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FIGURING IT OUT: A FEMINIST ACTIVIST'S (ANNOTATED) GUIDE TO POLITICAL TERMINOLOGY

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Canada Elections Act: The current federal *Canada Elections Act* was adopted by the House of Commons in December 1999. It has 22 parts in which it addresses: electoral rights, the role of the chief electoral officer, staff and election officers, registration of electors and conduct of electors, candidates, voting, third party election advertising, financial administration, contested election. However, other federal laws, including *Electoral Boundaries Readjustment Act*, the *Broadcasting Act*, the *Income Tax Act*, the *Criminal Code* and the *Dominion Controverted Elections Act*, also contain provisions regarding the Canadian electoral process. Since 1992, Canada has also had a national *Referendum Act*.

Constituencies: Each of the 301 Members of the Canadian House of Commons, including the Prime Minister and cabinet ministers, the Leader of the Opposition, and the Speaker, is elected to represent a particular riding, or constituency representing a geographic area. Elections in Canada are also organized and administered on a largely constituency basis. The *Electoral Boundaries Readjustment Act* controls the establishment of constituency boundaries in Canada through non-partisan entities. Within the dominant federal parties, **winnable ridings** are prioritized during elections and often represent significant barriers to female candidates who are sometimes perceived as too risky to run. On the other hand, some parties have supported the candidacy of women in winnable ridings in order to ensure some representation of women in the House of Commons.

Critical Mass: The level of participation by an under-represented group, such as women, in which their participation would wield a significant impact upon policies and processes within a legislature, or government. The United Nations has designated a 30% minimum of elected women in a legislature as constituting critical mass. Others have contested that its not critical mass that counts, but critical acts.

Electoral rights: Sections 3 to 5 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* guarantees the following basic democratic rights: the right to vote, the right to stand for office, the regular sitting of federal and provincial legislative bodies, and the requirement that elections be held every five years except in time of war or insurrection.

Executive Federalism: A federal process directed by extensive federal-provincial interaction at the level of first ministers, departmental ministers, and deputy ministers in order to establish policy and legislation. According to the *Canadian Policy Research Network*, Canadians are demanding new levels of inclusion and participation in public policy making that executive federalism does not facilitate. Feminists in Canada have been very critical of executive federalism (the '11 men in suits' during the Meech Lake Accord) because it has institutionalized exclusive and secretive policy-making

processes in which major stakeholders, such as women and other equality-seeking groups, are not given any formal voice.

First Past the Post/Single Member Simple Majority/Plurality: Terms used to describe federal and provincial electoral systems in which, in a constituency the candidate with the most votes is elected, even if total votes do not add up to an absolute majority (50% + 1). In every federal electoral district, the candidate with the most votes wins a seat and represents that riding as its Member of Parliament, or MP for the life of the Parliament (a maximum term of five years).

Globalization: For Barbara Marshall, feminist and Trent University professor, globalization “generally refers to a new economic world order, linked to technological advances, where trade barriers have been torn down, goods and services flow freely between nations, and democracy has spread like topsy as free markets have triumphed over political dictatorship and centralized economic planning” (*Reconfiguring Gender*). However, globalization has meant something very different for most women in Canada. In the year 2000, the Canadian Women’s March Committee, building upon vigorous critiques by NAC and other equality-seeking groups criticized the effects of globalization, which have included radical restructuring of the economy and a retreat by governments from their commitments to ‘social’ citizenship. This has resulted in increased violence and poverty for many women, including women from marginalized communities. Donna Haraway, a British feminist thinker, has said that the consequences of globalization are ones in which there is a simultaneous **intensification** and **erosion** of gender. As cuts result in more work being downloaded to the private sphere (ie. the home), women become more burdened with tasks of care-giving while, at the same time, in the public sphere (eg. in legislatures and other formal political institutions) their collective interests are rendered invisible, or simply ignored.

Lortie Commission: In November 1989 the federal government appointed a five-person Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing — often referred to as the “Lortie Commission,” after its chairman, Pierre Lortie. *Reforming Electoral Democracy*, its four-volume report, was tabled in the House of Commons on 13 February 1992. The Report contained 267 separate recommendations, including draft legislation. The Royal Commission also commissioned extensive research into various aspects of Canadian electoral law and policy, and identified **women’s under-representation** as a significant and systemic flaw of our current electoral system.

Mixed Member Plurality: According to Fair Vote Canada, Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) mixes a First Past the Post system (ie. Winner-Takes-All) with Party List voting. Each constituency elects one representative by a simple plurality (FPTP). But the voters are also required to vote for their preferred party’s list (of pre-selected candidates). After the constituency (riding) winners have been declared, each party receives additional seats, based on the votes cast for their list. This brings the party’s overall representation in parliament up to a level proportional with its

popular vote. In such a system, about half of the MPs are elected in constituencies, and the other half are elected from party lists.

Neo-conservatism: The Feminist Encyclopedia describes neo-conservatism as a social ideology advancing a more hierarchical, patriarchal, authoritarian, and inequitable society, grounded on the patriarchal, heterosexual family and on well-defined, state supported and regulated male and female roles.

Neo-liberalism: According to the Feminist Encyclopedia (Routledge), neo-liberalism is an economic ideology that advocates an economic arena free of government regulation of restriction, including labour and environmental legislation, and free of government participation in the marketplace. In many countries, the realization of neo-liberalism has meant the adoption of a re-structuring agenda which has typically resulted in, at minimum, a partial dismantling of the welfare state. Activities include “reducing fiscal and regulatory burdens on business and lowering expectations about the role of the state” (Janine Brodie 1995). In Canada., restructuring in the pursuit of neo-liberalism has meant drastic cuts to social spending, privatization and de-regulation of public services (ie. tele-communications, transportation, utilities), downsizing of workers within the public service (many of which were women who had full time, secure employment) as well as the state’s involvement in trade agreements which significantly reduce government’s willingness or ability to act on behalf in the collective interests of its citizens.

Party discipline: The consequences of party discipline (see responsible government) upon elected women’s participation in governing parties have been significant. Due to the enormous pressures of ‘losing’ the government, legislators are closely monitored by party and government officials, including the House leader, and enjoy limited ability or freedom to express (particularly publicly) views that are distinct from the party’s dominant viewpoint, especially in the name of women.

Proportionality: The idea that a party’s proportion of seats in the legislature should be roughly equal to the proportion of the popular vote won by that party in the general election.

Radical democracy: A broad theoretical concept in which democracy is re-defined to mean the full participation of its citizens in policy and decision- making processes (as opposed to having citizens’ interests represented through elected officials). For some radical democrats, the basis for calls for radical democracy include recognition of the fact that profound social inequalities continue to exist in most democracies as well as the reality that notions of difference are not well addressed in many democracies (ie. the needs and realities of marginalized communities). In Canada, radical democrats claim that institutions of social democracy, including the labour movement, remain undemocratic.

Responsible government: In Canada, our parliamentary system functions on the premise of responsible government in which the executive branch, the Prime Minister and Cabinet, must have the support from the majority in the House of Commons to stay in power. “In the British tradition, the defeat of a bill involving a major policy issue or a tax or supply bill in the House of Commons is usually regarded as a ‘vote of non-confidence’ in the Government. Given the rigidity of **party discipline, which discourages Members from voting against party policy**, defeat in the House of Commons is unlikely unless the Government is in a minority position or loses the support of its own backbenchers.” (From: Inside Canada’s Parliament, Library of Parliament).

Representation: In a representative democracy like Canada’s, we elect federal and provincial officials to represent us. But whose interests are they representing and on what basis? Within feminist political thought, women have begun to explore whether or not some of women’s possible common interests (ie. freedom from violence and poverty) demand specific types of representation and if so, how this would happen. In the meantime, debates ensue about the current nature of representation in democracies. In the year 2000, Judith Squires summed it up like this: “There has been no clear, unchanging conception of what it is that we require our ‘representatives’ to represent [in liberal democracies]. For as long as representation has been a key feature, the issue of what it is that is to count as being politically worthy of representation and who is to be deemed able to represent others has itself been the object of political battle.”

Given this, in Canada’s democracy, elected representatives are expected to represent some combination of beliefs, constituencies, interests and identities of at least some of their voters/communities.

Under-representation: In 1991, the federal Lortie Commission (see above) reviewed Canada’s electoral system. While its report, *Reforming Electoral Democracy* did not recommend changes to the way in which voters elect their representatives, authors of the report concluded that **women’s under-representation** in the House of Commons was a systemic problem and that certain measures should be taken to enable more women to be elected to the House of Commons.

Welfare State: The welfare state introduced a radical expansion of the public through direct intervention in the economy, and by subjecting the family and other aspects of private life to new forms of scrutiny and assistance. (Brodie 1995). The basic three principles of the welfare state, according to Brodie, are: 1) that economic activity is collectively regulated; 2) that citizens have a right to some basic needs met by the state; 3) that the state has a commitment to formal equality and impersonal procedure.