

“Pigeon-Holed and Forgotten” : The Work of the Subcommittee on the Post-War Problems of Women, 1943*

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In January 1943, a special subcommittee of the federally appointed Advisory Committee on Reconstruction was created to enquire into the difficulties likely to confront Canadian women once peace was concluded. This Subcommittee on the Post-War Problems of Women, composed of ten prominent Canadian women, presented its final report to Cabinet on 30 November 1943. It contained many proposals for improving the status of Canadian women; however, the impact of its work was weakened by its class bias, unrealistic time limits, the complicated nature of the reconstruction bureaucracy, and the lack of significant change in public attitudes toward women's role.

Afin d'étudier les difficultés que devraient sans doute affronter les Canadiennes au lendemain des hostilités, on créa en janvier 1943 un sous-comité spécial du Comité consultatif de la reconstruction sociale mis sur pied par les autorités fédérales. Ce sous-comité, qui comprenait dix Canadiennes jouissant d'une grande réputation, soumit son rapport final au cabinet le 30 novembre 1943. On y trouve maintes suggestions visant à améliorer le statut de la femme, qui se heurtèrent cependant aux préjugés sociaux, à des obstacles bureaucratiques et à l'inertie de l'opinion publique à l'endroit de la condition féminine.

By 1941, the nation was as preoccupied with the implications of peace as it was with the exigencies of war. Reconstruction — that resounding phrase encompassing Canadians' aspirations for an improved society after World War I — was once again a national byword; authors expounded on it, politicians promised it, and most Canadians waited impatiently for it. Consequently, long before Canadian troops had faced their baptism by fire on the beaches of Normandy and on the treacherous terrain of Italy, the federal government was busy assembling the bureaucracy which would plan the nation's return to peace.

Despite the prosperity resulting from the war economy, the suffering and despair of the 1930s was deeply etched into the memories of most Canadians. Many feared that once the war was over, the nation would again be plagued by chronic unemployment, or by inflation, recession and popular unrest, as had occurred immediately after World War I.

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Considerable pressure was therefore exerted on the Liberal government of Mackenzie King to develop plans which would assure a smooth transition of the Canadian economy to peacetime conditions.

Planning for reconstruction also had the advantage of boosting morale by distracting public attention from the demands and restrictions of war. As the war progressed, it became increasingly difficult to maintain Canadians' commitment to the military effort. King's parliamentary secretary, Brooke Claxton, warned the Prime Minister:

A widespread and growing feeling of insecurity, aggravated by labour lay-offs and fear of further lay-offs, is affecting morale at home. Concern over their post-war conditions may have more serious effects on morale in the army ... large sections of the population are feeling uncertain and critical because they do not see action in dealing with post-war reconstruction ... The time is ripe for a declaration of national policy.¹

Five months later, D. B. Rogers, the Acting Chairman of the Wartime Information Board reiterated the necessity for the government to keep the public informed. "The majority of Canadians", he wrote, "want 'great changes' in the Canadian way of life after the war. To maintain both civilian and military morale during the new offensive phase of the war, the government should release as much concrete information as possible regarding rehabilitation and post-war planning."² The rising popularity of the CCF throughout 1942, and the adoption of a progressive platform of social legislation by the Conservatives in the same year, made it imperative that the Liberals respond to the public demand for government leadership in the planning of a better post-war Canada.

I

One of the organizations created to advise the government in the formulation of its plans was the Committee on Reconstruction, chaired by Dr F. Cyril James, Principal of McGill University. Convened by Ian Mackenzie, Minister of Pensions and Health, in March 1941, the Committee was "to examine and discuss the general question of postwar reconstruction, and to make recommendations as to what government facilities should be established to deal with this question".³ The Committee was composed of six prominent Canadians,⁴ chosen from outside the

¹ Public Archives of Canada (hereafter PAC), Privy Council Office, RG 2/18, vol. 24, Memorandum to the Prime Minister from Brooke Claxton, 5 June 1943.

² PAC, King Papers (hereafter King Papers), MG 26 J4, D. B. Rogers to King, 20 November 1943.

³ Public Archives of Ontario, Marion Findlay Papers (hereafter Findlay Papers), RG 7 VII-1, vol. 9, Reconstitution of Post-War Reconstruction Advisory Bodies, P.R. 13, 682, n.d., p. 1.

⁴ In addition to Chairman James, the committee consisted of Hon. D. G. McKenzie, Chief Commissioner, Board of Grain Commissioners for Canada; J. S. McLean, President, Canada Packers Ltd; Dr Édouard Montpetit, Secretary-General, Université de Montréal (replaced in 1943 by Dr Arthur Surveyer); Tom Moore, President, Trades and Labour Congress of Canada (replaced in 1943 by Percy Bengough); and Dr R. C. Wallace, Principal, Queen's University. Dr Leonard Marsh, former Director of Social Research at McGill University, was appointed Research Adviser to the Committee.

federal government and civil service, who received no remuneration for their committee work. In order to come to grips with its broad mandate, the Committee set up subcommittees to investigate the following areas: agricultural policy, conservation and development of natural resources, housing and community planning, and post-war employment. By January 1943, the Committee established an additional subcommittee, composed entirely of women, to enquire into the potential post-war problems of women.

The campaign for the creation of a women's subcommittee was spearheaded by Margaret Wherry, a vice-president of the Canadian Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs. In April 1941 she wrote to the Prime Minister to express her concern that not a single woman had been appointed to the Reconstruction Committee. In his reply, King promised to discuss the matter in Cabinet and the question was raised in Council on 1 May 1941. It was subsequently referred to the Ministry of National War Services.⁵ When no further action was forthcoming, Miss Wherry tackled the issue once more, this time with the chairman of the Reconstruction Committee, Dr James. She reiterated the importance of the contribution which Canadian women were making to the war effort and underlined their keen interest in post-war planning.⁶

It was no doubt Margaret Wherry's initiative which sparked the decision of the Quebec-based League for Women's Rights / Ligue pour les droits de la femme to make similar representations to the Prime Minister. In May 1941, resolutions calling for the appointment of qualified women to the Reconstruction Committee were forwarded to King's office.⁷

The claim for the official recognition of women by means of government appointments was firmly based on their increased roles and responsibilities in Canadian society. The unrelenting demands of the war for manpower to fulfill Canada's military and civil commitments had resulted in an acute labour shortage. As a result, the government was compelled to encourage women to participate in the work-force. Initially incentives were directed at single women, but they were soon extended to married women as well.⁸ Both categories of women responded enthusiastically and the number of gainfully employed women soared from approximately 600,000 at the outbreak of the war to 1,200,000 by November 1943. It was estimated that by the latter date, over a quarter of a million women

⁵ King Papers, MG 26 J1, Wherry to King, 12 April 1941.

⁶ PAC, Munitions and Supplies, RG 28A, vol. 125, Wherry to James, 2 September 1941.

⁷ King Papers, MG 26 J1, Juliette Barry, Secrétaire, Ligue pour les droits de la femme to King, 19 May 1941; Mrs Brodie Snyder, Secretary, League for Women's Rights to King, same date.

⁸ For an excellent account of the federal government's efforts to recruit women into the labour force after 1942, see Ruth PIERSON, "Women's Emancipation and the Recruitment of Women into the Labour Force in World War II", in *The Neglected Majority: Essays in Canadian Women's History*, eds: Susan MANN TROFIMENKOFF and Alison PRENTICE (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977), pp. 125-45.

were engaged in war-related industry. Of the nearly one million women working in other sectors of the economy, 439,000 were in the service area; 373,000 in manufacturing; 180,000 in trade and finance; 31,000 in transportation and communication; and 4,000 in construction.⁹ Women were also employed in agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting, although their exact numbers in each of these activities are not known. In addition, there were nearly 38,000 women in the armed forces.¹⁰ Wherever there was a serious shortage of workers, women were prevailed upon to seek employment, and soon established their reputation as valuable workers.

For many government planners, this large-scale recruitment of women had a negative aspect; it threatened to aggravate the problem of post-war unemployment. With demobilization, the jobs women held in munitions plants and other war-related industries would disappear, while the Civil Employment Reinstatement Act (1942) made it mandatory for employers to rehire veterans, even if it meant releasing employees who had replaced them during the war. It was also believed that war widows would need to work to support themselves and their dependents, and that many single women would be forced to look for permanent employment due to a shortage of potential husbands.¹¹

The Subcommittee on the Post-War Problems of Women was initially established to recommend solutions to the problems likely to confront women working in war industries once peace returned. In April 1943, its terms of reference were extended to include a study of "all aspects of postwar problems relating to women".¹² Thus this body was presented with a unique opportunity to focus public attention on the contribution of Canadian women to the war effort, and to transform that public recognition into concrete improvements in the status of women in Canada. In the light of contemporary concern with women's role in society, it is a fascinating exercise to evaluate the Subcommittee's work, its recommendations, and their impact.

II

Ten members, all of whom had to be approved by the Committee on Reconstruction, were appointed to the Subcommittee. A study of the backgrounds of these women reveals that they brought to their work valuable experience gained through previous involvement in various political, social, educational and philanthropic organizations. The Chairman of the Subcommittee was Margaret Stovel McWilliams of Winnipeg. A graduate

⁹ Findlay Papers, Report of the Subcommittee on the Post-War Problems of Women (hereafter SPWPW Report) p. 2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹¹ Canadian war fatalities in World War II totalled more than 40,000.

¹² Findlay Papers, Statement of Chairman of Subcommittee on Post-War Problems of Women, 10 August 1943, p. 1.

of the University of Toronto in 1898, she worked as a journalist before her marriage to R. F. McWilliams who was named Lieutenant-Governor of Manitoba in 1940. Prior to her appointment to the Subcommittee, "Maggie" McWilliams had served as an alderman on the Winnipeg City Council, and was one of the founders of the Canadian Federation of University Women. In addition, "at one time or another she was president of every important women's organization in the city [Winnipeg] and Dominion President of most, including the Red Cross, National Council of Education, National Council of Women, and Women's Canadian Club."¹³ She and her husband were also close personal friends of Mackenzie King.

The other members of the Subcommittee were selected from across the country and nearly all were active club women. From the Maritimes, Mrs Margaret MacKenzie of Fredericton was chosen. After receiving a BA from the University of Toronto and an MA from Smith College, she had subsequently married a distinguished Canadian academic, N. A. M. MacKenzie. During the 1930s, she was actively involved in Toronto in the work of the League of Nations, and served for three years as a school trustee. After her husband was appointed president of the University of New Brunswick, Mrs MacKenzie participated in several aspects of war work in Fredericton, from setting up blood banks to chairing the local Wartime Prices and Trades Board. She was also a devoted patron of the arts.¹⁴

The Province of Quebec was represented by Mme Thais Lacoste Frémont of Quebec City, and by the woman most responsible for the creation of the Subcommittee, Mrs Margaret Wherry of Montreal. Mme Lacoste was an active welfare worker, lecturer and champion of women's rights. She was also a founder of the Conservative Women's Association in Quebec City, and served as a Canadian delegate to the League of Nations Society of Canada, and from 1937 to 1941, she represented the Canadian Welfare Council in Quebec.¹⁵ Margaret Wherry operated her own public stenography business and participated actively in the Canadian Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs. She was also the Honorary Secretary of the University Settlement in Montreal, a member of the executive committee of the League of Women's Rights, Co-Chairman of the Women's Division, War Savings Committee for the Province of Quebec, and a member of the executive committee of the League of Nations Society of Canada.¹⁶

¹³ Claire COATES and Janet BERTON, *Sixty Years of CFUW / Soixante ans de FCFDU: Calendar / Calendrier, 1980* (n.p.: Canadian Federation of University Women, 1979), p. 13.

¹⁴ Telephone conversation with Margaret MacKenzie, 14 November 1979.

¹⁵ *Who's Who in Canada 1943-44*, "Frémont, Thais (Lacoste)".

¹⁶ Elizabeth FORBES, *With Enthusiasm and Faith: A History of the Canadian Federation of Business and Professional Women* (Ottawa: Canadian Federation of Business and Professional Women, 1974), p. 53.

There were three members from Ontario — Mrs Harvey Agnew, Dr A. Vibert Douglas and Miss Marion Findlay. Mrs Agnew, who was from Toronto, was dubbed “Mrs Canada” because of her extensive involvement in national women’s organizations, including the University Women’s Club, the University College Alumnae and the Women’s Missionary Society of the Presbyterian Church. In 1936, she prepared a report for the International Labour Organization which documented the responsibility of Canadian female wage-earners for dependants. By 1939, she was President of the National Council of the YWCA and during the war, she also served as a member of the Consumer Branch of the Wartime Prices and Trade Board.¹⁷ Marion Findlay was also from Toronto, and had built a long and successful career with the Ontario Ministry of Labour. At the time she was appointed to the Subcommittee, she was Senior Investigator for the Ministry.¹⁸

Dr Douglas was Dean of Women and Professor of Astronomy at Queen’s University. She had occupied various posts connected with the British and Canadian war effort in London from 1915 to 1919, and the title of MBE was subsequently conferred upon her. She was a prominent member of the International Federation of University Women, as well as of several national astronomical societies.¹⁹

Aside from Mrs McWilliams, Mrs Susan Gunn of Lloydminster was the only representative from the Prairie Provinces. A school teacher by training she served as President of the United Farm Women of Alberta from 1924 to 1929. As one writer has noted, she was “for over 30 years, a key personality in the Canadian agrarian movement ... she threw herself into the work of the U.F.A., taking an active role as leader in the provincial men’s and women’s organization ... and serving as either chairman or member of both the U.F.A. and U.F.W.A. education committees during most of the decade, 1920 to 1930.”²⁰

The two other Subcommittee members, Mrs Evelyn Lett and Mrs Grace MacInnis, were both from Vancouver. Active in student affairs at the University of British Columbia where she earned her MA in 1926, Evelyn Lett continued her involvement in several organizations after her marriage to a distinguished Canadian lawyer and soldier, Sherwood Lett. She was particularly active in the University Women’s Club of Vancouver, and in the women’s auxiliaries of several military organizations during the war.²¹ Grace MacInnis was already a well-known politician and had been elected to the B.C. legislature in 1941 as the CCF representative for Vancouver-Burrard. Her personal life was inextricably linked with the

¹⁷ Carolyn Cox, “Names in the News: Mrs. Agnew is Mrs. Canada”, *Saturday Night*, 10 April 1943, p. 2.

¹⁸ Ontario Ministry of Labour, information provided by Personnel Department, 21 August 1979.

¹⁹ *Who’s Who in Canada 1943-44*, “Douglas, Dr. A. Vibert”.

²⁰ L. J. WILSON, “Educational Role of the United Farm Women of Alberta”, *Alberta History*, XXV (Spring 1977): 31-32.

²¹ Interview with Evelyn Lett, 15 February 1979.

CCF since she was the daughter of its founder, J. S. Woodsworth, and the wife of Angus MacInnis, a CCF Member of Parliament. Educated at the University of Manitoba, the Sorbonne and the Ottawa Normal School, she had served as Honorary Parliamentary Secretary to the CCF group in the House of Commons from 1935 to 1941.²²

Although it was stated in the Subcommittee's final report that "no representative basis of any kind was used for the choice of members",²³ it is obvious that an effort was made to represent various geographical areas of the country and to include some women knowledgeable about the problems of working women (Grace MacInnis, Margaret Wherry and Marion Findlay). And although the wives of prominent Liberal supporters (Maggie McWilliams, Evelyn Lett, Margaret Mackenzie) composed a significant portion of the membership, women were also chosen who were publicly identified with other political parties (Thaïs Frémont, Susan Gunn and Grace MacInnis). On the other hand, judged by their education, ethnic origin, religion and age, the Subcommittee members did not represent a cross-section of Canadian womanhood since they were overwhelmingly well-educated, of British origin, Protestant, and middle-aged.

At the first meeting of the Subcommittee, held 22-24 March 1943 in Ottawa, the Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Reconstruction requested that the Subcommittee undertake immediately an "investigation of women's aspects of social security and if possible prepare a report for the April Meeting".²⁴ Consequently, a major portion of this meeting was devoted to a discussion of the report, "Social Security in Canada", which had been prepared for the King government by Leonard Marsh, the Advisory Committee's research adviser.

The other important item which arose at the March meeting was the discussion of the principles and procedures which should guide the Subcommittee's deliberations. The members unanimously approved as a first principle a recommendation from Mrs McWilliams that

the only wise and fair position to assume in considering the problems in the post war world of women who have left their homes and normal lives to enter into war work whether in the armed forces or in civilian work in the factories and offices of the country, is that, since they have done in this precisely what men have done in the time of war, they must have precisely the same opportunities as men to prepare for and continue working.²⁵

Since the original purpose of the Subcommittee was to make recommendations for the reintegration of women employed in war work into post-war society, the gathering of information about such women became its immediate concern. To this end, a questionnaire was drafted to be

²² *The Canadian Parliamentary Guide 1966*, "MacInnis, Winona Grace", p. 230.

²³ Findlay Papers, SPWPW Report, p. 1.

²⁴ Findlay Papers, SPWPW, Minutes, 1st Meeting, p. 2. As a result of changes in the reconstruction machinery, the title of the parent committee had been altered to Advisory Committee on Reconstruction.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

distributed to women engaged in war industries. Each respondent was asked to record her home town or city, age, the type of work she had performed in the past, and her level of schooling. Of greater importance, she was asked to answer the following question:²⁶

What do you want to do most, after the war?

- (a) Get married?
- (b) Be a homemaker?
- (c) Go back to your old job?
- What was it?
- (d) Work in a factory?
- (e) Do some other kind of work?
- What kind?
- (f) Would you want to do this if it took six months to a year of training?

Considerable difficulty was encountered in securing completed questionnaires.²⁷ For example, Subcommittee members Evelyn Lett and Grace MacInnis reported that 2,300 copies of the questionnaire were distributed to women workers in war plants in or near Vancouver, but only 778 completed copies (33.8%) were returned.²⁸ No reason was offered for this low level of return. In the case of the arsenals at St Malo and Valcartier in Quebec, the rate of completed returns was even lower — 408 replies to 2,000 questionnaires distributed (29.4%). The questionnaire was distributed by the University Women's Club of Quebec, which attributed the low proportion of completed returns to "insufficient preparation of the ground. We had hoped to go to the arsenal, make contact with the workers and explain to them, ourselves, the value of the questionnaire and how to reply to it. That was impossible: the arsenal management dislike strangers and thought that the questionnaires should be distributed and explained by their own personnel. We had no way of controlling the situation and our role has been limited to receiving replies."²⁹

Moreover, the results of the completed questionnaires were impossible to interpret. Although the designer of the questionnaire, Dr Douglas, appears to have intended the responses to the question, "What do you want to do most after the war?" to have been mutually exclusive, many women gave more than one answer. By adding the question about training, she had effectively encouraged some women to give at least two responses. Moreover, the difficulties that were encountered in the distribution of the questionnaire suggest that the workers were frequently ill-informed as to how to complete it.

²⁶ Findlay Papers, SPWPW, Minutes, 2nd Meeting, appendix.

²⁷ The number of completed questionnaires from each area was as follows: Vancouver — 778; Winnipeg — 40; Toronto — 583; Montreal — 258; Quebec — 408; Maritimes — 30; Total — 2,097.

²⁸ Findlay Papers, Report on Post-War Employment Probabilities for Women, p. 9.

²⁹ Findlay Papers, The Report on the Questionnaires to Women in Industry distributed at the St. Malo and Valcartier Arsenals, p. 1.

Almost one-third of all respondents did indicate a willingness to undertake training programmes lasting from six to twelve months, and more than half offered suggestions for helping working girls after the war. According to the Subcommittee's tabulation, opinions most frequently expressed were:

Girls in war work should be given an opportunity to study or be trained in work they like or show an aptitude for on much the same plan as they are trained for war work. There should be payment of subsistence allowance while training.

Married women should not be allowed to work if their husbands have a good position and can keep the family and home comfortable. (Exclusion of married women re-iterated again and again).

Preference for single girls.³⁰

Many respondents emphasized the need for training for women, including manual training, which would enable women to become skilled industrial workers. Fairer wages, shorter hours, compulsory pension plans, paid holidays and unemployment insurance were all recommended. Other suggestions included raising the standards for domestic service, thereby effecting an improvement in wages, and creating new industries after the war. Finally, although many replies expressed opposition to married women continuing to work after the war, some did call upon the Subcommittee "to combat this reactionary attitude" and claimed that it was the right of "all women regardless of marital status ... to have a job and one they want". Equal opportunity, equal wages and equal rights for female and male employees were also stressed.³¹

In addition to contacting women workers in war industry, the Subcommittee sought the advice of employers, government experts, and business organizations such as the Canadian Manufacturers' Association and the Canadian Chamber of Commerce. There is no indication that the Subcommittee systematically tabulated the results of these interviews; however, Grace MacInnis and Evelyn Lett provided an eight-page summary of the interviews they conducted in British Columbia. They reported that "with one exception (which would appear to be due to the lack of a personnel worker), they [the employers] were pleased with women as employees ... In general, the employers see women as an integral part of the future economic structure. They feel that women have proved themselves and that it is up to society to work out a plan to conserve the home, and at the same time, to allow women to follow a career if they so wish." However, women's employment opportunities were seen as dependent upon the achievement of post-war prosperity. More specific recommendations were made by the employers with regard to the employment of women, including the following:

³⁰ Findlay Papers, Women Workers in War Industries — Suggestions, p. 1.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., pp. 2, 4.

There should be equal pay for equal work. When women cannot do equal work, they should receive lower wages.

The job-freezing order should apply to women as well as men. There should be a future for women in the social services and training schools should be provided for health, engineering and farm work.³²

In addition to interviewing management in firms which were engaged in war production, Grace MacInnis and Evelyn Lett canvassed managers in wholesale and retail firms, hospitals, banks and school superintendents for their opinions about female employment. It was generally felt that women would remain an integral part of their operations after the war, although the extent of female participation in the labour force would be highly dependent upon the state of the post-war economy.³³

A third sampling of public opinion was undertaken by the Subcommittee in September 1943 when it distributed a letter and questionnaire to thirty-eight national women's organizations. Each was asked to express an opinion on the following points: (1) the extent of government responsibility after the war for retraining women engaged in war occupations, (2) the desirability of including nursery schools in the regular educational system, and (3) methods for making household employment and farm life more attractive. A total of fourteen organizations replied.³⁴ The responses to the first two questions varied considerably. Socially conservative organizations, such as the Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire denied that it was the government's responsibility to retrain women, and also feared that the provision of nursery schools as part of the educational system would "encourage women to stay out of their homes". By contrast, groups such as the Junior League and the University Women's Club (Winnipeg) were of the decided opinion that it was government's responsibility to retrain women and to provide nursery schools.³⁵

The responses to the Subcommittee's enquiry of how to render domestic service and farm life more attractive were remarkably uniform. There was general agreement that household employment would have to become a skilled trade requiring a certain level of training, and ensuring better protection for household workers. Rural electrification and the distribution of household appliances were seen as the principal means of improving farm life for women. Improvements in health care facilities, communications and educational opportunities in rural areas were also frequently suggested.³⁶

³³ Ibid., pp. 4-6.

³⁴ Replies were received from the following groups: Dominion Women's Association Councils; The United Church of Canada; Women's Auxiliary, Missionary Society, Church of England; Junior Leagues of America; Junior League of Winnipeg; University Women's Club, Winnipeg; Canadian Nurses' Association; Professional and Business Women's Clubs; Salvation Army; Canadian Dietetic Association; Daughters of the Empire; La Fédération des Femmes canadiennes-françaises; Jeunesse Ouvrière Catholique; Fédération Nationale Saint-Jean-Baptiste; Cercles des Fermières.

³⁵ Findlay Papers, Re: Letter to the National Organization Societies, p. 2.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 3.

III

Much of the information collected from the war workers, the employers and the national organizations found its way into the Subcommittee's final report. This document, which was submitted on 30 November 1943, clearly rested on three assumptions on the part of its authors: that there would be full employment at war's end; that the post-war problems of women were an integral part of the post-war problems of all Canadians; and that women could not simply be ignored once the war was over because their "work and sacrifice of the war years" entitled them to better treatment.³⁷

According to the Subcommittee's calculations there would be 180,000 to 200,000 women employed in 1943 who would not be absorbed into the work-force once peace returned, or would not be leaving it for marriage and home duties. In view of this situation, the Subcommittee's report urged the government to expand employment opportunities for women, and it contained a number of specific recommendations for aiding different categories of women.

The first group discussed in the report were married women in the home, who were acknowledged as constituting "the largest group among Canadian women and the most important from the standpoint of the happiness and efficiency of the husband and children". Homes, and therefore home-makers, were considered the foundation of "true democracy"; consequently, it was incumbent upon all levels of government to introduce measures to ensure the well-being of Canadian homes. They included raising the status of home-making for both housewives and domestic servants. In the case of the former, this might be achieved by recognizing their economic contribution to the community by viewing the married couple as a partnership and including wives in social security provisions, by implementing a system of children's allowances which would be payable to the mother and spent by her, and by involving women in the planning and implementation of housing programmes. As well, the Subcommittee called for the creation of morning nursery schools as an integral part of the school system. Such schools would enable mothers to participate in outside activities, and to perform valuable community service. They would also permit married women who were compelled or desired to work outside the home to work on a part-time basis.³⁸

It was obvious, however, that the status of the housewife could only be improved if the status of the domestic employee were also raised. It was the belief of the Subcommittee that "for a long time in the future, as in the past, household workers will continue to be the largest, or one of the largest, groups of gainfully occupied women", and that "the status of household work should be raised by the standards of

³⁷ Findlay Papers, SPWPW Report, p. 1.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-10.

training to the dignity of a vocation." Moreover, skilled household workers were necessary "if highly trained professional and business women were to make an adequate return to the state for their expensive education" and to free women who were willing to undertake volunteer community work. In order to obtain this body of skilled household workers, training courses were to be established and funded by the federal and provincial governments, and graduates were to be granted proficiency certificates. Employers and employees would be protected by written contracts and provisions regarding household workers were to be included in the National Labour Code which was being discussed by the federal and provincial governments. Furthermore, it was proposed that these workers be covered by minimum wage legislation and be included in unemployment insurance and workmen's compensation schemes.³⁹

The second group of women selected for specific attention in the Subcommittee's report were single women. According to the statistics gathered by the Subcommittee, seventy-three percent of all gainfully employed women were single, and approximately 20,000 single women would have "to be looked after" at the conclusion of the war. The members of the Subcommittee believed that the best solution would be to settle them on farms. Government figures revealed that some 95,000 women had left the farm during the course of the war, and so single women could potentially fill the vacuum created by this exodus. Domestic service was also expected to expand, especially if the Subcommittee's recommendations to improve conditions in this sector were implemented. It was also expected that new jobs would be available in trade and industry, and the Subcommittee's report went to some lengths to indicate those occupations which offered special opportunities for women. It was marriage, however, which the Subcommittee members believed would most effectively alleviate the problem of large numbers of unemployed single women.⁴⁰

To lessen the difficulties of those single women who wished to remain in the work-force, it was recommended that the federal government create an employment service which would also offer vocational guidance. As for women war workers, it was suggested that the government set up its own retraining programmes and see that certain standards were met in the training programmes offered by private industry. It was emphasized that whatever training was made available to male war workers "should be provided for women workers upon precisely the same basis, though dealing with occupations attractive to women or those in which employers like to hire women." To women who found it impossible to support themselves during the retraining period, government loans should be available.⁴¹

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 10-12.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 14.

The Subcommittee also called for better housing conditions for single female employees and for the inclusion of nurses, teachers and social workers, many of whom were single women, in unemployment insurance and workmen's compensation schemes. Contributory old age pensions and disability pensions were also highly recommended for single women.⁴²

The third group of women studied consisted of married women working outside the home. The Subcommittee estimated that one of every four workers in 1943 was married. It was felt that all recommendations made with reference to the first two categories of women were equally applicable to the married working woman because of her dual role as home-maker and wage-earner. In addition, the report emphasized her right to choose whatever type of employment she wished, provided that she possessed the proper qualification. If full employment prevailed in the post-war period, increased part-time employment for married women was deemed particularly desirable.⁴³

Farm women constituted the final category of women discussed in the report, which emphasized their importance to Canadian society:

The position of women on farms and in rural communities is, and will remain, so long as Canada is based upon an agricultural economy, one of first importance to all the women of the country ... Some way must be found to make rural life less arduous and more attractive to women ... Farm life offers one of the largest fields open to women when war ceases, and both because of this, and because of the fundamental needs of the country, every possible effort to improve the conditions under which life is lived in farm homes is essential.⁴⁴

The solutions put forward to deal with this problem included rural electrification, a government plan to distribute appliances at cost to farm homes, improved water supply and communications, and the creation of adequate health, educational and recreational facilities. Furthermore, the Department of Agriculture was urged to encourage women in rural districts to establish their own small businesses, such as honey production, fur farming, fruit canning, handicrafts, tea rooms and vacation homes.⁴⁵

The members of the Subcommittee concluded their report with a list of proposals that would benefit women. They called for an examination of unemployment insurance benefits to determine if they were adequate for women workers, and for the appointment of women trained in architecture and interior decorating to government-sponsored housing projects. Considering the amount of time which the members had spent discussing household employment, it was not surprising that their final recommendation was the replacement of the category "domestic service" by the less demeaning term "household workers" on future federal census schedules.⁴⁶

⁴² Ibid., p. 16.

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 16-17.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 18-19.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 21.

IV

With the recent interest in women's history, documentation relating to women has taken on new value, and the report of the Subcommittee on the Post-War Problems of Women has been rediscovered. In an article published in *Atlantis*, Ruth Roach Pierson has focussed on the section of the Subcommittee's report which dealt with domestic employment. She rightfully points out that "in the recommendations of the Sub-Committee altruism converged with self-interest, for the concern to improve the lot of 'household workers' coincided with the class interest of the Subcommittee members",⁴⁷ when the latter argued that one reason for bettering conditions for the domestic worker, was to release the energies of professional and business women, and those involved in community work, from household tasks. Although Professor Pierson acknowledges that the Subcommittee did call for training programmes and the inclusion of domestic workers in protective labour legislation and social insurance schemes, she paints an essentially negative picture of its work.

Certainly it is not difficult to find fault with the report. The continued emphasis on farm life and domestic work as prime areas of employment for Canadian women seems ludicrously dated. One can find the same platitudes about the importance of the home for democracy as were present in the publications of the Women's Department of the Canadian Reconstruction Association at the end of World War I. Similarly, the calls for training, especially for domestic workers, have an all too familiar ring about them.⁴⁸ The middle-class bias of the Subcommittee is evident and not surprising, considering its composition. Only Grace MacInnis and Marion Findlay could be said to have had any association with labour. It is apparent that the chairman, for example, adhered to certain assumptions and attitudes which were hardly conducive to innovative solutions to the problems women were facing. In one memorandum, she characterized women who would decide to return to domestic service at the end of the war as "not being of the adventurous or pioneering type", while she described social work, nursing and teaching as "professions in which women are so skilled".⁴⁹

It would, however, be an injustice to dismiss the Subcommittee and its report as the work of a group of middle-class dilettantes who deserved to have their work ignored. In the first place, such a judgement takes no cognizance of the circumstances and attitudes of Canadian

⁴⁷ Ruth PIERSON, "'Home Aide': A Solution to Women's Unemployment After World War II", *Atlantis*, 2, 2 (Spring 1977): 89.

⁴⁸ Such schemes had been consistently advocated by middle-class women's organizations from the end of the nineteenth century. For an account of one such group, and its plans, see Veronica STRONG-BOAG, *The Parliament of Women: The National Council of Women of Canada, 1893-1929* (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1976), pp. 211-13, 235-39.

⁴⁹ Findlay Papers, SPWPW, Minutes, 1st Meeting, p. 5.

society at the time the report was produced, nor of the conditions under which it was produced. It is obvious from the questionnaires and interviews that most Canadians simply wanted to see women return home after the war,⁵⁰ but the Subcommittee consistently stressed a woman's right as a citizen to choose whether or not to marry, to work at whatever occupation she wished and subsequently to enjoy "equality of remuneration, working conditions and opportunity for advancement" with men. In particular, the Subcommittee sought to encourage Canadians to acknowledge the married woman's right to work so that "the result would be a greater readiness to look on marriage as on a par with any other occupation".⁵¹

Furthermore, the Subcommittee's preoccupation with farm life does not appear so misdirected when one considers that nearly one-third of all gainfully employed males aged fourteen years and over were employed in agriculture in 1941, compared to only seventeen percent in manufacturing.⁵² There was a general expectation that Canada would play an even more important role as an exporter of food to war-ravaged Europe once the hostilities ended. It was also believed that technological innovations in the manufacture of synthetics would lead to increased demand for agricultural products in the post-war era.

Any satisfactory assessment of the work of the Subcommittee should take into consideration the unrealistic time limits under which it laboured. Originally, the members were informed that they would have until the summer of 1944 to complete their work,⁵³ but in the end they were to have only eight months in which to fulfill their very broad mandate. As noted earlier in this article, they were assigned the additional task of preparing a special report on the implications of the introduction of a national security scheme for Canadian women. During its brief existence, the Subcommittee was able to meet only four times. One of its meetings, scheduled for 16-18 June 1943 was cancelled by Dr James because the federal government had requested a review of the work of the Advisory Committee on Reconstruction, and as a result, a moratorium was imposed on all subcommittee meetings. At the August meeting of the Advisory Committee, the Chairman of the Women's Subcommittee, Mrs McWilliams, expressed the dissatisfaction of her fellow subcommittee members over the sudden cancellation of their June meeting. It was subsequently agreed by the parent committee that Mrs McWilliams' subcommittee could continue to meet since it was expected that any reorganization would not result in the demise of that particular subcommittee.⁵⁴ In September 1943 the Advisory Committee submitted its main

⁵⁰ "According to a Gallup poll taken in Canada, seventy-five percent of men and sixty-eight percent of women polled said men should be given first chance in any competition for post-war jobs." Clara Boothe LUCE, "Women Can Win the Peace", *Chatelaine*, February 1944, p. 3.

⁵¹ Findlay Papers, SPWPW Report, pp. 5-6.

⁵² CANADA, DOMINION, BUREAU OF STATISTICS, *Census of Canada, 1941*, 11 vols (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1942), vol. 7, Table 2, p. 7.

⁵³ Findlay Papers, SPWPW, Minutes, 2nd Meeting, p. 2.

⁵⁴ Findlay Papers, SPWPW, Confidential — 3rd Meeting, p. 1.

report well before the Subcommittee had completed its own investigations. Then on 29 October 1943 the Subcommittee was informed by the Clerk of the Privy Council, A. D. P. Heeney, that it should submit its report not later than 30 November of the same year.⁵⁵

The lack of sufficient time had a direct influence on the quality of the Subcommittee's report. The small sampling of the opinions of women war workers was intended to be only a preliminary investigation, but due to the premature deadline imposed on it, the Subcommittee was forced to rely exclusively on these results.⁵⁶ Similarly, its recommendations for the retraining of women war workers were cursory because the necessary information regarding training facilities was not yet available when the Subcommittee was asked to terminate its work.⁵⁷ Important issues such as the lack of security for older self-supporting women were mentioned but could not be satisfactorily explored in such a short space of time.

Even the effectiveness of the Subcommittee in publicizing and organizing support for its work was undermined by Dr James. At an early meeting, he suggested that the members postpone sending questionnaires to women employees in war industry, and concentrate their efforts instead on the attitudes of employers.⁵⁸ In addition, he led the members to believe that they should carry out their duties with as little publicity as possible. The minutes of the Subcommittee's meetings contain some curious statements; for example, "Each member undertook to get *without publicity* (my emphasis) as much distribution of the questionnaire ... as she thought wise and useful in her area" and "it was agreed that members ask the Y.W.C.A. to cooperate in the *quiet distribution* (my emphasis) of these questionnaires."⁵⁹ In fact, when asked by the members of the Advisory Committee in August 1943 if she had contacted the national women's organizations, Mrs McWilliams replied that "owing to the direction for avoidance of any publicity given by the Chairman [Dr James], the members of the Subcommittee had studiously avoided any such action, but that she herself felt close cooperation with such societies to be essential to the success of the Subcommittee's work."⁶⁰ Consequently, it was only in September 1943, just two months before its final report was due, that the Subcommittee finally began to solicit the opinions of the influential national women's organizations. Without their commitment and support, it was highly unlikely that the government would take seriously the recommendations of the Subcommittee on the Post-War Problems of Women. Two decades later, the Royal Commission

⁵⁵ In his correspondence with Mrs McWilliams, King acknowledged "the pressure under which you and your associates had to work in order to meet the government's wishes to submit an early report". King Papers, MG 26 J1, vol. 346, King to McWilliams, 3 December 1943.

⁵⁶ Findlay Papers, SPWPW, Report on Third Meeting, September 3, 1943, p. 2.

⁵⁷ Findlay Papers, SPWPW Report, pp. 13-14.

⁵⁸ Findlay Papers, SPWPW, Confidential — 2nd Meeting, p. 2.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁶⁰ Findlay Papers, SPWPW, Confidential — 3rd Meeting, p. 2.

on the Status of Women in Canada demonstrated the importance of gaining the support of the national women's organizations. Its success in achieving reform was due to the fact that it was created and sustained by the lobbying efforts of thirty-two national groups. In view of the difficulties placed in the 1943 Subcommittee's way, one can only admire the persistence and devotion to duty of its members.

V

On 28 January 1944, the Subcommittee's report was submitted to the House of Commons by Prime Minister Mackenzie King. There was, however, no immediate reaction in the House. The question period that day was given over to more pressing issues, including the domestic production of children's underwear. In fact, the only direct parliamentary reference to the work of the Subcommittee came some months later, in May 1944, when the MP for North Battleford, Dorise Nielsen, quoted passages from the report to support her request to the Minister of Labour that equal wages for equal work be made part of a national labour code.⁶¹

Outside Parliament, the report also appears to have received limited but positive attention. Newspaper coverage consisted primarily of brief summaries of the Subcommittee's findings and recommendations; almost invariably, these were located on the women's pages. What comment the report did receive was generally favourable. An article in *Saturday Night*, which began by noting that much of the report was "aimed at attracting women away from industrial or 'men's work' type of employment and into more womanly channels", concluded: "It is the basic premise of the report that women shall be free to choose exactly what they want to do and be aided to achieve their ambitions when the war is over. In fact in this and in other respects, the report goes beyond the study of a problem and becomes something of a charter of women's rights."⁶² The *Halifax Herald* referred to the report as "a premise for a bill of rights".⁶³ Important women's organizations also endorsed it.⁶⁴

But what of the government's reaction? After all, it had commissioned the Advisory Committee on Reconstruction; if the deliberations of its subcommittees were to have any impact, it would have to be at the level of government policy. The Speech from the Throne on 27 January 1944 contained no special reference to women; it did, however, indicate the government's intention to institute family allowances in

⁶¹ CANADA, PARLIAMENT, *House of Commons Debates*, III (1944): 2630-31.

⁶² Anne FROMER, "What War Women Will Do When It's All Over", *Saturday Night*, 24 June 1944, p. 6.

⁶³ *Halifax Herald*, 2 February 1944, p. 8.

⁶⁴ The National Council of Women, for example, endorsed the report at its 1945 conference. Special thanks to Dean Beeby of the University of Toronto for drawing this endorsement to my attention.

recognition of the fact that "the family and the home are the foundation of national life."⁶⁵ In order to understand the failure of the government to implement the report's recommendations, it is necessary to consider the complex bureaucratic structure which was erected to deal with reconstruction issues.

Almost immediately following its formation, the parent Committee on Reconstruction was plagued with uncertainty about its own role. In June 1941, Professor James wrote to Ian Mackenzie to complain about the lack of a clearly defined mandate for his group, and to demand a clarification of his committee's position.⁶⁶ Although a redefinition was forthcoming, the James Committee and its work was viewed with suspicion by another government-appointed body, the Advisory Committee on Economic Policy. Composed of powerful senior civil servants such as W. A. Mackintosh, Clifford Clark, Norman Robertson and Donald Gordon, it was bound to carry more influence with the government.

When the Committee on Reconstruction recommended in October 1942 that either a ministry of economic planning be created, or a minister without portfolio be made responsible for reconstruction planning, the Economic Advisory Committee (EAC) vetoed these proposals on the grounds that "the bulk of the preparation and advisory work must be done within government departments and agencies".⁶⁷ Therefore, either a new interdepartmental committee or the EAC itself should assume the responsibility for post-war planning. It also suggested that the Reconstruction Committee should have its functions redefined and, to emphasize its advisory nature, it should no longer report to the Minister of Pensions but rather to the Prime Minister. The War Committee, following the Prime Minister's lead, approved the EAC report and thereby hastened the eclipse of the James Committee.⁶⁸ The attitudes of the EAC members toward the work of the reconstruction subcommittees were also later reflected in their opinions on whether the final reports of the latter should be published. Three of seven members were opposed for reasons ranging from the need to conserve paper and manpower to "the indifferent quality" of some of the reports.⁶⁹

Within the Cabinet itself, war-time considerations continued to take precedence over post-war planning.⁷⁰ In April 1944, the government

⁶⁵ CANADA, PARLIAMENT, *House of Commons Debates*, I (1944): 2.

⁶⁶ J. GRANATSTEIN, *Canada's War. The Politics of the Mackenzie King Government, 1939-1945* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 255.

⁶⁷ PAC, Privy Council Office, RG 2/18, Minutes of the Cabinet War Committee, 23 December 1942, p. 2.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3. For a fuller account of the rivalry between the James Committee and the EAC, see J. R. ENGLISH, "The Defunct Economist, Lord Keynes and Reconstruction Planning in Canada", unpublished paper presented to the Canadian Historical Association, Edmonton, 1975, pp. 19-22.

⁶⁹ King Papers, MG 26 J4, vol. 415, Reconstruction.

⁷⁰ According to statistics prepared by W. E. D. Halliday, Secretary to the Cabinet War Committee, between 1938 and 1945, discussion of domestic issues occupied only one-fifth of Cabinet's time. See PAC, Privy Council Office, RG 2/18, vol. 35, file C-10-3-G.

finally created a department of reconstruction but it was obviously not to be the powerful instrument to create a new society which the James Committee had originally envisaged. Much of the responsibility for social and economic measures was to be shared with two other new ministries — Health and Welfare, and Veterans' Affairs. The selection of C. D. Howe to head the Reconstruction Ministry was a further indication that the government would adopt a conservative approach in its post-war designs.⁷¹ Indeed, reconstruction as implemented by the new ministry in conjunction with the Cabinet Committee on Reconstruction, was primarily concerned with the creation of capital expenditure projects.⁷²

Finally, the primary motivation underlying the demand for reconstruction — fear of massive unemployment, recession and popular unrest — melted away as the nation began to bask in the prosperity of the immediate post-war period.⁷³ The remarkable increase in residential construction, the equally impressive number of marriages and births not only attested to the general prosperity, but also indicated the changing circumstances of many Canadian women. "Rosie the Riveter" was leaving the factory for the suburbs, and exchanging her role as producer for that of consumer. This transfer was facilitated by the fact that, despite women's new responsibilities, there had been no fundamental change in public attitudes toward their appropriate role.⁷⁴ Even as he steered his Cabinet into encouraging women's participation in the war effort, Prime Minister King retained his traditional views about women's capacities. In April 1941, he recorded in his diary a conversation he had had with the Governor-General, the Earl of Athlone:

I spoke to H.E. about the organization of women for war work. Felt strongly that a man should be at the head of the work ... Advised strongly against H.R.H. [Princess Alice, Athlone's wife] attempting to do any organization or assume responsibility ... He himself agreed that a good deal of what women wished for, and what would occasion difficulty in their employment was the hope of wearing uniforms.⁷⁵

Three days later, similar views were expressed during a Cabinet meeting. Not only did the ministers oppose the creation of a national women's corps, and women's uniforms, but also, according to King: "We opposed the recommendation of a woman at the head of a corps. Suggested women were secretaries but that a man was needed for that purpose."⁷⁶

⁷¹ As one recently published work concludes, under Howe, "reconstruction in fact would be reconversion". See R. BOTHWELL, I. DRUMMOND and J. ENGLISH, *Canada Since 1945: Power, Politics and Provincialism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), p. 68.

⁷² PAC, Munitions and Supplies, RG 28A, vol. 136, Committee on Reconstruction, 1944-47. On 13 October 1944 it was specifically stated that one of the principal duties of the Cabinet Committee on Reconstruction was to consider proposals "to make capital expenditures on reconstruction projects".

⁷³ BOTHWELL et al., *Canada since 1945*, pp. 64, 85.

⁷⁴ PIERSON, "Women's Emancipation", p. 145.

⁷⁵ *The Mackenzie King Diaries, 1932-1949* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), 27 April 1941.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 30 April 1941.

VI

The report of the Subcommittee on the Post-War Problems of Women contained several proposals for improving the status of women in Canada. They included: equality of remuneration, improved working conditions, opportunity for advancement, freedom of choice for married women, improved coverage for women in social security programmes, and better protection under labour codes. A comparison of the Subcommittee's report with the Women's Reconstruction Committee in 1919 reveals some significant differences both in the analysis of women's problems, and their proposed solutions. Although the earlier group had as one of its aims to "improve the position of women in paid employments",⁷⁷ most of the emphasis was on women's role in the home, as consumers. The possibility of married women seeking employment outside the home was scarcely mentioned, for as one of the official Reconstruction pamphlets declared in 1919: "The best employment for any woman is in home making."⁷⁸ Over and over, Canadian women's devotion to the home, and consequently to the advancement of the race, was stressed. Thus, in its emphasis on the right of the married woman to seek employment outside the home, and on the responsibility of government to provide adequate training programmes for other women seeking employment, the Subcommittee on the Post-War Problems of Women was breaking new ground. A quarter of a century later, the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada would restate many of the Subcommittee's recommendations: more effective and accessible technical education for women, including training programmes for household workers; better educational and social services for rural women; the extension of unemployment insurance to include groups of women such as private duty nurses and household workers; and an adequate, federally supported day-care system.⁷⁹

In the end, the report of the Subcommittee on the Post-War Problems of Women failed to have a significant impact on Canadian society for a variety of reasons. It shared the fate of many other government-appointed commissions, including the reports of the other subcommittees established by the Advisory Committee on Reconstruction. Once the King government had received the Marsh report on social security, it was content to let most of the other works of the Advisory Committee and its subcommittees lie dormant. As other historians have effectively demonstrated, Mackenzie King was not prepared to commit his government to an integrated and extensive reconstruction programme.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Marjory MACMURCHY, *Women of Today and Tomorrow* (Toronto, n.d.), p. 11.

⁷⁸ CANADIAN RECONSTRUCTION ASSOCIATION, WOMEN'S DEPARTMENT, *What Shall I Do Now?* (Toronto: Canadian Reconstruction Association, 1919), p. 6.

⁷⁹ ROYAL COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN CANADA, *Report* (Ottawa: Information Canada, 1970), pp. 198, 203-4, 207-9, 84, 264-72.

⁸⁰ See, for example, ENGLISH, "The Defunct Economist", pp. 31-32; GRANATSTEIN, *Canada's War*, pp. 262-88; BOTHWELL et al., *Canada since 1945*, pp. 63-69.

Moreover, the Subcommittee on the Post-War Problems of Women was not only lost in the labyrinth of personal jealousies and competing political considerations which characterized the reconstruction bureaucracy; it also suffered from a lack of public support. There was no surge of popular sentiment in favour of fundamental changes in the role of women in Canadian society, as there was in favour of a more extensive social security system.⁸¹ As one embittered critic remarked, there was a general tendency to say to women: "Well, girls, you have done a nice job; you looked very cute in your overalls and we appreciate what you have done for us; but just run along; go home; we can get along without you very nicely."⁸²

⁸¹ It is interesting to note that in her letter to Dr James calling for the appointment of women to the Reconstruction Committee, Margaret Wherry suggested that this was the fundamental concern of women themselves: "The women of Canada are very much concerned that after this war is over we shall have social security in this country." PAC, Munitions and Supplies, RG 28A, vol. 125, Wherry to James, 2 September 1941.

⁸² CANADA, PARLIAMENT, *House of Commons Debates*, III (1944): 2629.