had her abortion without difficulty. "She had a good holiday, spending some time on the beach and she thanked the people who had paid the tab very nicely," recalls Stolk. Her own doctor said, nonchalantly, "Oh, I see you've had a miscarriage."²⁸

From this young woman Stolk, Potrebenko, and Liberson learned something about Harvey Karman they hadn't known before. It seems that after

the abortion, Karman proposed having sex. She "...was quite good natured about the sex part. She declined," says Stolk. "However, I had to seriously re-think the feasibility of giving Harvey's number to very many people."

Donna Liberson decided to check Karman out. She had a woman friend who had just finished medical school, and the two of them drove to Los Angeles together. Liberson missed one Tuesday night session of AIS to do this, and, because of the crush of clients, she was missed. When the two reached Los Angeles, Harvey Karman remembered Donna and called her into the operating room while he was performing an abortion. "He said, 'Donna, hold the flashlight.' And he said, 'See? Look. This woman is three months pregnant, and this is all there is to it.'"²⁹ Liberson was surprised the procedure was so quick and uncomplicated. The patient was conscious, and she seemed to be in more anxiety than pain. Karman used a vacuum aspirator, which was indeed the latest technology; even Dr. Makaroff didn't have one of those. Consequently, women at Karman's clinic needed only a local anesthetic, which was much less dangerous and debilitating than the general anesthetic used in Canadian hospitals. Karman said, "Now this is how you know it's a clean job. I don't know if he was performing for me or what, but I was totally amazed...To me it was...like, what was all the fuss about?" Then Karman turned the patient over and gave her a massage.

Liberson's doctor friend did a tour of the clinic and decided it looked okay. It was certainly clean, and antiseptic procedures were being followed in the operating room. But like her peers, this BC doctor had never had any training regarding abortion. It was taboo in medical schools, so she really didn't know what to look for. Karman and his clientele were decidedly hippies. On their return, Liberson and her doctor friend concluded that "although he was weird and the place really wouldn't do for your average middle-class woman, it was safe and competent."

Liberson confronted Karman with the story about having sex with his patients, but in his view, he only did it as a means of comforting the women. And he never made having sex a condition for the abortion; he only suggested it afterward. "He wanted me to start up a clinic and he'd give me a percent up here. I said, 'I'm not interested; I don't do it for money.'...He was funny. So that was the story about Harvey. He was a character."³⁰

Potrebenko and Stolk were less amused. Although this was 1970, and as Helen Potrebenko recalls, "women were still flattered to be sexually harassed," she objected to Karman's attempts to seduce his patients. "Nobody was indignant, because he'd gone to jail [for performing abortions] and was a martyr to the cause," she complains. In fact, scandal mounted over Harvey Karman, and *Ms. Magazine* later did an extensive exposé of him.

Meantime, Helen Potrebenko heard that Dr. Koome sometimes performed abortions without anesthetic. Stolk, on the other hand, had maintained contact with quite a few women she'd told about Dr. Koome, "and they were generally relieved that the whole situation could be dealt with so

easily and competently." These AIS clients had not complained about a lack of anesthetic. Stolk concluded that Koome "used local anesthetic in varying amounts, perhaps not too lavishly."³¹ Doubts about their main sources of help surfaced as the demand for abortions grew.

Liberson and Stolk were in telephone contact several times a day. It was impossible not to notice that their phones were tapped. The interference on the line was so obvious and heavy-handed that Stolk concluded that the object was to scare people. A friend who was involved in protesting nuclear experiments on Amchitka Island later described having the same experience. "It was vehemently denied, but I smiled. The things they described were very familiar to me...other phones ringing, clicks, several conversations going on in the background", etc. She also recalls that "Dr. Makaroff told me his phone calls used to be broadcast over taxi cab and ship-to-shore type phones. People used to phone and warn him."³²

As spring 1970 advanced, the tactic of pressuring doctors to implement the new law and perform more legal abortions in local hospitals seemed to be having an effect. Very gradually, more of the women who came to AIS reported success through that route. Nonetheless, the process was so lengthy and complex that it was a rare for a woman to get through it before she was disqualified on the grounds that her pregnancy was too far advanced. In addition, many doctors were afraid to abort an obviously healthy woman. Liberson recalls being phoned by a doctor who sat on a hospital TAC. He was concerned about a fifteen-year-old patient who wanted an abortion, and he asked AIS to help her. "I said, 'You've got your own Therapeutic Abortion Committee!' He said, 'There's nothing wrong with her.' I said, 'She's fifteen, isn't that enough?'"³³ The law said her life or health must be endangered by the pregnancy, and the doctor felt that didn't cover his young patient, that she'd better find an illegal abortionist.

Then suddenly, the illegal resources dried up. On March 10, 1970, Dr. Robert Makaroff was arrested and his medical career came to an end. Vancouver feminists called for the charges against him to be dropped, but most medical colleagues, who had sent him more patients than he could handle, now shunned him. Dr. Makaroff's progress through the courts was front-page news for months.

Shortly afterward, an overloaded Dr. Koome began to require that women phoning him for appointments have a doctor's referral. He could not keep up with the demand. In late March, Harvey Karman, too, was put out of business. The *Georgia Straight* reprinted an article from Los Angeles that described cigar-smoking "homicide cops" invading the clinic, seizing the appointment book, interrogating patients, and arresting Karman and five volunteer staff members.³⁴

However, Mary Stolk remembers that, in the spring of 1970, "a lot of American clinics opened, some in Bellingham, which were very anxious to cash in on the Canadian demand." From Dr. Claman, one of AIS's "sym-

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pathetic doctors," Helen Potrebenko learned that "pressure from women's groups" led VGH to gradually increase to forty abortions per week.³⁵ Nonetheless, the demand was skyrocketing. Recalls Helen Potrebenko, "The staff of the [VGH] Ob-Gyn Department went into a panic and decided to freeze the number at 40 per week, with no out-of-town people allowed except with extenuating circumstances (money). In October [1970], there was a backlog of three weeks" waiting time to get into the operating room, after all approvals had been obtained.³⁶

With the arrests of the doctors, AIS lost its power and some of its significance. It was a great relief to Mary Stolk. "My phone had been ringing for months with calls from desperate women...It was more than I could handle, after awhile." The counsellors of AIS reported to a Women's Caucus general meeting, "We were exhausted...We couldn't go on" after the illegal clinics dried up.³⁷

During the past few months, the tight group of women who operated AIS used the same office, but apparently seldom interacted with other members of Women's Caucus. No-one seems to remember how that isolation came about — possibly it was due to the anxiety of the AIS organizers who felt their service was clandestine. But toward April, as the departure date for the historic Abortion Caravan [see chapter five] neared, criticism of AIS developed within Women's Caucus. Potrebenko had quit AIS out of disgust for the methods of Karman and Koome. Other members of Women's Caucus felt the direction of AIS was wrong. They believed the first priority should be to politicize the women who came to the clinic and convince them that women were oppressed. A showdown developed. Feeling burned out, Donna Liberson agreed to hand over AIS to those in Women's Caucus who demanded it.

Under this new management, AIS began another phase that lasted through the summer months of 1970. Women coming for help were persuaded to join sit-ins in the VGH Outpatient Department, and AIS threatened to sit-in at meetings of the TAC, unless many more abortions were approved.³⁸ Potrebenko believes that "due to this outside pressure, and the pressure inside from Dr. Claman and others, the hospital policy was changed and the number of abortions rose to 70 a week." Still, reporting on their experience in the *Pedestal*, the original members of AIS said "the same problems are frustrating the counsellors now, as before. Many of the new doctors who say they are sympathetic use the situation to moralize, keep the women waiting for weeks and then refuse to help." Even worse,

The hospitals are still doing barbaric and unnecessary hysterotomies (cutting through the stomach and uterine walls) on women over three months pregnant.³⁹

There was only one solution: "this present system for obtaining abortions must be removed" altogether.⁴⁰ The new abortion law must be repealed.

The exuberance and sass of the Abortion Information Service characterized other Women's Caucus projects, as well, although those focussing on women workers may have had the most down-to-business manner. Pleased by the reception given to her proposal for a Caravan to Ottawa, Betsy Wood first thought the appropriate moment would be on Valentine's Day.¹ She saw an obvious irony in the celebration of romantic love — and its frequent outcome for women: unwanted pregnancy and the danger of a bloody illegal abortion. But February proved to be too early; more time was needed for organizing the march.

Despite its members' readiness for daring projects, the scope of what became known as The Abortion Campaign was a matter of debate in Women's Caucus. There was much to do on the local scene, and some outside the tight group in AIS were eager to focus on British Columbia. Ottawa and its dealings were remote from BC; was it really necessary to go so far? "It was actually hard to convince them," recalls Wood, the newcomer among politically sophisticated student radicals, "that it was a federal law. And you had to work at the municipal level, the provincial level, and the federal level."

Wood envisaged holding public meetings at every stop between Vancouver and Ottawa, with new people joining the Caravan along the way. They would be so colourful and garner so much notice that the inadequate 1969 law would be dispatched by parliament upon their arrival. Repeal it altogether! No law was needed on abortion. Existing federal and provincial health acts could guarantee its safe performance. However, with no network of contacts and the barest beginnings of feminism in Canada, a search was required to locate people willing to set up meetings in their areas, do advance publicity, and, not least, find places for caravaners to sleep. Marge Hollibaugh is credited with doing much of that spade work, just as Anne Roberts sent press releases to media across the country.

As the glamorous Abortion Campaign drew more internal interest and womanpower, some resentment surfaced. Wood, whose job situation was the focus of the first Women's Caucus demonstration, and who had presented a paper on the problems of women workers at the Western Regional Conference², felt she had to explain her apparent switch in loyalties.