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The Scholar & Feminist XXX:

Past Controversies, Present Challenges, Future Feminisms

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Comments from 1993 Scholar & Feminist Conference

By:

Tanya Melich

Tanya Melich, Republican feminist consultant and analyst: I think they both blew us away. They're wonderful. I went through a political nervous breakdown in 1992 so it's wonderful to come and be revitalized and share in the excitement of another 20, 50, 100 years of the Barnard Center for Research on Women.

Like many of those on this panel I began working in the women's movement in 1971. Very early on it was clear to some of us that if there was to be meaningful change, if women's lives were going to improve, we needed a hell of a lot of political power. It was not going to be enough to have women's studies programs, consciousness raising sessions, our own theaters, our own magazines, newspapers, and research institutes like this first rate one at Barnard. We knew we had to learn how to understand each other, how to talk to each other, how to set our issue agendas, and how to work together, but we also knew we had to lay the groundwork for assaulting the male power structure. Piece by piece we built a political movement. Much of our success in 1992, that so-called Year of the Woman – that's a joke, I agree – came because we had built the feminist political tools. We had the training, we had the recruitment, we had the funding, we had the grassroots, we had the policy ideas, we had women candidates, and we had reapportionment. The 22-year painstaking building was finally paying off, but it was too, too slow, and it still is.

From the beginning I have been guided by a two-party view for gaining political power. That is, our feminist revolution would only succeed when we wielded substantial influence in both political parties. My hope – call it a dream – was that the basic premises of feminism would be accepted by majorities in both parties, and that we Republican and Democratic feminist women would struggle and debate over the details of public policy. I have never believed, and I do not believe now, that a third party was a valid option. I think Alice Paul with all her great struggles proved that.

After the brutalization of the last 12 years, my dream was been sorely challenged. Many Republicans and Independent women voted for Clinton. We worked for Dianne Feinstein and for Barbara Boxer and other progressive candidates, and we rejoiced in their victories.

Republican and centrist women are often asked why we won't become Democrats since we so often find ourselves aligned with Democratic candidates. But the question blurs the complexity of the feminist movement's efforts to gain and retain – and I emphasize retain – political power. It is a clichéd superficial question my sisters ask me as to why I don't become a Democrat, and I think the question needs to be analyzed more closely.

First, we must be concerned about the polarization of American politics. If Republican feminists and centrist women give up on the Republican party, doesn't their action further polarize the nation? If there is not diversity and variety in both parties, aren't we inviting the inevitable ethnic, social, religious, and racial hatreds that we see in too much of the world? Does polarization help the cause of feminism or are we hurting our potential to grow?

The second set of concerns is inclusion concerns. Aren't we feminists giving up on a substantial number of political women if we don't participate in Republican primaries and conventions and in similar events dominated by the anti-feminist Democrats? How do we reach those women politically if we never help them fight their battles? And aren't we taking an enormous risk of being shut out in states where Republicans or anti-feminist Democrats are the majority? Look at the case of Pennsylvania headed by anti-choice Democrat Governor Casey who brought us the *Casey* case, which he inherited from Republican Governor Richard Thornburg and chose to champion even more strongly than his predecessor.

Third, there are the maintaining-our-gains-concerns. If feminist public policy gains from one party, how much do we stand to lose when our opponents win elections? How do we hold on to what we have won if we're only in one political grouping? Let us not forget that the American political system is decentralized to encourage diverse viewpoints and de-emphasize monolithic solutions. How do we protect ourselves against a repeat of those horrendous Reagan-Bush years?

All these questions are at the core of any philosophical debate about political power. We'll not solve them today, but it's worth considering more deeply one question: Does a revolutionary movement consolidate its gains and become more broad-based in its ideology as it wins power, or does it do better by keeping its base more narrowly focused? Or, put more simply, are we now secure with our modest power and mature enough to welcome centrists with their pragmatic and less ideological ideas into our movement? What about short-term practical considerations? (The ones that were talked about by Marie and Catharine?) They are in one sense easier to respond to in a political context.

The religious right led by Paul Weyrich and Pat Robertson seeks and is in some cases already using the Republican Party for its own fascist ends, and I mean fascist. Ross Perot is on an ego-aggrandizing political trip heading toward the '96 elections. With a possible three-way split in the electorate, feminists from all political parties and all persuasions must help the President. The breaking off into a feminist third party will isolate us from the mainstream. We will be talking too often only to each other. With

our energy directed at building a third party, money and resources will be siphoned away from local and state feminist candidates and causes. We will lose momentum with such an effort. Need I repeat what we already know? If we don't win elections, we won't have any political power. At least, *real* political power. We will have the kind of power we had before the modern women's movement. There will not be feminists wielding power if we squander what we have on a third party movement.

I remember many years ago my mother telling me that the highest flattery was imitation. How was I to know that the leadership of the Bush campaign would take the ideas of the feminist movement and twist them around and try to use them for their own ends? Last August I walked out of the Republican convention. I couldn't stand to hear one more attack on women and families as though all of us in the feminist movement, all of us who had worked so hard, disliked families, disliked children, were against women, did not love our husbands, and on and on and on. Buchanan, Robertson, Bush, and both Quayles were too much. And I am also sorry to say that I was heartsick as I sat in my hotel room the night that Barbara Bush spoke. I had wanted to go home to New York. I couldn't get out of Houston so I sat in my hotel room and watched those speeches on Wednesday night. And, yes, Pat Robertson was outrageous. And Pat Buchanan on Monday had been outrageous. Marilyn Quayle was what Marilyn Quayle would always be. Marilyn Quayle should have been here with us. Marilyn Quayle is a very smart women who somehow can't quite understand what has been happening to all of us over the last 30, 40, 50 hundreds of years. But the sad part to me was Barbara Bush. She should have known better. She was used in an unfortunate, and I think, despicable way. And I sat there in my hotel room and said, "That dream of mine, that dream about those two parties and feminists in both parties" – yes, I realize it's a contradiction, and I've realized it for years, but I also am an optimist just like Catharine. And I said, "I can't let this go on any longer". So I walked out and faced what I didn't want to face, which was that as far as I was concerned, at least for the near future, my two party dream was over. And many of my colleagues that I have worked with in the Republican feminist movement and independent women feel the same way. Weyrich and Quayle and Robertson and the rest of those scoundrels will get no help from us under the guise of a so-called big tent.

But I am hounded by the polarization of America's politics. Do we really want a feminism that turns its back on mainstream women? Are we not strong enough now to embrace a more broad-based coalition? I remember when we founded the Manhattan Women's Political Caucus in 1972 down at the New School, or maybe it wasn't the New School, it was at P.S. 41. It's been a long time. And I remember getting up and saying that it was important that there be feminists in both political parties. You may remember Richard Nixon was president then, and we were all tied up in hating the Vietnam War. Many of us were active in the anti-Vietnam movement, but we were Republicans. I stood up at P.S. 41 and opened by saying, "I am a Republican women". And most of the women in the room booed me. I remember Carol Greitzer – some of you may know Carol Greitzer, she was a reform Democratic party leader from the Village Independent Democratic Club, a very liberal club – stood next to me and told people to be quiet, that I had a right to speak.

Well, it's 22 years later. Pro-choice Republican women are taken somewhat more seriously by feminists, but what has happened is that most of us are very tired. We don't know whether we want to continue. As I said, we cannot turn our back on those mainstream women. I don't know the answer, but I know we must face the issue. We lost twice to Reagan and once to Bush because we didn't recruit and include those women – and when I say “we” I mean the feminists. Ignoring them again will be our Achilles heel, at least in the political sense. Our opposition is cunning, and as I said about Houston, they cloak themselves in our words. They use “Family”, they use “life”. As Kathy Spillar will tell you, they argue for freedom of speech as they stop women from going into the clinics. They talk about their right to choose as they obstruct doctors from entering their place of business. They talk about freedom of religion as they attempt to impose their religion upon us.

Mainstream women don't know much about us. They hear our words through the likes of Helms and Dornan and Hatch and yes, Casey and O'Connor. Our challenge is to welcome these women into the fold and at the same time maintain the hard edge of our goals. Yes, it is a balancing act, but balance is at the heart of any civilized democratic political system. For me it is the only way we can retain some peace and sanity in this unsafe world. And in the bargain we might increase our political power. We need to turn to win over those mainstream women.

Thank you.