

Agnes Macphail and Canadian Working Women

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"I AM A FEMINIST," Canada's first woman MP informed a Toronto audience in 1927, "and I want for women the thing men are not willing to give them, absolute equality. We will not get it this year but we will get it next."¹ The intricate interplay between feminism and equality that characterized the thought of Agnes Macphail during her 30 years in politics has eluded historians.² While each ideal informed the other, equality rather than feminism stood at the core of her social and political outlook. Believing that women were as diverse as men, Macphail strove to improve conditions for those groups of people whom she considered to be the most disadvantaged: farmers, workers, and the disabled. In championing the cause of working women, Macphail brought their concerns to public attention and assisted in providing programs designed to improve their material situation. She played a key role in the process that saw the Canadian state shed its 19th-century narrowness in order to serve a broader range of citizens in new ways.

Studies by historians of women in Canadian politics are in their infancy. To date, most have emphasized the difficulties women have encountered in making their presence felt within party, ethnic, or other organizations. Frustration with failures has led to fanciful attempts to redefine politics as encompassing "all organized initiatives by women to change the structure of society," and to view separatist gender initiatives as a viable alternative to integrationist or transformative action.³ Such a definition, excluding the male half of the population, assumes

¹*Farmers' Sun*, 20 January 1927. *Toronto Mail*, 16 January 1931.

²See Margaret Stewart and Doris French, *Ask No Quarter* (Toronto 1959). Doris Pennington, *Agnes Macphail: Reformer* (Toronto 1989) is chronicle masquerading as local history.

³Linda Kealey and Joan Sangster, eds., "Introduction," *Beyond the Vote: Canadian Women and Politics* (Toronto 1989), 11-2. See also Linda Kealey, ed., *A Not Unreasonable Claim: Women and Reform in Canada, 1880s-1920s* (Toronto 1979); Carol Bacchi, *Liberation Deferred? The Ideas of the English-Canadian Suffragists, 1877-1918* (Toronto 1983); Joan Sangster, *Dreams of Equality: Women on the Canadian Left, 1920-1950* (Toronto 1989).

a separate women's sphere not in accord with the principles of governance, while its emphasis on change denies validity to any, unlike Macphail, who believe legitimately that the role of government should be to maintain the comfortable *status quo*. The history of women's involvement in political life needs to seek new interpretations.

Canadian women have helped increase popular participation in politics and to change the nature of state activity in Canada. The nation-state in the West did not triumph fully over traditional competing centres of authority until the 19th century. With their new-found powers, many countries initially centred their activities on creating economic infrastructures that permitted the development of national markets designed to ensure supply of foodstuffs and avoid popular disruptions.⁴ As the idea that government might be a positive force in assisting individuals more directly gained ground, the jurisdiction of the state expanded. In many areas, statute law came to rival its civil counterpart. Compulsory education provided by the state, the recognition of trade unions and worker's compensation, the implementation of pensions legislation beginning in Germany under Bismarck, and the provision of mothers' allowances were but four areas where state activity invaded a previously private domain.

Although such developments usually are seen as precursors of the 20th-century welfare state, in the longer term they also represented the politicization of life on an unprecedented scale. A divorce between private and public life that was assumed by many gradually produced a conflation in which the latter increasingly subsumed the former. During the latter half of the 19th century, power shifted from municipal bodies to superior levels of government where political parties became firmly entrenched as the funnels for particular viewpoints.⁵ Women, who had always been involved variously in the political process, formed provincial and national organizations in response, although initially these were dominated by the middle class.⁶

Political scientists have generally framed their inquiries within an integrationist model. See Sylvia Bashevkin, *Toeing the Lines: Women and Party Politics in English Canada* (Toronto 1985); Janine Brodie, *Women and Politics in Canada* (Toronto 1985); Janine Brodie and Jill Vickers, *Canadian Women and Politics: An Overview*, CRIAW Paper no. 2 (1982).

⁴See Charles Tilly and Gabriel Ardant, *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Princeton 1975).

⁵See S.J.R. Noel, *Patrons, Clients, and Brokers: Ontario Society and Politics 1791-1896* (Toronto 1990).

⁶Ida Blom, "Women and politics in Norway since the end of the nineteenth century," in S. Jay Kleinberg, ed., *Retrieving Women's History, Changing Perceptions of the Role of Women in Politics and Society* (Oxford 1988), 254-77. See also Joan W. Scott's essay, "The Problem of Invisibility," in the latter collection.

In Canada, these developments have been interpreted as the formation of a "women's movement" with suffrage as its ultimate goal. See Veronica Strong-Boag, "Setting the Stage," in Alison Prentice and Susan M. Trofimenkoff, eds., *The Neglected Majority* (Toronto 1977); Bacchi, *Liberation Deferred*, and Alison Prentice, et al., *Canadian Women: A History* (Toronto 1988), 169-211.

Working women were affected materially by new government programs, although they saw their employment situation influenced more directly through union activity in the opening years of the new century. Unions altered the terms, conditions, and wages of employment (often indirectly for women), but they did not raise political consciousness any more than housework or childrearing enabled them to understand how government might be rendered more useful.⁷ Public education and political organization assumed this responsibility where people were willing to risk the hazards of adopting unpopular viewpoints. Governments enacted new legislation in response to electoral pressures, but within more complex processes at work in industrial society.⁸

Women's enfranchisement in Canada occurred at a time when new political parties competed for attention in various provinces and the Progressive revolt caused momentary confusion on the national scene following World War I. Lacking the financial resources enjoyed both by Liberals and Conservatives, new movements resorted to education to gain greater acceptance for their programs. A product of this upheaval in political life, Agnes Macphail pursued both avenues in order to enhance the lives of working people. First elected in 1921, she remained the sole female voice in the House of Commons for 14 years, and later, the only woman member of the Ontario Legislature. As a woman and an advocate of human and economic rights her position was doubly anomalous, although she never wavered in her belief that more women politicians would alter the character of government in favour of working Canadians. Her commitment to politics was made in full recognition of its cost in restricting those life choices that are woman's alone.

Although trained as a schoolteacher, repeated electoral successes turned Agnes Macphail into that rarest of human species, the professional politician. As she never was a true "loose fish" in politics, Macphail was not, as those attracted to separatist gender politics have maintained, a representative of "the long tradition of political independence among women's rights activists in English Canada."⁹ Agnes Macphail represented the United Farmers of Ontario (UFO) in Parliament for 19 years. Without previous links to the women's suffrage movement, her public career started with the advance of the United Farmers into politics and she remained the foremost spokesperson of the Ontario farm movement after it beat a hasty retreat from formal participation in party politics following defeat in 1923. A colourful

⁷According to the census, the number of working women increased from 490,150 in 1921 to 832,840 in 1941, expanding from 15 to 20 per cent of the total labour force, before experiencing tremendous growth due to government policies during World War II. See Veronica Strong-Boag, *The New Day Recalled: Lives of Girls and Women in English Canada, 1919-1939* (Toronto 1988) and Ruth Roach Pierson, *They're Still Women After All: The Second World War and Canadian Womanhood* (Toronto 1986).

⁸See Doug Owram, *The Government Generation: Canadian Intellectuals and the State 1900-1945* (Toronto 1986).

⁹Bashevkin, *Toeing the Lines*, 15-7, 159.

populist who invoked Lincoln's definition of democracy, she admired the democratic conventions observed by the United Farmers while the Liberal and Conservative parties were run by parliamentary caucuses. Agrarian radicalism firmly rooted in local organization appeared to her as a model that would allow women and men to reclaim control of their destinies. Like Western farm women, she stressed the need for both sexes to work together in order to counter the business interests that had come to dominate the two old parties.¹⁰ Throughout her life, she retained a close personal and intellectual friendship with Violet MacNaughton, the first president of the Women's Grain Growers' Association. Collective action by people organized in economic groups appeared to Macphail and many others in the farm and labour revolts following World War I to provide a means to achieve fuller democratic expression by transcending political parties.¹¹

Macphail's family background, her association with agrarian and labour radicalism, and her personal dilemma about reconciling motherhood with a career were the formative influences on her social and political outlook. Between 1932 and 1934, she tried to lead the United Farmers into the new Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) because she saw it as a federated movement rather than a political party, but when the United Farmers withdrew, she felt compelled to exit because she considered herself a delegate of that organization. Only the disintegration of the UFO into the Ontario Federation of Agriculture in 1943 relieved Macphail of the loyalty she owed to the movement that had spawned her career. She joined the CCF and sat in the Ontario legislature during 1943-45 and 1948-51. Agrarian activists joked that the United Farmers had not failed, but 'Macphailed,' in that they had given birth to the country's foremost woman politician.¹²

Agnes Macphail always was an opposition politician because, as a radical agrarian feminist who emerged as a social democrat, her views stood well in advance of her times on most public issues. Believing that electoral victory would be obtained only following extensive public education, she appeared in Canada and around the world, as well as on national and international radio, expounding her views. Always providing encouragement to women who held similar beliefs, her

¹⁰See Bacchi, *Liberation Deferred*, 117-32.

¹¹Macphail's views on the need for electoral reform through the transcendence of party was expressed in *Montreal Star*, 22 May 1922; *New York Times*, 7 June 1925, sec. 9, p. 5, *Boston Herald*, 4 April 1928, and during the next decade in her weekly newsletters in National Archives of Canada (NAC), Agnes Macphail Papers (AMP), vol. 6, 18 February and 6 November 1933. She continued to advocate such policies until just before World War II. See Toronto *Globe and Mail*, 19 August 1939. Her views on this subject were heavily influenced by William Irvine, Henry Wise Wood, W.C. Good, and (later) by J.S. Woodsworth.

¹²University Guelph Library, Archival and Special Collections, Leonard Harman, "General Farm Organization in Ontario," 1969. A 1952 Gallop poll showed that 55 per cent of people asked if they had heard Macphail's name replied in the affirmative — surely the highest recognition factor accorded a non-sports woman in Canada up to that time. Archives of Ontario, MU 7116 (Stewart-French Papers), 4 June 1952.

role was not limited solely to that of critic as has been argued.¹³ She was a formative influence in the founding of the Ginger Group in Parliament in 1924, in the creation of the CCF, and in the beginnings of the Canadian Federation of Agriculture in 1939 when farmers assumed a highly successful role as a lobby in politics rather than direct participant. Macphail also assisted in the expansion of state activities in Canada. As a member of the executive of the Progressive group in Parliament in 1926, she played a role in the negotiations that led the Liberal government to introduce the first federal old age pensions the following year.

Agnes Macphail never defined women or work narrowly. Especially at the outset of her political career, she shared with other women in farm and labour movements the belief that women's conditions were closely linked to their class (or occupational) backgrounds. While her feminist outlook led her to acknowledge the special problems that all women encountered in patriarchal society, the three groups she considered to be most disadvantaged were her special concern. She actively promoted the expansion of cooperatives on behalf of the agricultural community and insisted that government priorities were wrong. Only the interests that the old parties represented, she argued, forestalled finding the funds for such programs as the support of the disabled, and pensions for veterans' wives nursing their invalid husbands. She promoted the activities of trade unions and criticized Canadian governments for obstructing their expansion while failing to address the problems posed by transnational business firms.

Born into a Scottish family from Ontario's rural Protestant heartland in 1890, Macphail drew from her upbringing a sympathy for the underdog, a passionate belief in religious and ethnic tolerance, and an identification of her struggles as a young woman with those of other groups striving in society for dignity and recognition. Her early years were marked by a determination to get an education that would allow her to become self-supporting. Her grandparents had been poor immigrants who improved their economic situation without ever reaching prosperity, a condition that her mother and father enjoyed on a 150-acre farm in Grey County where they occasionally employed hired hands. Like the young Mohandas Gandhi, she drew from the writings of Leo Tolstoy a belief in nonviolence and the view that moral principles needed to be applied in daily life. Reading John Ruskin as a young woman also impressed her with the dignity inherent in all beneficial labour. Following the formation of the Ontario Farmer-Labour government in 1919, Macphail came naturally to associate the difficulties experienced by the "tillers" as they tried to eke out a living with those of the "toilers" in towns and cities.

¹³See Sandra Burt in an otherwise-thoughtful and well-informed essay: "Legislators, Women and Public Policy," in Sandra Burt, Lorraine Code, and Lindsay Dorney, *Changing Patterns: Women in Canada* (Toronto 1988), 146.

Macphail explained her role in the creation of federal old age pensions in Ontario, *Debates of the Legislative Assembly*, 25 September 1951.

Although Macphail began her political career identifying her personal struggles with the plight of ordinary dirt farmers and workers as they strove for improved standards of living, her reformist outlook paved the way for her difficult transition from agrarian radicalism to social democracy during the 1930s. In the next decade, she followed the CCF call for nationalization of key industries, but her personal views were always too pragmatic to typify her as other than a social democrat or left-wing liberal — what Progressive leader Thomas Crerar called the “super-democrats.”¹⁴ Fascinated by human diversity, Agnes Macphail’s thought gravitated around the fundamental importance of individuals — whether female or male — within the occupations that permitted them to earn a living. Knowing full well the inequalities that most Canadians faced, she still drew the strength of her convictions from a belief in the inalienable rights of people as embodied in the United States Declaration of Independence. “I think women just want to be individuals, no more and no less,” she said in appealing for women’s equality with men.¹⁵ While her focus on the individual was not unlike that in the writings of the young Karl Marx, Macphail’s proposals for change were predicated on the power of education broadly conceived in liberal democracies and the introduction of appropriate social programs in response to specific needs. Great reforms do not emanate from governments, she thought, “but from the people. Legislation follows public opinion.”¹⁶

Until World War II, Macphail also believed that the two old parties were so unresponsive to change that a reordering of government priorities to address the needs of farm and labour would only arrive through the abolition of the party system. In her view, Liberals and Conservatives were dominated by business and only served the interests of the rich. Macphail advocated group government and other political reforms as the way to overcome the deficiencies in the Canadian political system. “I look forward to the time when the idealism we have in the Farmer’s party and the idealism you have in the Labor party are united to form a co-operative government,” she said not long after she was elected for the first time.¹⁷ As a farmer and rural school teacher, Macphail knew little about the working class when she entered politics. “I am anxious to have the best of feeling developed between agricultural and industrial workers,” she told the press in 1922, “but I sometimes think that labor would win more if they were not so radical in their views.”¹⁸

Class consciousness and a populist impulse were apparent from the beginning of her public career. At her nomination meeting in 1921, she made it clear that

¹⁴Queen’s University Archives, Thomas Crerar Papers, Vol. 79, Crerar to J.B. Musselman, 15 January 1922.

¹⁵Canada, *House of Commons Debates*, 29 March 1922.

¹⁶*Farmer’s Sun*, 23 February, 1921.

¹⁷AMP, vol. 6, press clippings 1921-26.

¹⁸Toronto *Globe*, 20 January 1922.

while "Premier Meighen says the tariff is the issue ... I say it is democracy. It is a question of whether the people are to rule or the big interests. They say this is a class movement. I grant you, it is...."¹⁹ Before a packed audience in a local hall, she approached the subject of business by asking: "What is industry? Is it limited to hogs who have their noses in the trough all the time?" A consummate populist actor, Macphail continued by deftly capitalizing on Clifford Sifton's remark about Canada welcoming poor immigrants in sheepskin coats: "If those asking for 'protection' would ask for charity, we would probably give it. But when men in sealskin coats drive up in limousines and demand thirty cents on every dollar, we draw the line." Nor did she neglect the interests of her own gender. "Some say that women should stay at home," she remarked. "If women should stay in the house," she retorted with the clincher, "then men should not be permitted to stray beyond the garden gate."²⁰

Macphail's early views were remarkably broad in scope and feisty for someone seeking election for the first time, but they reflected both the direction that Violet MacNaughton had stirred her toward, and the social criticism in W.C. Good's *Production and Taxation in Canada*.²¹ Decrying the "big interests" pitted against farmers and other workers, she denounced the practice common before the Depression of watering stocks — and added that if all the water were let out of them, they would create new Great Lakes. Macphail advocated that the names of shareholders in major newspapers be made public because such papers represented the voice of the few rather than the many. She inveighed against intermediaries in business and extolled cooperation between producers and consumers.²² In response to the common rumour that the farmers were communistic at heart, she replied that "Farmers stand for ordered society and property rights and would be the first to kill anything like Sovietism. But in any case, I'd rather be red than yellow." She spoke in favour of limited public ownership, a position not difficult to assume in light of the creation of Ontario Hydro. Worried that state involvement in economic life might simply enlarge the infamous political pork-barrel, she advocated the new morality in government represented by the Progressives. "We need something more than legal honesty, and a great deal of unselfishness, if it is to triumph," she remarked of public ownership.²³ "It has been a proud boast of the UFO," Agnes declared in terms reminiscent of her grandmother's beliefs, "that in it people of every race, color and creed can meet on terms of perfect equality."²⁴ London labour leader Joseph Marks came to the town of Hanover, which had the only trade union

¹⁹Hanover Post, 29 September 1921.

²⁰Farmer's Sun, 4 December 1920.

²¹(Toronto 1919). Saskatchewan Archives Board (Saskatoon), Violet McNaughton Papers, Agnes Macphail to Violet McNaughton, 20 May 1921.

²²Quotes in Gertrude Pringle, "The Only M.P...." *Maclean's Magazine*, 15 January 1922.

²³Ottawa Journal, 14 March 1922.

²⁴Hanover Post, 17 November 1921, 6 April 1922.

in her riding of Southeast Grey, to support Macphail's candidacy. She returned the favour by speaking at Toronto's Labour Temple, where she tackled the controversial issue of international trade that divided some in the farm and labour movements.²⁵

Agnes Macphail was especially concerned about farm women whom, with housewives, she considered to be the hardest-working women in the country. In the 1920s, she actively organized on behalf of the United Farm Women of Ontario, seeing it essentially as a social organization for rural women that would ultimately bring political and economic benefits. A voluntary association such as the UFWO, free from the constraints that government funding imposed on the Women's Institutes, could provide rural women with enhanced self-esteem through mutual support and study, she believed.²⁶ Macphail became director of the UFWO for North York while a teacher in East Gwillenbury, and later served on its provincial executive as well as on the immigration committee of the Women's Section of the Canadian Council of Agriculture.

Macphail understood the value of networking at the local level; the experience of her own mother struggling to master UFWO study materials proved its worth. Other problems experienced by farm women she attributed to general agricultural conditions. Rural depopulation in Ontario, which affected women even more severely than men, derived in Macphail's view from "lack of pay for the amount of work done. Possibly the second greatest reason for leaving the land is the women's lack of help." Macphail sought to influence government to improve farm incomes in order to provide rural women with more labour saving devices. She also argued for the dignity of all labour, whether by farm owners or hired hands. She appealed to women in the United Farmers to treat rural labour better and to right the inequities they experienced themselves. "It has been said," she remarked, "by some that in farming women break fifty fifty with men, but if this is true it is fifty dollars to the men and fifty cents to the women, and I doubt that is overstating the case."²⁷ With her prompting, the United Farm Women lobbied for measures designed to reduce maternal mortality after federal health officials revealed the shocking extent of the problem in Canada.²⁸

²⁵Toronto *Mail*, 19 October 1921.

²⁶Others held similar views. See Margaret Kechnie, "The United Farm Women of Ontario: Development of a Political Consciousness," *Ontario History*, 77 (1985), 166-78, and Pauline Rankin, "The Politicization of Ontario Farm Women," in Kealey and Sangster, *Beyond the Vote*, 309-32.

²⁷SAB, McNaughton Papers, Agnes Macphail, "Address to Convention," (c1922).

On the gender imbalance that resulted from depopulation in rural Ontario by c1900, see John MacDougall, (Robert C. Brown, ed.) *Rural Life in Canada, Its Trends and Tasks* (Toronto 1973) and Douglas Lawr, "The Development of Agricultural Education in Ontario, 1870-1910," PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 1972.

²⁸United Cooperatives of Ontario, United Farm Women of Ontario, Minutebook, 4 December 1928.

Once in Parliament, where she came under the tutelage of labour members J.S. Woodsworth and William Irvine, Agnes Macphail became even more concerned with working-class women and children. Strikes by Cape Breton coalminers and steelworkers brought the question of industrial unrest to public attention during her first term. When Woodsworth sought to establish a royal commission of inquiry, Macphail challenged Mackenzie King by saying that "the only thing worthwhile in industry, no matter what industry is, is humanity"²⁹ — a play on the Prime Minister's platitudinous tome on labour relations. The experience reinforced her belief in the importance of opposition politics. Following her first session in Ottawa, she concluded that the "debate we had in the House regarding the coal miners was to me the turning point in this new Parliament, and the most encouraging thing that has happened because it proves that if we have courage enough and are earnest enough and are determined enough we can do things even after the Government have decided that they should not be done."³⁰ A royal commission was later struck, but only after militia had been dispatched with machine guns protected by sandbags piled high on railway gondolas. The ensuing violent clashes involving men, women, and children led to national protests with thousands of British Columbian miners walking off the job.

When strikes continued, with violent confrontations between police and people that sometimes included women and children, Macphail followed Woodsworth in visiting Cape Breton. Union leader J.B. McLachlan, a communist, had been imprisoned but released by the Privy Council in Ottawa.³¹ In Glace Bay and surrounding towns, she paid particular attention to the families of the miners. She was shocked and indignant at what she discovered. Going where she wanted rather than where she was directed, Macphail went to see people in their homes. Few company houses enjoyed running water, and most lacked sanitary necessities. Normally so impatient that she refused to knock at a door only once, Macphail was forced to show more forbearance in order to allow people time to cover themselves with whatever inadequate apparel they could find. In many of the houses she found people of Scots ancestry like herself living in conditions worse than those in her grandparent's generation. Children without shoes or adequate clothes were forced to absent themselves from school; others showed signs of malnutrition and its attendant diseases such as rickets. Macphail knew of deprivations experienced in her own family, but to confront the human face of appalling poverty was jolting. Such conditions, she later told her sisters, were "something we should all be ashamed of."³²

²⁹Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, 30 March 1922.

³⁰AMP, vol. 1, file 1, Macphail to J.M. Murray, 3 May 1922.

³¹See John Mellor, *The Company Store, James Bryson McLachlan and the Cape Breton Coal Miners 1900-1925* (Toronto 1983).

³²SFP, CBC Portrait in Memory (1957).

In Parliament, Agnes Macphail registered in poignant words the utter destitution she had observed. An insidious wage slavery chained workers and their families to the company so tightly that after several weeks of unemployment families were forced into hunger lines to survive. Above all, Macphail's heart was smitten by the plight of young children. The bodies and faces of toddlers appeared aged well beyond their years. Macphail expressed admiration for the pride displayed by Cape Bretoners faced with such adversity, but she thought their refusal to accept five thousand dollars in relief from the Soviet Union in order to remain respectable in the eyes of other Canadians seemed like dubious wisdom. After two days in Glace Bay, she said, "nobody looked red to me. I think if I lived there long I would be a lot redder than anything I saw." She lamented that the country put "the commercial value of making dollars above the value of making human life and creating comfortable conditions of living." "We are indeed a smug, self-righteous people," she concluded.³³

When Macphail, Woodsworth, and other members of the Ginger Group pressed for action, the King government hid behind the constitutional convention requiring a prior request from the Province of Nova Scotia. Although restrained in her report, Macphail was criticized by opponents in Parliament for being ill-informed and for having failed to consult the right people on her visit. During the 1926 election she was branded a Bolshevik by former Conservative Cabinet minister Hugh Guthrie. Following her third victory, she toured the western provinces where one newspaper contended that her stance, "a mixture of socialistic dogma, feminism, peace-at-any-price theories, and the Bolshevik brand of world brotherhood, no longer attract[s] much attention."³⁴ In contrast, many agrarian and working-class women found in her speeches a confirmation of their own beliefs and admired Macphail's courage.³⁵

Protest by auto workers over the King government's 1926 tariff adjustments revealed how Macphail's political skills had grown. When duties were lowered from 35 to 20 per cent on imported cars, General Motors closed its Oshawa plant for a day and 3,000 workers descended on Ottawa the next week to protest. Some 100 women formed part of the delegation — perhaps the first female workers to have demonstrated before Parliament in such numbers. Macphail met them while their male colleagues spoke with Mackenzie King and his Minister of Finance. Because she agreed with the reductions, Macphail exercised great tact in sympathizing with the workers' concerns while explaining why they had nothing to fear from the measure. She assured them that she would work to reduce the tariff on imported parts so that more cars would be assembled in Canada, and condemned

³³HCD, 30 March 1925, 1726-35.

³⁴*Calgary Albertan*, 24 January 1926; *Toronto Telegram*, 3 September 1926.

³⁵See the doggerel reprinted in Strong-Boag, *New Day*, 206. Many letters in the Macphail Papers attest to similar sentiments, as does NAC, Louise Lucas Papers, Neva Myrick to Louise Lucas, 22 March 1931.

manufacturers for laying off workers and closing plants without seeking other alternatives. The women emerged from the hour-long meeting in better humour. "I think she's just lovely," one commented. Another said that "she made it so clear."³⁶ Later, when the Liberals gave into pressure from manufacturers to remove a five per cent excise tax on assembled cars which met Canadian content standards and thereby increased the industry's protective margin, Macphail approached King with "a very friendly and reasonable attitude" that convinced him that the move had been a mistake.³⁷

Agnes Macphail emerged as the country's foremost equal-rights feminist following her second re-election, although she never forgot that working-class women experienced greater discrimination than their middle-class counterparts. While reading Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill provided a theoretical framework for her feminism, Macphail's originality lay in associating feminism, equal rights, and social justice more fully than any other Canadian woman. As the only woman member of the House of Commons until 1936, she advocated absolute gender equity. "I desire," she said in 1927, "that women have equal rights in regard to criticism, equal rights in matters of abuse, as well as equal rights in the best things in life."³⁸ Macphail opposed changes to the Elections Act in 1922 because they failed to treat married women on the same basis as men, but she worked with other members of the Ginger Group three years later to secure the same grounds for divorce for the two sexes in the Western provinces. She also opposed women's minimum wage laws in favour of legislation that was gender-neutral.³⁹

The Depression heightened Macphail's concerns for women and also for young people, seniors, and the disabled. When Parliament debated measures to provide the needy with minimal assistance, she pressed for consideration of working women. Contraction in the labour market forced some females from their jobs, created underemployment for many, and made others stay home to free up employment for men. Women "are suffering greatly," she informed Parliament in 1932. "They will not get into queues for meals. No shelters, or very few at any rate, have been provided for them.... Many women who were formerly in offices are now willing to work in homes for pitifully low wages, in some cases almost just for shelter and food...."⁴⁰ When the question of relief camps was raised in 1936, she challenged the Minister of Labour: "If men are not capable of taking care of themselves during periods of stress and unemployment, does Parliament think that

³⁶*Farmer's Sun*, 29 April 1926.

³⁷NAC, Mackenzie King diary, 6 June 1926.

³⁸HCD, 11 April 1927.

³⁹HCD, 29 March 1922; 26 February 1925. Macphail's egalitarian feminist views never went as far as some of those of her British counterparts. See Jane Lewis, "Dealing With Dependency: State Policies and Social Realities, 1870-1945," in her *Women's Rights, Women's Welfare* (London 1983), 31-2.

⁴⁰HCD, 11 March 1932.

women are more capable of taking care of themselves? If they are not, what provision has the government made, or what provision does it propose to make for single, unemployed women?"⁴¹ Apart from a token woman on the National Employment Commission, the minister was forced to admit that the matter had not been considered. When a young Tommy Douglas fresh from Saskatchewan spoke only about the economic problems of male youth, Macphail shouted, "What about the women?" Douglas responded by altering his remarks to rectify his omission, but Macphail remained dissatisfied with cursory treatment. When it was her turn to speak she began by saying that "I would like to see Canada composed entirely of young men, and see how they would get on."⁴²

Macphail fought attempts by men like Quebec politician Camillien Houde to get women to return to the home in order to vacate jobs opportunities for men. In the press she argued that there was no economic benefit from such a proposal, as one wage earner simply displaced another at a time when the general level of consumption needed to be increased. "To propose that women be regimented into one groove," she continued, "no matter how widely varied their ambitions and talents, herded back into the home for economic reasons, without a thought of their individual spiritual destinies, betrayed such a superficiality of thought that it simply staggers one."⁴³ Yet Macphail was always more interested in assisting women than participating in the war of the sexes. "If both men and women thought clearly," she said during an international radio broadcast in 1937 when she participated with British MP Nancy Astor and US Congressional Rep. Caroline O'Day, "it would be obvious that the work of the world is neither men's nor women's, but the work of both, each individual performing that part which he or she is best qualified to do."⁴⁴

Macphail's increasing emphasis on the importance to women of meaningful work outside the home reflected more than the sorry state of the world economy. Until the early 1930s when she passed the age of 40, Macphail wrestled constantly with the problems marriage would pose for her professional career. Personal involvements with men had been numerous, though not as common as gossip contended. The most influential relationship was that with Robert Gardiner, leader of the independent group in Parliament and Henry Wise Wood's successor as president of the United Farmers of Alberta. Macphail's decision to end her involvement with Gardiner sometime before his defeat in the 1935 general election marked a watershed in her personal life. Thereafter she devoted herself solely to public activity and sources provide no further evidence of such relationships with men.

Macphail did not escape the effects of her decision unscathed. "And I know," she said as she was formulating her decision, "that when I am sixty that I shall

⁴¹HCD, 20 June 1936, 4024.

⁴²HCD, 9 March 1937, 910-1; 21 February 1935, 1070.

⁴³Agnes Macphail, "Go Home Young Woman? Ha! Ha!" *Chatelaine* (October 1933), 13-4.

⁴⁴AMP, vol. 10, file 23, 26 February 1937.

probably look back at this life I have chosen and regret every bit of it, dust and ashes, because I will wish I had married and had children and had been a happy country woman. Sure I will!"⁴⁵ When a hysterectomy followed shortly, Macphail became even more convinced that nothing prevented women from contributing to social betterment in the same way as their male counterparts. While the ability to procreate separated one sex from the other and contributed to female uniqueness, Macphail thought each gender to be equally diverse. Some women found contentment in family life, others in careers. A career is what she chose for herself. "The person in me could not be subjected," she later wrote.⁴⁶

Macphail came to believe that the transformation of life created by the productive capacity of industry required a new social and political outlook, especially for women. Tired adages such as "If a man works not neither shall he eat" needed to be reassessed in the light of women's roles and the supports being developed through social assistance, old age pensions, mother's allowances, and worker's compensation. Mackenzie King reacted incredulously when Woodsworth and Macphail argued for the right of all Canadians to basic food, shelter and clothing. During a momentary fit of pique he condemned them as "developing from sincere radicals into clap-trap politicians of the cheapest variety."⁴⁷

Reflecting on her own upbringing and reading of British socialist literature, Macphail believed that industrialization had altered home life so that there was less for women to do. Most no longer dipped their own candles, made soap, baked bread, created fabrics, or churned butter. The expansion of hospitals increasingly removed the sick from home care, while schools had been accorded primary responsibility for formal education. Although she acknowledged that woman's ability to conceive children distinguished her from man, Macphail also noted that the desire to serve through work outside the home had increased. Women selecting this option faced major obstacles, especially the lack of equal pay for work of equal value, a situation that served to depress general wage levels. That daughters were still the ones expected to care for aged parents while property was more frequently willed to sons disturbed her. Full freedom for all people would not arrive, Macphail contended, until there was economic independence for everyone and no person possessed property rights over another.

Macphail assailed the double standard that governed familial roles to women's detriment. "I believe that the preservation of the home as an institution in the future lies almost entirely in the hands of men," she said. "If they are willing to give women economic freedom within the home; if they are willing to live by the standard that they wish the women to live by, the home will be preserved. If the

⁴⁵Toronto *Star Weekly*, 31 December 1932. SFP, George Coote to Doris French, 24 August 1957; Grace McInnis to Doris French [1957]; interview with Muriel Kerr, 1957.

⁴⁶SFP, Macphail, autobiographical notes. Toronto *Globe*, 30 April 1933.

⁴⁷Quoted in H. Blair Neatby, *William Lyon Mackenzie King*, vol. 2: *The Prism of Unity* (Toronto 1976), 156.

preservation of the home means the enslavement of women, economically or morally, then we had better break it.... when we have a single standard for men and women, both morally and economically, then we shall have a home that is well worth preserving, and I think we can be quite sure that it will be preserved."⁴⁸ In 1929 and 1930 Macphail supported William Irvine and J.S. Woodsworth in their successful campaign to obtain a divorce court for Ontario. The system of petitions for divorce to Parliament had proven inadequate as well as costly, effectively restricting access to the wealthy. On this issue, Macphail found herself opposing Ernest Lapointe, the great bear of a man who served as Mackenzie King's Minister of Justice. She often found herself in accord with the lovable French Canadian, but his opposition to this measure indicated to her "that he was born five hundred years too late."⁴⁹

Throughout the 1930s, Agnes Macphail strove to assert the central importance of work in women's lives and to the welfare of the country as a whole. Unlike Charlotte Whitton, the former director of the Canadian Council on Child Welfare, Macphail did not simply defend the importance of work to single women.⁵⁰ Macphail perceived that in the course of women's lives, domestic duties lessened and labour outside the home became increasingly important. She advocated meaningful volunteer involvement that went beyond traditional social functions and earnest resolutions, or a return to the paid workforce when appropriate. Only in this way, Macphail thought, might women be returned to a central position in life that had been lost during industrialization. "That is why I have always maintained women's right to work — whether single or married," Macphail said in 1939. "To be spiritually happy, women as well as men, must work, must feel their responsibility."

Agnes Macphail defended labour unions because she was well aware of their importance in improving the health and welfare of workers. When Ontario Premier Mitch Hepburn's special police roughed up strikers attempting to organize through the American CIO at Oshawa in 1937, Agnes Macphail retorted that "Labour will organize and a little tinpot like Hepburn will not stop it."⁵¹ The influence of American head offices on Canadian companies concerned her more, especially when they dictated the decisions of food processors like Swift Canadian, but she could not help but see the contradiction in Hepburn's denunciation of American unions when General Motors was itself American-owned. Noting the operation of American multinational corporations, she added with a twinkle in her eye: "such

⁴⁸HCD, 4 June 1925, 3864.

⁴⁹HCD, 9 May 1930, 1950; 15 April 1929, 1605. Kenneth McNaught, *A Prophet in Politics, A Biography of J.S. Woodsworth* (Toronto 1959), 237-41 discusses Woodsworth's skillful manoeuvring in Parliament to secure the Ontario divorce court.

⁵⁰See P.T. Rooke and R.L. Schnell, *No Bleeding Heart: Charlotte Whitton, A Feminist on the Right* (Vancouver 1987).

⁵¹Toronto Star, 23 September 1937.

is foreign control of industry, but the workers must have no foreign control."⁵² In 1943 she criticized the actions of the Ontario government for appointing a judge rather than a labour board to adjudicate the province's new collective bargaining law. She had never known a progressive judge, she said, adding that all members of the judiciary were political ward-heelers or they would not have been appointed to the bench. As government war measures had curtailed civil liberties, Macphail's utterances on the judiciary were raised in Parliament, but Minister of Justice Louis St. Laurent agreed only to refer the irritating remarks to the Wartime Information Board.⁵³

In the rancor created by the Great Depression, many claimed to represent the political interests of workers. Macphail herself revealed little personal propensity for organizational or administrative work when it fell outside the farm sector, but she did throw herself into the founding of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation during the years 1932-34. Seeing this political initiative, based on a loose coalition of provincial groups, as a new beginning for women as well as farm and labour, she adopted an integrationist stance, advocating that the former cooperate with men rather than forming a separate organization as had been the case with the United Farm Women of Ontario, a group now in serious decline. The experience of four elections told her that minorities aspiring towards success at the polls could not afford to be bifurcated along gender lines during elections. Macphail proved equally impatient with marginal left-wing parties. She viewed them as purporting to represent a working class which they perceived through theoretical and ideological prisms that distorted reality. Her lack of sympathy for groups such as the Socialist Party of Canada (Ontario Section) combined with her always-expressive (sometimes explosive) temper to complicate the establishment of the CCF in her home province during this period.

Agnes Macphail's conduct as chair of the Ontario CCF provincial council worsened the emerging organization's susceptibility to its own structural weaknesses. The Ontario section of the Socialist Party of Canada purported to be the voice of the working class and came to control ten of the twelve seats on the Labour Conference (one of three constituent groups through which people joined the Ontario CCF), but it consisted of only a few dozen members. In working with others to remove their influence by restructuring the provincial council in 1933, Macphail revealed a lack of leadership ability. Fully aware of their own weakness, Socialist Party members reacted to this assault with bluff and bravura. Referring to their opponents within the CCF, who were sanctioned by Macphail, one of the party leaders maintained that "we must put the fear of god in them about *the mighty mass strength* of our trade unions, who would swamp them under such an arrangement. Tell them of the thousands in the National Union movement, and thousands

⁵²Walkerton *Herald*, 8 July 1937.

⁵³*Globe and Mail*, 24 June 1943.

more in the A.F.L. (We don't have to tell them that we have more to fear from these unionists than they do.)"⁵⁴ Given the intensity of emotion on the issues that Macphail proved unwilling to assuage, she left J.S. Woodsworth no alternative but to disband the Ontario provincial council. While the formal influence of the Socialist Party in the CCF ended when they departed with their "principles intact and the Red Flag of the working class flying to the last,"⁵⁵ Ontario voters who had not been totally alienated by the internal wrangling simply ignored the CCF in the 1934 provincial election.

At the public podium where she always commanded centre stage, Macphail shone much more brilliantly than during heated backroom debates. In expressing her views she was uplifting while candidly chiding. "Woman has courage and faith," she told a CBC audience. "She can hold fast to a vision through a disconcerting period, a fact not unconnected with the months of waiting for a child. And woman puts human values first and material things in a secondary place. To her human beings and their well-being are the chief things in life. To her, that is life." The nurturing role also led women, in her view, to fear war and promote peace. Macphail rejoiced that women were increasingly persons in their own right and less frequently creatures of sex, though she found it sad that they had to perform "twice as well for half as much pay."⁵⁶ She also feared the repercussions of attempts by European fascists to force women from the workplace in order to produce babies. "Fascism spells the doom of a developing womanhood," she declared. The "traditional activities of women cannot again in the world be centered in the home to any extent. We shall not, I believe, again make the family the chief industrial and educational center, and to drive women back into the home today merely means to sterilize their creative functions."⁵⁷ At the same time, Macphail criticized her own gender for accepting too willingly the cult of the lady that had been prevalent since the early 19th century.

During Macphail's years in the Ontario legislature, the distinctiveness of her position declined as she adhered to the CCF platform. Then in her fifties, she championed improved pensions for teachers, an end to the means test for old age assistance, and a provincial supplement to the federal pension for seniors. "All right," she exclaimed in the Legislature while supporting the latter measure, "it costs \$700,000 a month and I can sleep better at night and enjoy my meals more,

⁵⁴Thomas Fisher Library, Woodsworth Memorial Collection, vol. 8, Bert Robinson to A.H. Downs Jr., 26 September 1933 (italics in original). This volume contains membership lists for the Ontario section of the Socialist Party. NAC, CCF Papers, vol. 5, J.S. Woodsworth to Norman Priestley, 11 December 1933.

Gerald Caplan, *The Dilemma of Canadian Socialism: The CCF in Ontario* (Toronto 1973) establishes the larger context but did not consult these manuscript sources.

⁵⁵Woodsworth Collection, vol. 8, A.H. Downs Jr. to D. Williams, 7 March 1934.

⁵⁶AMP, vol. 10, Agnes Macphail, "Women in the Present World," (1936).

⁵⁷AMP, vol. 10, file 23, Macphail, "Women in Government," (n.d.). See Claudia Koontz, *Mothers in the Fatherland* (London 1987).

and so will you. Any honorable member who can say 'It does not make any difference to me' — let them stand up and be counted."⁵⁸ At a nomination meeting for Eugene Forsey, the Trades and Labour Congress research director, Macphail conveyed her message by challenging Premier George Drew. "What freedom does he think old age pensioners have on \$30 a month? What freedom would Mr. Drew have on \$30 a month? What freedom have mothers and children on children's allowances? Groups like these, living in an economic straitjacket, have no freedom."⁵⁹ She also argued for the retention of day care, better programs for seniors in provincial institutions, subsidized housing, improved provisions for the blind, and hospital insurance.

Even despite her declining health at age 59, Macphail attempted to rally women and men fighting to unionize the Eaton's Toronto branch, the spearhead in the postwar era of the drive to organize more workers. Speaking in 1949 at the first seminar for Local 1000 of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union, Macphail entertained as she educated. Equating capitalism with the elephant that danced among the chickens while trumpeting, "every man for himself," she encouraged her listeners to organize in order to become more aware of provincial laws that influenced their lives and to help support new legislation that would improve the lot of all Canadians.⁶⁰

Laws creating equal pay for equal work became the most significant achievement affecting women after World War II and, as the only woman in the Ontario Legislature, Agnes Macphail made the issue her own. As early as 1914, organized labour in Canada had expounded this idea as a means to stop women undercutting male wages, but four years later the abortive Woman's Party had also included the measure in its own British-inspired platform.⁶¹ Not until World War II did the measure enter government contracts, with Britain establishing a royal commission (1944-46) to examine its repercussions. At this time Margaret Hyndman, president of the Canadian Federation of Business and Professional Women and a great admirer of Agnes Macphail, submitted a brief to the Ontario government arguing for a continuation of equal pay provisions. George Drew's Conservatives proved unresponsive, but the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the first draft of which was written by McGill University professor John Humphrey, furthered the idea by declaring that everyone "has the right to equal pay for equal work."

International precedent could be cited to shame Canadian governments after the United Nations adopted the Declaration in 1948, but effects of equal pay

⁵⁸Ontario, *Debates of the Legislative Assembly*, 24 February 1949.

⁵⁹Metropolitan Toronto Public Library, biographical files, vols. 15-6.

⁶⁰Eileen Sufrin, *The Eaton Drive: The Campaign to Organize Canada's Largest Department Store 1948 to 1952* (Toronto 1982), 99.

⁶¹SAB, A1-E54, The United Women Voters (non-partisan), "The Women's Program for the War and After." In "Equal Pay for Work of Equal Value: An Historical Note," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 22 (1987), Thomas Flanagan is critical of the concept but fails to note the subtle distinctions that have marked its evolution.

remained controversial. Inspired by similar legislation in several American states, CCF women collected information on female working conditions in order to press the case more concretely. In 1948 Barbara Cass-Beggs, vice-president of the Ontario CCF Women's Committee, and Edith Fowke of the Toronto CCF Women's Council, compiled a report that lawyer Andrew Brewin used to prepare the first pay-equity legislation introduced in Canada.⁶² The bill aimed consciously at not allowing loopholes limiting its application only to the same work performed by women and men. Brewin's legislation asserted equality between men and women in "work of comparable character or work on comparable operations, or where comparable skills are involved."⁶³ This was pay equity rather than equal pay for equal work.

Some thought the bill utopian; others dismissed the principle of pay equity as one that would drive women from the workforce as employers hired men instead. Agnes Macphail did not think so in 1949 when she rose in the legislature to second the bill. Certain that the time had come to use the force of law to end gender-based wage discrimination, she dug into the history of the struggle for women's rights and concluded that pay equity was straightforward justice for half of the population. While dismissing the camouflage that contended erroneously that women did not support dependents — the "family wage" concept developed in the 19th century and associated with male earners — Macphail sought the deeper sources of male unwillingness to treat women equally. "I think it is a disgrace to men that they are not willing that women should get the same pay for doing the same work," Macphail said. "Why should they not? Is it because women, in their homes, do a lot of work — well, I would not like to say "without pay," but certainly not for a stated sum? It has become a habit of mind, that may be it; some explanation must be found to let the boys down, Mr. Speaker, so I will advance that it is simply that they are used to women doing a lot work for nothing, so they do not see why, in factories and other places of employment, they should not do the same."⁶⁴

⁶²CCF Papers, vol. 198, "Draft Suggestions for a CCF Policy on the Employment of Women," 1948.

⁶³Quoted in Dean Beeby, "Women in Ontario C.C.F., 1940-1950," *Ontario History*, 74 (1982), 258-83. Joan Sangster, *Dreams of Equality, Women on the Canadian Left, 1920-1950* (Toronto 1989), 215-22 provides the larger context within the CCF without addressing the issue directly.

⁶⁴ODLA, 7 April 1949. Macphail was so committed to pay equity that she became indignant with those who did not share her views. While dining with an old friend and her son in a restaurant, her companion expounded the old chestnut that men needed to earn more to support a home and family. Macphail immediately flew into a rage, stood up, and proceeded to leave the restaurant before she was retrieved by her friend's son. SFP, Lila Tinker to Doris French, (October 1957).

As the CCF formed the Opposition, the bill was given a sixty-day hoist, but Macphail took to the press to advise women not to be cowed by men.⁶⁵ When the federal Conservatives adopted an equal pay plank in their platform in 1949, and the Ontario government forecast a new Fair Employment Practices Act in 1951, Margaret Hyndman met with the new Premier, Leslie Frost, to persuade him to include equal pay provisions while formally ending discrimination based on nationality, race, and creed. The Premier proved reluctant, but Hyndman prepared a brief and proposed a bill for which the Business and Professional Women lobbied intensively. The Conservative government responded with a Female Employees Fair Remuneration Act, introduced later that year. By referring only to the "same work" in its operative clause rather than to comparable work (as Brewin originally proposed), the Conservatives severely limited the bill's applicability. Macphail was disappointed, but failed to win amendments that would have ensured broader applicability and remedy the bill's other grave deficiencies. She thought Frost would find it hard to explain such shortcomings to Ontario women. "Pious and pretty sentiment in print," she said of the equal pay legislation during the 1951 provincial election. "Nothing else. It has no meaning in the world."⁶⁶ She equally condemned Conservative failure to include in Fair Employment Practices legislation provisions against sexual discrimination. The Ontario electorate returned the Tory dynasty.

Throughout her life, Agnes Macphail remained a powerful but poignant voice for the interests of working women, despite the criticisms she incurred. While at first she identified only the problems of lower-income groups in relation to their class situation, after 1926 she emerged as a feminist willing to identify the larger inequities that corralled all women in patriarchal society. At the beginning of her career, she had insisted on absolute equality for both sexes in legislative provisions, but her adoption of pay equity during the 1940s revealed how she came to understand that state intervention might right longstanding gender imbalances. By that time she had abandoned advocacy of group government and was more willing to make the types of compromises required in political life. Adhering to the CCF as a social democrat rather than as a socialist, she saw it as the best means of improving the lives of Canadians.

While political activity can take place at any level, the most crucial decisions take place at the top, from the international level down. Macphail's activities in the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and her role in disarmament talks at the League of Nations in Geneva in 1929, while not highlighted here, affirmed her belief that women had a stake in decisions directly involving war and

⁶⁵ Agnes Macphail, "Men Want to Hog Everything," *Maclean's Magazine*, (15 September 1949).

⁶⁶ *Toronto Star*, 19 October 1951. See also Beeby, "Women in the CCF" and Elizabeth Forces, *The Enthusiasm and Faith, History of the Canadian Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs* (Toronto 1974), 75-8, 136.

peace, life and death.⁶⁷ Politics concerns power, or as Harold Lasswell asserted, "who gets what, when, how."⁶⁸ In democracies, however imperfect, this involves women and men collectively resolving common problems in order to better individual lives. Elected seven times and defeated in four elections, Macphail knew well that integrationist politics provided the only sure and immediate route for women to impress their influence on government. Although she cooperated with men in the farm and labour movements immediately after entering politics, the farm sector's decision to abandon direct political action in favour of lobbying during World War II led her to espouse one party. In her view, politics were too important for one half the population to accept exclusion, however successful lobbies such as agriculture were in providing benefits to their constituents. More than any other Canadian woman of her day, Agnes Macphail kept alive the idea of women's equality with men and the need for social and economic justice. In many measures she failed, but she never lost heart. After she had retired from active political life, she maintained that "I represented all my constituents, most of all the children, because it takes so long to get things done."⁶⁹ No matter how her formal political affiliation changed, Agnes Macphail served as a vehicle through which the influence of Canadian women was felt in the redefinition of government's role in Canadian society during the first half of the 20th century.

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⁶⁷See Thomas Socknat, *Witness against War, Pacifism in Canada, 1900-1945* (Toronto 1987); Veronica Strong-Boag, "Peace-making Women, 1919-1939," in Ruth Roach Pierson, ed., *Women and Peace: Theoretical, Historical and Practical Perspectives* (London 1987), 170-91; Barbara Roberts, "Women's Peace Activism in Canada," Kealey and Sangster, *Beyond the Vote*, 276-308.

⁶⁸Harold Lasswell, *Politics; WHO Gets What, When, How* (New York 1950).

⁶⁹SFP, Agnes Macphail interview notebooks (c1952).