

Book/video reviews

State of Struggle: Feminism and Politics in Alberta. Lois Harder. Edmonton, University of Alberta Press, 2003; xix + 227 pages; ISBN 0-88864-401-9; \$34.95.

This book presents a comprehensive account of feminist activism in Alberta from 1970 to the late 1990s. Actually, Harder prefers the term "claimsmaking" to describe the activity of making claims on public policy and institutional structure. The provincial focus is welcome because so much has been written about the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC) and its struggles with Ottawa. After all, the provinces have jurisdiction over the actual implementation of policies that matter to women.

Harder pins the rise and fall of feminist claimsmaking on the price of oil. When the Royal Commission on the Status of Women was released in 1970, the price of oil was on a tear. As the price of oil increased to a peak of \$44 a barrel in 1981, the Alberta economy boomed, and the provincial state expanded. While other governments struggled with stagflation, the government of Alberta enjoyed remarkable affluence, and hence social consensus. Parallel with events at the national level, an Alberta Action Committee on the Status of Women was established in 1971, but feminist demands were absorbed into the big comfy couch of Alberta's one-party state. Claimsmaking was further complicated by antagonistic relations with Ottawa. If Ottawa established institutional infrastructure and semi-official status for NAC, a contrarian streak meant that the Alberta government balked at creating parallel infrastructure.

According to Harder, a window of opportunity opened when the price of oil fell to \$10 a barrel in 1986. While the rest of the world prospered from the low price of oil, Alberta fell into a recession. As social consensus deteriorated, government sought out women's organizations as a means to legitimate itself. Claimsmaking reached its

peak of influence during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Indeed, a sympathetic and progressive cabinet minister - Nancy Betkowski - contested the leadership of the Progressive Conservative Party in 1992. Her defeat at the hands of Ralph Klein marked the end of institutionalized collaboration between the provincial state and women's organizations.

This book notably includes an account of the origin of the right-wing, anti-feminist backlash in Canada. In 1981, the Alberta Federation of Women United for Families emerged as a rival to feminist groups, and later formed the basis for R.E.A.L. Women.

Harder has worked almost exclusively from primary documents to provide a solid, comprehensive history. Nonetheless, Alberta's distinctive political economy is less than complete as an analytical explanation. The price of oil is an important context, but did it really drive a distinctive path for the women's movement in that province? Feminist organizations reached their peak of political influence in the late 1980s and early 1990s throughout Canada; in Alberta whose economy suffered from the low price of oil, and, in the rest of Canada whose economy prospered from the low price of oil. Logically, if the price of oil was so crucial, the outcome should be different in two different parts of the country. But it wasn't; the history of feminist claimsmaking in Alberta is less distinctive than might be expected from Harder's analytical frame.

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Fleeing the House of Horrors: Women Who Have Left Abusive Partners. Aysan Sev'er. University of Toronto Press, 2002; ISBN 0-8020-8521-0; \$24.95 (paper).

Aysan Sev'er interviewed thirty-nine women, each of whom, having experienced extensive abuse by her male partner, managed to leave the abusive partner. All of the women had been away from the former partner for at least