

FEMINISIM AS NATIONAL POLITICS

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The blue and green bunting, the state delegation signs, the three-cornered hats that said "Free D.C.," the scurrying floor leaders, the midnight caucuses, the gaggle of reporters—there were all the signs of a political convention at the Houston Women's Conference. It was not a place for arcane discussions about the origins of patriarchy.

Delegates sat for hours on the Spartan folding chairs to approve a series of legislative recommendations that ranged from support of full employment to a call for national health insurance. Representatives of major national women's groups said they would seek adoption of the program by their own boards and members. It marked the entry of a new force into the loose national coalition that works for civil rights, economic justice and social welfare in America.

The meeting was mandated by federal legislation introduced by Bella Abzug in 1975 that called for a national gathering at which American women would recommend

ways to remove the barriers to full equality for their sex. Preliminary conferences open to the public in the states and territories drafted resolutions and elected delegates to Houston. The International Women's Year (IWY) Commission, headed by Abzug, distilled the recommendations into a proposed National Plan of Action. Now, the conference report will be submitted to the President and the Congress. The law instructs Mr. Carter to send Congress his recommendations for action by July.

The 2,000 delegates, gathered in the Sam Houston Coliseum from the morning of November 19 to midday on the 21st, included some 300 members of the National Organization for Women (NOW), a larger number of conservatives, and a diverse collection of pro-feminist churchwomen, trade unionists, political activists and community leaders with careful representation of every

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minority and ethnic group, the aged and the disabled. The Plan of Action they endorsed expands strictly feminist concerns to a broad range of social goals. It establishes support for the principle of federal and state spending to solve such problems as those faced by battered wives, widows or divorced women, rape victims and abused children, and it champions forceful government intervention to promote civil rights, public health and social welfare. The new, Carter-appointed IWY Commission reversed the policy of the commission Gerald Ford appointed when it supported resolutions calling for full employment, national health insurance, child-abuse legislation and civil rights for homosexuals.

The proposals were adopted with little dispute among the feminists, partly because of a real consensus and partly from fear of playing into the hands of the Right by delaying action and not reaching a vote on all the motions. The "Pro-Plan Caucus," supported by NOW, the Women's Political Caucus, the Jewish caucus, the labor caucus and others, urged everyone to accept the resolutions without change, exceptions being made for amendments by the minority, disabled and welfare caucuses.

The mood of the delegates was to give the most deprived groups whatever they wanted, and the conference approved a substitute motion attacking the Carter administration's welfare reform bill which eliminates food stamps, Comprehensive Employment and Training Act training, CETA jobs paying more than the minimum wage, and requires recipients to work off their grants. Minority delegates cheered in elation at the overwhelming acceptance of a resolution developed by an alliance of American Indians, Alaskan Natives, Asian/Pacific women, Hispanics and blacks that set forth their individual concerns; it was the first time they had worked together in such a coalition.

The resolution on sexual preference also passed easily, although several delegates, including former IWY staff chief Catherine East, warned that it was not a feminist issue and would hurt chances for ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). The attack on gay rights by right-wing groups helped convince many feminists that they could not turn their backs on the lesbians' demands.

The atmosphere grew tense during the abortion debates when the "anti's" stood up with giant-sized color photos of fetuses and then paraded down to the stage when they lost the vote. "All we are saying is give life a chance," they sang. They were quickly drowned out by the mass of delegates and observers chanting, "Choice, choice, choice, choice. . . ."

The other resolutions were a litany of feminist demands—the ERA (dramatically advocated by Susan B. Anthony, a descendant of the suffragist), equality in jobs and education, federally supported child care, changes in rape trial procedures and the like. A new proposal sought legislation to provide "equal pay for work of equal value," a concept that could prevent employers from paying secretaries less than unskilled male workers earn. The plan also asked aid for the aged, the homemakers and women in prison.

The conference turned down a proposal for a Cabinet-level department of women. Some feminists thought it

would isolate women or co-opt them into the political establishment, and the conservatives opposed it as more hated bureaucracy. However, the commission itself will continue, and the law calls for it to hold a future conference to assess women's progress.

Do the resolutions passed in Houston represent what American women want? Some 130,000 of them attended the regional open meetings that drew up the demands and elected the delegates that approved the final plan. It is impossible to prove that they represent American women at large, but they certainly speak for an important chunk of those in the country who are active and organized.

The significance of the Houston Conference is that, under the neutral sponsorship of the government, and through the elected delegates and delegates at large, it gathered the major women's organizations and made it possible for them to approve a comprehensive national political program that belongs equally to all of them, because it was not proposed by any one of them.

Since delegates voted as individuals rather than as organizational representatives, they could support resolutions about which many of their groups have as yet no policy. At the same time, the imprimatur of the Houston meeting will encourage those organizations to accept much of the plan as it is and to acknowledge its concerns as "women's issues" worth their attention.

The private discussions in the commission-appointed delegates at large section may have been as important as the floor debate. There, in rows behind the state groups, sat the national leaders of organizations like the General Federation of Women's Clubs, the National Council of Jewish Women, the Association of Junior Leagues and Zonta International. "I don't think those of us who came to the conference will leave here the same," declared Blanche Shukow, head of National American Affairs for Hadassah. Seated next to her, Janice Kissner, national president of Zeta Phi Beta and a vice president of the National Council of Negro Women, nodded her assent. "A certain kinship, a certain closeness has evolved. I felt hostile before toward a lot of white women. After coming here and seeing that they had sympathy and empathy, I have a feeling of sisterhood. . . . I think we have many more things in common than I thought we had." "There will be more coalitions," predicted Shukow.

One already spawned is the Women's Conference Network, an alliance of some forty organizations that includes the American Jewish Committee, Church Women United, the League of Women Voters and the National Education Association. It was set up in August to assure the success of the conference, and it will meet again in December to work out a plan of future action. Nancy Joyner, vice president of the American Association of University Women which organized the network, said, "We will coordinate the drafting of legislation and the steering it through committee to the floor and to the President."

Relaxing in her hotel room after the last session, Bella Abzug predicted the establishment of a national and state-wide system of communication through the organizational