

# Militant Mothers Fight Poverty: The Just Society Movement, 1968-1971

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# RESEARCH NOTE / NOTE DE RECHERCHE

## Militant Mothers Fight Poverty: The Just Society Movement, 1968-1971

Margaret Hillyard Little

ARMED WITH A CARD TABLE and a critical knowledge of state policy and regulations they wreaked havoc on the discriminatory welfare practices in downtown Toronto. Members of the Just Society Movement [JSM] sat at the table and advised welfare applicants of the rules and regulations for welfare.<sup>1</sup> “Applying for welfare is so degrading, so humiliating. We wanted to empower people — to give them knowledge so they could get what they were entitled to,” explained Susan Abela, a leader in the JSM.<sup>2</sup> Whenever the JSM got word that a welfare worker was mistreating his/her clients, it would set up an information booth at that particular government office. A flamboyant style and passionate commitment to justice made JSM

<sup>1</sup>Along with the actual welfare legislation there is a separate volume of regulations which helps determine how the policy is to be administered. The two welfare acts of significance for the Just Society Movement were:

- i) the Family Benefits Act established for those who required long-term assistance: the old, the blind, elderly widows, unmarried women, and single mothers
- ii) the General Welfare Assistance Act created for short-term assistance for single men, employable men, and their families. For a brief discussion of this legislation see James Struthers, *The Limits of Affluence: Welfare in Ontario, 1920-1970* (Toronto 1994), 237.

<sup>2</sup>Interview with Susan Abela, Kingston, 2 May 2003.

activists media darlings, much to the chagrin of those in power. It was a simple but highly effective strategy which made poverty front-page news.

We know so little about the history of poor people's organizing. Those with little resources and many personal crises have little time to write their memoirs, keep daily journals, and store all political correspondence in their filing cabinets. As Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward have persuasively argued, the effectiveness of poor people's movements lies within their informal organizational style.<sup>3</sup> Because of this informal political mobilizing little is written down for posterity. And yet it is vital that this history be told, that moments when those with the least power raise their voices against injustice be recorded. This essay is an attempt to recover the lost history of a highly successful anti-poverty organization in downtown Toronto which "organized by the poor, for the poor" between 1968 and 1971.

The Just Society Movement emerged during an era that promoted justice for all. In April 1965, Prime Minister Lester Pearson declared "war on poverty" and promised \$25 million a year to needy Canadians through the introduction of the Canada Assistance Plan, providing guaranteed unlimited funding for provincial and municipal welfare programs. This marked the beginning of a new era of federal and provincial welfare state expansion. This expansion in the field of welfare was partly a result of the continuation of the post-war economic boom, as well as an active and vocal anti-poverty movement. 1965 to 1975 marked the tail end of the Fordist post-war compromise characterized by mass production, mass consumption, and a consistent pattern of bargaining between labour and capital. There was a myth, widely accepted, that all Canadians were prospering during this era. This belief gave welfare state administrators permission to humiliate and scrutinize the poor, even while welfare programs were expanding their eligibility criteria. It was generally believed that it was your personal fault if you were not able to find a job during this fortuitous economic period.<sup>4</sup>

During the mid-1960s this myth of post-war economic prosperity for all was challenged. Collection of statistical data on poverty and the media attention to anti-poverty protests increased public awareness of the problem. In 1964, the Ontario Federation of Labour published a study that declared that more than one million Ontarians were living in poverty. A year later the Canadian Welfare Council [CWC] conducted a study of rural poverty and found the "extent ... staggering."<sup>5</sup> An-

<sup>3</sup>Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York 1979), Introduction and Chapter 1.

<sup>4</sup>American president Lyndon B. Johnson had declared a similar War on Poverty a year earlier. For a more elaborate discussion of this era of welfare state expansion, see Margaret H. Little, *No Car, No Radio, No Liquor Permit: The Moral Regulation of Single Mothers in Ontario, 1920-1997* (Toronto 1998); Struthers, *The Limits of Affluence*, 211-230.

<sup>5</sup>Archives of Ontario [hereafter AO], Legislative Offices [hereafter RG 49], Reel #260, quotation cited in "A Study of Canadian Poverty," *Peterborough Examiner*, 14 April 1965. Also see AO, RG 49, Reel #260, "Rural Poverty Report: Some Subsist on \$11.71 Each Month," *Ottawa Journal*, 8 December 1965.

other report concluded that more than one million Canadians were illiterate and almost four million lived below the minimum poverty line.<sup>6</sup> And the Economic Council of Canada claimed that one in five Canadians lived in poverty in 1968.<sup>7</sup>

But the most ambitious study on the subject began in 1968 with the federal government's establishment of the Special Senate Committee on Poverty. With Senator David Croll as chair, a \$1 million budget, and a mandate to "inquire into the causes of poverty ... and to make recommendations for its elimination," the committee embarked on a cross-country tour.<sup>8</sup> This committee was controversial from its inception. The poor criticized the senators for holding committee hearings in ballrooms. To alleviate this criticism, committee members were taken on tours of the poor ghettos of Canada's cities. Not only were the committee members enlightened, so was the general public as the media shone the spotlight on the real living conditions of Canada's poor. But it was the report of this special committee, or rather the "real" report, that increased the controversy surrounding this special committee. Four staff members of the committee resigned from their positions because they believed the important story about poverty's persistence would be edited out of the final report. As the staff claimed, "After one especially harrowing session of unilateral (and, we felt, essentially political) editing, we decided that we would no longer contribute to the production of a document that was obviously intended to be useful more to politicians than to the poor." With that, they resigned and wrote a comprehensive and strongly worded rejoinder entitled "The 'Real' Poverty Report." This account promoted informed public discussion about continued inequality in Canada in general and the failures of the welfare system in particular. As the report stated,

Welfare systems treat people like animals. They encourage dependency. They do not provide enough money to ensure a decent living for the people trapped within them. They reinforce, they do not break, the cycle of poverty. They are corrupt and ugly embodiments of prejudice and brutality, and they cannot be reformed; they must be replaced.<sup>9</sup>

The writers warned that "[a]n affluent society that continues to tolerate widespread poverty and inequality of opportunity is in very real danger of losing its democratic ideals."<sup>10</sup>

The political climate was also ripe for discussions about Canada's democratic ideals. The same year that the Special Senate Committee was formed, Pierre Elliott

<sup>6</sup>AO, RG 49, Reel #260, "Poverty: Million Can't Read or Write," *Toronto Telegram*, 8 December 1965.

<sup>7</sup>Andrew Armitage, *Social Welfare in Canada: Ideals, Realities and Future Paths*, 2nd ed. (Toronto 1988), 277.

<sup>8</sup>Ian Adams, William Cameron, Brian Hill, and Peter Penz, eds., *The 'Real' Poverty Report* (Edmonton 1971), Preface.

<sup>9</sup>Adams et al., *The 'Real' Poverty Report*, 187.

<sup>10</sup>Adams et al., *The 'Real' Poverty Report*, 7.

Trudeau became prime minister. A man who had flirted with progressive, socialist ideas during his graduate studies, he was determined to make a difference by creating a more participatory democracy, a more “just society.” He had written extensively in *Cité Libre* about his desire to create a “just society” where all Canadians would have individual rights that would be honoured and respected. In joining the Liberal party he promised his *Cité Libre* readership that he would maintain his ideals of “a democracy oriented towards social progress.” Upon joining the governing party Trudeau replaced his earlier musings with anti-capitalist ideas for laissez-faire style capitalism. He did not believe that such laissez-faire economic strategies would interfere with his desire for a more participatory and equal society.<sup>11</sup> His earlier calls for equality would be used against him as concerns about growing poverty escalated.

Simultaneously there were rumblings of protest erupting in the United States. The post-war civil rights movement shed light not only on the unequal treatment of African Americans but also their increasing impoverishment as they ventured to the industrial northern states. In the early 1960s African Americans who were the victims of agricultural displacement and urban unemployment publicly protested the American welfare system.<sup>12</sup> By the mid-1960s these welfare protests became more coordinated and the National Welfare Rights Organization was born. Along with the urban poor, radical social workers and other professionals became involved in this national organization to protest the welfare administration’s treatment of the poor. Also the civil rights movement had shed light on the inequities between men and women in society. A feminist movement was spawned during this era, encouraging women to speak out and be heard. Protest against the war in Vietnam also highlighted inequities between those who made policy and those who sacrificed their lives.

Canada had its own emerging social movements. While professional groups such as nurses and teachers were becoming more vocal, other organizations, including movements of students, feminists, labour and farmer groups, and Aboriginal peoples, were making their voices heard.<sup>13</sup> In an effort to curb the student movement, the federal government established and funded the Company of Young Canadians. This organization provided youth with the opportunity to live in remote locales and create community development projects. Many youth were radicalized

<sup>11</sup>For more details about the Trudeau era see Christina McCall and Stephen Clarkson, *Trudeau and Our Times: The Heroic Delusion*, Vol. 2 (Toronto 1994), 86.

<sup>12</sup>For a more detailed discussion of the influence of the civil rights movement on anti-poverty organizing in the United States see Fox Piven and Cloward, *Poor People’s Movements*, Chapter 5.

<sup>13</sup>There is a crying need for more research into this period of social movement activism. Note Samuel D. Clark, “Movements of Protest in Postwar Canadian Society,” in S.D. Clark, J. Paul Grayson, and Linda M. Grayson, eds., *Prophecy and Protest: Social Movements in Twentieth-Century Canada* (Toronto 1975), 409-423.

by this opportunity; they became familiar with the plight of Aboriginal peoples and the growing inequities between the rich and the poor. All of this provided an important backdrop to the mobilization of Canada's poor.

The poor had already begun to organize in the mid-1960s but the Senate Committee provided a needed focus for this activism. This type of grassroots, anti-poverty organizing had only occurred in Canada during one other period, the Depression of the 1930s. Both the Depression and the mid-1960s provided an opportunity for the voices of the poor to be heard. During the economic crisis of the Depression newly unemployed men were outraged that they had lost their jobs and were forced to rely on the punitive relief system. The mid-1960s, in contrast, was not a period of economic instability, but a time of rising expectations and a concern about "poverty in the midst of plenty." Various neighbourhood and tenants' associations began to emerge, which provided a forum for the poor and working poor to begin to organize.<sup>14</sup> Federal funding through the Senate Committee offered a new avenue for political action. And for the first time many low-income Ontario women, particularly single mothers, raised their voices in protest.

According to the Ontario Mothers' Allowance records and other historical accounts of the period, there was no collective protest by single mothers in the province prior to 1966. Previously single mothers would often individually write the premier or a local official regarding their mothers' allowance cheques. But in 1966 50 single mothers from Sarnia collectively addressed Prime Minister Lester Pearson:

We have had a great deal of difficulty with the Mothers' Allowance lately. It is totally inadequate in face of the rising cost of living. Sarnia has the highest wage scale in Canada and food, clothing, rent and services are fantastically high. Some of our Mothers have not purchased milke [sic] for 3 months. It is 32 cents a quart here. The children in many cases, are going to bed hungry and if their stomachs are full often it is with macaroni and 3 day-old bread ... We understand that the Canada Assistance Act may help us, especially in the way of rehabilitation so that we may become independant [sic] ... Could you please try to "hurry up" the CAAct?<sup>15</sup>

The fact that these women directed their protest to the prime minister rather than the premier or a local official also demonstrated the growing awareness of the central

<sup>14</sup>The emergence of neighbourhood and tenants' associations requires more extensive research. For preliminary discussions see Ann Bowman, "Poverty and People Power," in W.E. Mann, ed., *Poverty and Social Policy in Canada* (Vancouver 1970), 135-150; James Lorimer and Myfanwy Phillips, *Working People: Life in a Downtown City Neighbourhood* (Toronto 1971), 75-105.

<sup>15</sup>This is the first and only evidence I discovered of a group of single mothers writing the prime minister. National Archives [hereafter NA], Pearson Papers, MG 26, Volume 208, File 641-L, Letter from Mrs. Mary Firston, Sarnia, to Prime Minister, 4 November 1966.

importance of the federal government in welfare. This collective action in the form of non-confrontational lobbying heralded a new era of anti-poverty organizing.

The 1966 letter writing campaign heralded the beginning of public protest by poor single mothers. The most effective organizing of this particular group was found in the astute and disruptive activities of the Just Society Movement, from 1968 to 1971. According to documented history, it was the first time since the Depression that poor people had collectively organized in the province.<sup>16</sup> It all began when two single mothers, Doris Power and Suzanne Polgar, met at a summer camp for children north of Toronto. They talked about the problems of being single mothers on welfare, desperately trying to raise their children. "We were both fed up. We talked about how things should be changed, about stupid laws and about what should be done about them," explained Power when interviewed at the time.<sup>17</sup> They decided that it was time for the poor to organize and raise their voices against these injustices. They took Prime Minister Trudeau's term "just society" and pushed the limits of this liberal philosophy.<sup>18</sup> "They were very political animals," recalls one JSM member, Jack Heighton. "They were involved in abortion rights and other political causes."<sup>19</sup>

The organization quickly grew as welfare applicants turned to JSM members for help. Susan Abela, who became a leader within the JSM, recalls her introduction to the organization:

I got involved in 1969. I came to Toronto with my two kids to escape from an abusive marriage and got admitted into the Ontario College of Art. I got kicked off welfare because you weren't allowed to get post-secondary education and get welfare at the same time. And that's when I went to the Just Society meeting and I met other women trying to do the same thing.

From there Abela became very active in the JSM, in charge of one of the two downtown offices, studying welfare policies and advising welfare applicants of their entitlements. "We read the Welfare Act like it was the bible," she recalls.<sup>20</sup> Lin Spence had a similar beginning with the JSM. Although Spence joined later, she was equally impressed with JSM's ability to help.

<sup>16</sup>For further information see Little, *No Car, No Radio, No Liquor Permit*, 146-147; Jonathan Greene, "Visibility, Urgency and Protest: Anti-Poverty Activism in Neo-liberal Times," PhD dissertation, Queen's University, 2006.

<sup>17</sup>"Metro's Poor Form Their Own Union," *Toronto Daily Star*, 5 July 1969.

<sup>18</sup>Many thanks to David Kidd for encouraging me to pursue my interest in the Just Society Movement and for allowing me to "raid" the activist files in his archival closet which got me started on this project many moons ago. Interview with David Kidd, Toronto, 10 December 1993.

<sup>19</sup>Interview with Jack Heighton, Colborne, 28 May 2003.

<sup>20</sup>Interview with Susan Abela, Kingston, 3 May 2003.

I was 16 and moved to Toronto running away from an abusive situation at home and moved in with a friend of mine who had six kids. She lost her purse at Christmastime and she was traumatized with what she was going to do so I went to the all night welfare office and that's where I met up with people from the Just Society.<sup>21</sup>

Jack Heighton also was impressed with JSM's advocacy. "I was laid off and the welfare department turned down my application. The JSM told me to ask for Form 6 — to appeal the decision and so I got the form and won the appeal. I was impressed with how they helped me so I became involved."<sup>22</sup> Heighton was not particularly radical and did not pretend to espouse socialist politics. "I was a regular soldier. I was a policeman and I'd never had a crusade before ... I believe you should follow the rules and that's all I wanted the government to do — follow its own rules," he explained. But he was impressed that JSM members knew the rules and passed this information along to others who needed the help.

It was this advocacy that saw the JSM quickly grow to more than 600 dedicated members. Given that there were no membership fees, attendance records, or other formal organizational structures, it is virtually impossible to know the true strength of this organization. Yet, the JSM members interviewed recalled that more than 200 people regularly attended JSM events. "That was part of the key to our success," recalls Heighton. "The authorities did not know how many members we had — but they were scared because we could get a group together to protest pretty quickly."<sup>23</sup>

At its peak, the JSM boasted downtown Toronto offices, open five days a week, branches in Kingston and Peterborough, and influential allies in other progressive bodies, foremost of which was the New Democratic Party. It is clear from accounts of the era that the JSM became media darlings. Leaders and members knew how to draw a crowd and get media attention for any of their protests. They could terrify welfare administrators by their mere presence in welfare offices. They helped hundreds of people get their welfare cheques. They challenged and dramatically altered the leadership in the United Way and the Toronto Social Planning Council. They never lost an appeal when they presented a case to the Social Assistance Review Board. For a brief time they effectively empowered many of the city's poorest citizens.

The Just Society Movement agenda was clear. The most important goal of the JSM was to empower the poor — to give them knowledge of welfare policy. As JSM members shared this knowledge with others, people became aware that they had similar problems, that they were not alone in their difficulties. Organized protests to demand better treatment at welfare offices, secure housing, and other issues relevant to the poor and working poor helped to empower the poor and break the isolation and shame of poverty. "People forget that we were also concerned about the

<sup>21</sup>Interview with Lin Spence, Kingston, 3 May 2003.

<sup>22</sup>Interview with Heighton.

<sup>23</sup>Interview with Heighton.



rights of the working poor ... We demanded that the government increase minimum wage up to three dollars at the time,” explained Abela. “We also were concerned about all who were ineligible for Unemployment Insurance. We focused a lot on the transition from welfare to work — how you lost your dental care and your prescription drugs and all of that.”<sup>24</sup> The JSM was also a strong advocate for Workers’ Compensation clients, charging that disabled claimants had great difficulty getting satisfactory compensation. They organized pickets and demonstrations, took cases to the public, and harassed the Compensation Board to attempt to make it more responsive.<sup>25</sup>

With a definitive agenda, the JSM developed extremely effective tactics to meet their goals. As Fox Piven and Cloward have argued, the strength of anti-poverty organizations lies in their ability to keep organizational structure to a minimum. “Whatever influence lower-class groups occasionally exert in American politics does not result from organization, but from mass protest and disruptive consequences of protest,” they assert. “The development of a formal organization works to the benefit of the elites. The creation and maintenance of these formal structures distracts the poor from their more disruptive tactics. The elites are pleased to channel such uncontrollable protest into formal organizations with more predictable forms of communication, especially when these organizations depend upon financial support from the elites.”<sup>26</sup> The JSM practiced exactly what Fox Piven and Cloward preach. They advocated a non-hierarchical structure, encouraging different people to take leadership positions within the organization. As Doris Power explained at the time, “Look, the last thing we want is to get a bureaucracy of our own.”<sup>27</sup>

JSM members understood that the key to their success was advocacy and disruptive protest. For the most part they existed as a loose organization of volunteers requiring virtually no financial support. They had two offices in downtown Toronto — one in the west on Dovercourt Road and the other in the east on Seaton Street. Both of these were situated close to welfare offices so they were accessible to the poor. They were staffed by volunteers — JSM members who generally were welfare recipients. These staff kept the office open from 9 to 5, five working days of the week. The Seaton Street office was located next to the welfare department for single men. “They were cracking down on single men, then. The welfare department refusing to give you a welfare cheque if you were a single man — they’d give you vouchers instead,” recalls Heighton who helped staff the east-end office. This office was also responsible for printing out 500 or more copies of the JSM newspaper, *Community Concern*. Abela was in charge of the west-end Dovercourt office and

<sup>24</sup>Interview with Abela.

<sup>25</sup>George Ford and Steven Langdon, “Just Society Movement: Toronto’s Poor Organize,” *Canadian Dimension*, 7 (June-July 1970), 19-23.

<sup>26</sup>Fox Piven and Cloward, *Poor People’s Movements*, Introduction with quotation on 36.

<sup>27</sup>“Metro’s Poor Form Their Own Union,” *Toronto Daily Star*, 5 July 1969.

she recalls the cramped quarters that were the epicentre of political activity: “We had a phone, we had a Gestetner, a typewriter and we were in business.”<sup>28</sup> From this office they advocated on behalf of welfare applicants, organized protests, distributed copies of their newspaper, and much more.<sup>29</sup> It was through this advocacy work that JSM staff over time became acquainted with influential contacts in the government and civil service. “We had some handy phone numbers — the Minister of Welfare, top welfare administrators. You could call them when you couldn’t get action at the local level,” recalls Heighton.<sup>30</sup> In some circumstances, the government officials were anxious to receive these calls and solve the problem before the media became involved.

One of their most effective strategies was setting up help booths at a welfare office. Sometimes JSM members would just sit in the waiting room of the welfare office with the welfare regulations, talking to people waiting to see their welfare worker. Other times they set up a card table outside the welfare office. “We’d bring coffee, juice to the welfare office — it’s a public office, you know. We were only trying to help,” laughs Abela. “It drove them [welfare workers] crazy. It just blew their entire system because it depended upon people not knowing their rights ... Nothing made them [welfare workers] madder than this tactic,” she explains.<sup>31</sup> In an effort to thwart JSM’s advocacy, welfare administrators attempted to bar JSM members from all welfare offices. “But there were too many of us. They’d push one of us out the door and another three JSM members would walk in behind,” explains Heighton.<sup>32</sup> “The welfare office knew they couldn’t touch us because we would call the media and they would be there in a flash. So they had to put up with us even though they hated it,” recalls Abela. She believes it was JSM’s most effective tactic because it was entirely legal. “They couldn’t arrest us, they looked foolish if they tried to stop us from helping people get welfare.”<sup>33</sup> JSM members would rotate to different offices with their help booths, arriving at the office where they received the most recent complaints about the welfare workers’ treatment of clients.

Establishing a discourse of rights for welfare recipients was an important JSM tactic. The philosophy of the JSM was reflected in a ten-point advice column in a JSM newspaper:

- i) Welfare is your RIGHT; it is not charity.
- ii) If you apply for welfare, ask for money right away if you need it. There is also an Emergency Welfare Dept. call 367-8600

<sup>28</sup>Interview with Abela.

<sup>29</sup>Jack Heighton believes that the JSM printed between 500 and 600 copies of each newspaper and there were at least ten issues. Interview with Heighton.

<sup>30</sup>Interview with Heighton.

<sup>31</sup>Interview with Abela.

<sup>32</sup>Interview with Heighton.

<sup>33</sup>Interview with Abela.

- iii) You must answer questions about your financial situation but your personal life is nobody's business. Remember, it all goes in the file.
- iv) You do not have to sign desertion or non-support papers against your husband to be eligible for assistance.
- v) Ask questions about the money you are getting and the extra benefits you are entitled to. Make your worker explain until you understand.
- vi) If you are unmarried, the Children's Aid's files are confidential and you do not have to tell the Welfare Dept. anything except that you have seen the Children's Aid worker.
- vii) If you need extra help, eg. appliances, drugs, eyeglasses, etc., there is a department that is set up to help you. Call 367-8623.
- viii) Call the JSM, if you need help and are not getting it. 922-1206.
- ix) Join the JSM and help us organize to fight the welfare system to get rid of the intolerable situation it puts us and our children in.
- x) Law and the Woman in Ontario available free — Ontario's Woman's Bureau, Dept. of Labour, Ontario. Write For It.<sup>34</sup>

This ten-point survival guide provided important advice on how to manoeuvre through the welfare administration, firmly establish a rights discourse which was new to the field of welfare, and, finally, encourage collective organizing of the poor.

As well as firmly establishing a rights discourse, the JSM held many effective protests. One was at the employment office [Canada Manpower] in St. Catherines. "The politicians were trying to tell us that there were lots of jobs out there but we knew this wasn't true so we wanted to prove it. So, a group of us went and sat in the office and then one stood up and sang out good and loud, 'Got any jobs today?' Then when they answered 'No' the next one would stand up and ask the same question," recalls Heighton.<sup>35</sup> One of the effective strategies used in JSM protests was to ridicule government policy. "The easiest way to get change in society is to make something look ridiculous. Not to bash it and knock it down but to make it obviously ridiculous," explains Heighton.<sup>36</sup>

Some of these protests resulted in important welfare policy changes. One of the victories was the right for welfare recipients to receive student loans [Ontario Student Assistance Plan (OSAP)] and pursue post-secondary education. "The OSAP amount was reduced for welfare recipients and I had to sign a legal paper saying that I would not feed my children with any of the money I get to go to university," recalls Abela. She took this victory in stride. "It was an obvious case," she argues. "I couldn't afford to get a job with minimum wage because it paid so little. And I wasn't allowed to go to school in order to find a better job. The public understood our problem and we embarrassed the government into making this policy

<sup>34</sup>*Just Society Movement Newspaper*, 7, 7 (1970), 6.

<sup>35</sup>Interview with Heighton.

<sup>36</sup>Interview with Heighton.

change.”<sup>37</sup> This is a right that welfare recipients today no longer enjoy, as witnessed in the Kimberly Rogers case, when a pregnant woman in Sudbury was convicted of welfare fraud, cut off welfare, and sentenced to house arrest in 2001 because she was attending college and receiving student loans simultaneously with her welfare cheque.<sup>38</sup>

Another victory was to expose the discriminatory practices of Ontario Housing Corporation [OHC] which provided subsidized housing for low-income citizens. “If you had a hyper-active child or a child with any problems they would boot you out and black list you and then you couldn’t get any more [subsidized] housing,” explains Abela. “The OHC denied that they had a black list.” The turning point was when Audrey Wilson and her five children were evicted from her subsidized housing because she failed to pay a \$30 hike in her rent. The mother argued that she had to stay in the neighbourhood because she had two special needs children (one was epileptic, the other physically disabled) and it was difficult to re-establish services for them. “We had a sit-in. We got into an empty apartment and put the mom’s stuff in there and we just stayed there for several days. Even though OHC said there was no apartment available — we found one and exposed it,” recalls Abela. The sit-in received extensive newspaper coverage. The *Toronto Telegram* reported, “About two dozen police officers and two paddy wagons were used to carry away the society [JSM] members who left the second floor apartment quietly but protested violently when TV cameras outside were turned on.”<sup>39</sup>

The JSM also played a role in two important national anti-poverty events. The Senate Committee of 1968 provided a federal forum for anti-poverty groups to emerge and register their complaints. This was the first time federal funding was available to the poor in order to organize and present briefs. Media reports of the Senate hearings provided free publicity for these groups. Several anti-poverty groups formed throughout the country and took advantage of these opportunities to demonstrate that the federal “War on Poverty” was ineffective.

Unlike most emerging anti-poverty groups at the time the JSM refused to take federal funding from and legitimize this Senate Committee. The JSM did not prepare a formal presentation to the committee but their attendance made front-page news. More than 150 JSM members attended the committee meetings in the “ornate ballroom of St. Lawrence Hall” when Doris Power stood up and shouted, “We, of

<sup>37</sup>Interview with Abela.

<sup>38</sup>Kimberly Rogers died of an overdose of antidepressants during her house arrest and a public inquest recommended that the government eliminate lifetime welfare bans and use house arrests only when ensuring that a person has adequate housing, food, and medication. It is interesting to note that the jury did not recommend that welfare recipients have access to OSAP and post-secondary education. This illustrates how important the JSM victory was, a victory we have since lost. “Recommendations to the Government of Ontario, The Minister of Community, Family and Children’s Services,” Kimberly Rogers Inquest.

<sup>39</sup>“Apartment Sit-in Group Ousted and Charged,” *Toronto Telegram*, 2 July 1970.

the Just Society, decry this cynical game. We will not legitimize this type of social bull——.”<sup>40</sup> She then read the following statement to the hearings:

We demand that if this committee wishes to study anything, it should study wealth, not poverty. We demand that this committee study the nature of oppression in this country — not the oppressed; there are answers to poverty. You refuse to ask the right questions and until you do there will be no right answers — only more deceit.<sup>41</sup>

Following the JSM presentation Power waved bundles of the JSM newspaper and announced they were for sale for 25 cents. This JSM event helped to galvanize protest against the committee, contributing in April 1971 to Senate Committee staff members resigning and buttressing the anti-poverty movement’s allegation that the Committee was “not going to live up to its mandate.”<sup>42</sup> As we have seen, Ian Adams and three other staff produced a 255-page report which explored the depths of poverty in the country and condemned the welfare policies of the day.<sup>43</sup> This critical document provided fresh support for anti-poverty activism, and was widely distributed within the movement and extensively used in university courses.

The Senate Committee on Poverty both provided funding and exposure for many anti-poverty groups. Momentum from the Committee helped many low-income activists mobilize and create the first National Conference of Poor People’s Organizations which met in Toronto in 1971. More than 500 activists from across the country attended. Howard Buchbinder, a key member of Praxis, strong supporter of the JSM, and one of the organizers of the conference, describes this event as the highlight of anti-poverty organizing during this period. JSM members were among those who attended the conference and made allies with other anti-poverty groups across the country. “It was the first time anything like that had ever happened,” Buchbinder recalled. During the conference the participants called for a radical redistribution of profit and formed the National Anti-Poverty Organization [NAPO].<sup>44</sup>

<sup>40</sup>“Don’t Play Games with Poor Just Society Tells Inquiry,” *Toronto Daily Star*, 12 March 1970.

<sup>41</sup>Proceedings of the Senate Committee on Poverty, No. 28, Thursday, 12 March 1970, 17-18, cited in Howard Buchbinder, “Guaranteed Annual Income: The Answer to Poverty for All but the Poor,” *Canadian Dimension*, 7 (October-November 1970), 27-32.

<sup>42</sup>Adams et al., *The ‘Real’ Poverty Report*, Preface.

<sup>43</sup>Adams et al., *The ‘Real’ Poverty Report*, 187, and “Angry Canadian Writer Uses Pen Like a Scalpel,” *Toronto Star*, 8 December 1971.

<sup>44</sup>NAPO remains today as an important voice of low-income Canadians which lobbies federal and provincial governments on poverty issues. Much of the documentation concerning the preparation of this conference was lost as a result of a suspicious fire in the Praxis office. Interview with Howard Buchbinder, Toronto, 3 December 1991. “Activists Say Offices Ransacked, Burned,” *Toronto Daily Star*, 22 December 1970.

While these two national events provided a momentary spotlight for anti-poverty groups and their issues, the JSM was able to sustain media coverage for a prolonged period of organizing. Doris Power, one of the leaders of the JSM, became a media favourite and was considered highly influential in local politics. The *Toronto Daily Star* considered Power one of the three high-profile newsmakers in 1970 and called her the “small, hard, pretty woman with an old-fashioned pony tail ... and blow horn ... a heroine.” All of Power’s opinions and activities, including the birth of her baby, were news items.<sup>45</sup> “We knew how to get the media out to our protests and the welfare departments were nervous of our ability to win media support,” Abela explained.<sup>46</sup> Sustained media exposure also helped the JSM to achieve a level of public support. For example, teachers brought their classes to the JSM offices to learn about poverty. Some of these students ended up going to JSM protests following their “educational tour.”<sup>47</sup>

The media attention helped attract support from other sources. Soon the JSM had an alliance with Praxis, a New Left group of professional but radical social workers and academics who were committed to social change and critical research. Praxis included such nationally and internationally renowned academics as Stephen Clarkson, Jane Jacobs, and Peter Russell. Howard Buchbinder, the predominant leader of the organization, was a radical social worker from Chicago who moved to Toronto and helped to form Praxis.<sup>48</sup> The JSM also had an ongoing alliance with the New Democratic Party. It was Praxis and NDP members who financially helped bail JSM members out of jail following arrests. Praxis offered the JSM office space for their meetings. Both Praxis and the NDP gave the anti-poverty movement important media contacts. These two organizations also helped to give the JSM greater credibility in the larger society.

JSM members also worked with the peace movement and the women’s movement to bring positive changes to people’s lives. For instance, some JSM members were active in the women’s movement’s fight for abortion rights and regularly attended these demonstrations. The JSM joined forces with the peace movement to stop Ontario Hydro from demolishing blocks of houses in downtown Toronto. They helped to organize protests, saved these houses, and helped turn them into co-operative homes.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>45</sup>“Toronto Newsmakers Look Ahead to 1971,” *Toronto Daily Star*, 29 December 1970; Jeremy Brown, “About Town,” People section, *Toronto Daily Star*, 10 September 1970; David Lewis Stein, “The City: Saviors Are Springing Up All Over,” *Toronto Daily Star*, 26 January 1971.

<sup>46</sup>Interview with Abela.

<sup>47</sup>Interview with Spence.

<sup>48</sup>Interview with Buchbinder.

<sup>49</sup>*Peace Exchange*, Peace Movement newspaper, 1 (1970), 1. Interview with Abela.

The JSM was careful not to take any money from the government. “We knew this could have limited us — our ability to keep true to our goals,” explains Abela.<sup>50</sup> Again, the JSM was strategically astute to make this financial decision. Many other progressive organizations have been silenced or restricted in their radical potential because of their financial dependence upon government funds.<sup>51</sup>

One of the distinct features of the JSM was the decidedly dominant role that women played in the organization. The leaders were all women, mostly single mothers. It was the women who received front-page coverage on the pages of Toronto’s daily newspapers. It was the women who were the spokespeople for the organization. In fact more than 80 per cent of the members were women. The men were quite aware that their role was an ancillary and supportive one. Heighton recalls that there was no resistance from male members to the female domination of the group: “You should have met some of these women — they were strong women. They could put any man in his place.” Heighton explains that one of his roles in the JSM was to babysit the members’ children while they went to demonstrations. “It was important for the women to be out there — visible — so I looked after the kids,” he recalls. He seems unaware that the female dominance of progressive organizations is still a rare phenomenon. “Well, I did notice when I went to NDP ridings and hung around the Waffle group that the men would just take off to the pub after the meeting and leave the women to clean up and look after the kids. And then they’d talk about being a great liberated party,” says Heighton. “I saw that inequality with the NDP and basically I swore off partisan politics right there.”<sup>52</sup>

The fact that the JSM was led and dominated by women makes it unique amongst popular anti-poverty groups. Often the most visible anti-poverty groups are dominated by men, as the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty [OCAP] is today. This can affect the group’s organizational style, agenda, and political strategies. Unlike OCAP, which has a hierarchical structure with an executive and paid staff (albeit not well paid), JSM was completely run by volunteers who believed strongly in a non-hierarchical organizational structure. Also, the JSM provided childcare for meetings and political events. JSM leaders knew that single mothers could not participate in their organization without guaranteed childcare. OCAP has yet to integrate the childcare needs of parents into its organizational structure.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>50</sup>Interview with Abela; Interview with Buchbinder.

<sup>51</sup>Fox Piven and Cloward caution anti-poverty groups to maintain financial independence. Fox Piven and Cloward, *Poor People’s Movements*, Chapter 1.

<sup>52</sup>Abela confirms that it was generally five women, including herself, who were the key spokespeople for the group. Interview with Heighton; Interview with Abela.

<sup>53</sup>For a more detailed discussion of OCAP’s structure and political agenda see Jonathan Greene, “Boardrooms and Barricades: Anti-Poverty Organizing in Canada,” in Miriam Smith, ed., *The Politics of Contestation: Organized Interests and Social Movements in Canadian Politics* (forthcoming), and Greene, “Visibility, Urgency and Protest.”



Abela credits JSM's success to the fact it was predominantly female-run. "It takes a huge amount of volunteer hours to run an organization. Men just don't do that. The bottom line is they just won't put in the day to day flogging, unglorified hours that is needed," she explains. "This is not to say that there weren't a lot of really good men involved in the JSM, men who were supporting what we were doing." But Abela believes that the organization ran efficiently because the majority of its organizers were women — women who brought their children to the JSM office or the welfare office and made sure that day-to-day advocacy work got done.<sup>54</sup>

Some scholars believe that women, especially as mothers, politically organize differently than men. Through her interviews with African American, Puerto Rican, and white European American women who fought for social and economic justice in their low-income neighbourhoods of New York City and Philadelphia, Nancy Naples came to understand that low-income mothers undertake politics in a distinctive way. She believes these women engage in "activist mothering," which extends their maternal roles beyond their family and kin and includes the caretaking of a larger segment of society.<sup>55</sup> She observes that many of these women did not view themselves as political — did not name themselves as feminists, radicals, or socialists. Although "they held a radical critique of establishment politics ... they simply believed they were acting to protect their communities," observes Naples.<sup>56</sup> Theresa O'Keefe counters this argument in her examination of the women in the Irish Republican Army. She suggests that scholars in this field have overemphasized the maternal interests of women's progressive political organizing. Based on her interviews with these subversive women she argues that women are involved in political activity because they want the betterment of society, which is not tied to their mothering roles at all. They may or may not be mothers, but they are committed to their radical, subversive politics.<sup>57</sup>

JSM women carried aspects of both a maternalist and a radical, subversive politics. Certainly the women interviewed spoke eloquently about how their tactics were premised on the fact that they were mothers. "We wanted a better life for our children so we fought to make things better. We wouldn't have done all that [activism] if it weren't for the kids," explains Abela. Also their organizing was affected by their maternal constraints. Because many of them were low-income single

<sup>54</sup>Interview with Abela.

<sup>55</sup>Nancy Naples, *Grassroots Warriors: Activist Mothering, Community Work, and the War on Poverty* (New York 1998), Chapter 5 with definition on 113.

<sup>56</sup>Naples provides a sophisticated understanding of the role race and racism play in low-income community organizing. She argues that the racist nature of progressive social movements may partly explain why these community organizers did not identify with these larger social movements. Naples, *Grassroots Warriors*, 125, 136-141.

<sup>57</sup>Theresa O'Keefe, "The Miniskirt Brigade: Feminist Identity Construction in the Irish Republican Movement," PhD dissertation, Queen's University, 2003, Chapter 3.



mothers there was a blurring of public and private lives and politics. Children were always a part of JSM meetings, office hours, and peaceful protests. "All our organizing revolved around the needs of the children. Who was going to look after them? Was it safe to bring them to the welfare office? to a demonstration?" JSM meetings were held early in the evening so children could be home at bedtime.

These maternal interests made JSM members more radical and more cautious. They carefully evaluated all demonstrations and protests that might lead to arrests. "We couldn't go around being arrested all the time 'cause at the end of the day we needed to come home and feed our children," says Abela.<sup>58</sup> Yet, at the same time, Abela believes it was single motherhood that truly radicalized her. "Survival made me more radical and surviving as a mother made me even more so because you're not just surviving for yourself. You can't give up."<sup>59</sup>

The JSM women I interviewed continue to blur the lines between their public and private lives by their commitment to social justice. Both Spence and Abela opened their homes to low-income adults and children when they were active members of JSM, and they continue to do so now. Today both have paid employment in the women's shelter movement. And privately, both continue to raise non-biological children. In this way their maternal politics extends beyond their flesh and blood.

In 1971 the strength of the JSM began to waver. It was a time when a number of anti-poverty organizations were having difficulties. The federal funding had dried up following the Senate Committee and the National Conference of Poor People's Organizations. While the JSM was not dependent upon government funding, the energy of the group began to wane. Abela believes that one of the problems was that the JSM became involved in too many divergent activities and did not remain true to its roots: doing day-to-day advocacy for welfare applicants and recipients. This is often a hazard of anti-poverty mobilizing. Fox Piven and Cloward have cautioned anti-poverty groups to never forget that their key resource is the mass mobilization of poor people. Often, as anti-poverty groups continue over time they become institutionalized and/or involved in activities that do not require mass mobilization.<sup>60</sup> This was partly the case for the JSM.

One of the strengths of the JSM was also one of its greatest weaknesses. The JSM's close association with Praxis provided tremendous legitimacy for the

<sup>58</sup>Naples speaks about this blurring of public and private activist mothering. See Nancy Naples, "Activist Mothering: Cross-Generational Continuity in the Community Work of Women from Low-Income Urban Neighborhoods," *Gender and Society*, 6 (September 1992), 441-463. Interview with Abela.

<sup>59</sup>Spence also agrees that motherhood made her more committed to anti-poverty politics. Interview with Abela; Interview with Spence.

<sup>60</sup>As the National Welfare Rights Organization became established it diluted the activities of the local anti-poverty groups. Fox Piven and Cloward, *Poor People's Movements*, 284-305, 353-359.

scrappy anti-poverty group, but it also diluted the group's mobilizing agenda. It was through Praxis that JSM members became involved in a campaign to significantly alter the organizational structure of professional agencies such as United Appeal, Toronto Social Planning Council, and the Ontario Welfare Council. These agencies documented poverty and provided financial aid but did not involve poor people in their decision-making structures. Praxis members such as Howard Buchbinder and Gerry Hunnius were firmly committed to community control over policy-making and published extensively on the topic. They strategized and encouraged the JSM to help make these charitable organizations and government advisory councils accountable to the poor.<sup>61</sup>

With the help of Praxis, JSM members stormed the boardrooms of these organizations, demanding that poor people be fairly represented on their governing bodies. This created sensational media events.<sup>62</sup> In 1969 JSM founder Suzanne Polgar was appointed to the Toronto Social Planning Council. This was just the tip of the iceberg in changing the structure of the council. Within two years membership in the council skyrocketed from 512 individual members to 1,179; it was believed that much of this influx was made up of JSM members and allies who wanted to dramatically change the representation of the board. And the board did change. More than one-quarter of the new council members in 1970 supported a more activist, participatory council. The Toronto Social Planning Council was only one site of Praxis and JSM efforts to make charitable organizations and government advisory councils more representative of the poor. Public pressure from the Senate Committee on Poverty and the National Poor People's Conference prompted the federal government to establish the National Welfare Council to advise the government on poverty issues. Again, Polgar, a founding member of the JSM, was appointed to this council. But JSM-elected members and their allies soon claimed that these were token positions which did not permit real substantive policy change. As a result, the

<sup>61</sup>Gerry Hunnius, ed., *Participatory Democracy for Canada: Workers' Control and Community Control* (Montreal 1971); Howard Buchbinder, "Social Planning or Social Control: An Account of a Confrontation with the Social Welfare Establishment," in Alan Powell, ed., *The City: Attacking Modern Myths* (Toronto 1972), 131-160; Howard Buchbinder, "The Toronto Social Planning Council and the United Community Fund," in D.I. Davies and Kathleen Herman, eds., *Social Space: Canadian Perspectives* (Toronto 1971), 196-205; Buchbinder, "Participation, Control and the E.P.O.: A Consideration of Strategies," *Our Generation*, 7 (September 1971), 9-22.

<sup>62</sup>AO, RG 49, Press Clippings 1934-1973, Reel #349, "Two Angry 'Clients' Crash Welfare Experts' Meeting," 20 June 1968; "Client Power," 13 July 1968; Reel #389, "United Appeal Ignores Poor, Says Just Society," 28 October 1969; Reel #440, "The Day They Routed the Social Planning Council," 23 March 1970; "Militant Poor Cash Welfare Meeting," 22 April 1970; "Angry Mothers Storm Office," 27 August 1970; and Reel #491, "Poor People and Reformers Desert the Social Planning Council," 17 April 1972.

board membership of various charitable agencies soon returned to the elites who had previously controlled the councils' decisions.<sup>63</sup>

Upon reflection, not all believe that this Praxis initiative was effective. Abela thinks this concern with community control of various social and charitable agencies distracted JSM energies from their primary work: advocating and mobilizing the poor.

They were male social workers who essentially took advantage of us. They tried to move the agenda and you know when you're a poor woman it's really easy to be swayed by that language.

Abela sat on the board of the Toronto Social Planning Council for a term but she considers this to have been a waste of JSM energy and resources. She also asserts that Praxis wanted to engage in more radical political activity than JSM members were comfortable with. "We were going to have a national march against poverty and the Praxis and JSM men wanted to go and attack the stock exchange. But some of us were single moms. We didn't want to get arrested and lose our children," Abela explains. "Praxis activities took us away from our agenda. We got pulled off track. The JSM was very grounded in the day to day. We helped people at welfare offices, we fought to allow women to go to university, we fought for day care, children's services — that was our own agenda and we were effective when we stuck to it," says Abela.<sup>64</sup>

The alliance with Praxis changed the gender and class dynamics of anti-poverty organizing. JSM was predominantly a women's organization with men playing a subordinate, supportive role. Praxis was dominated by professional men. "All of a sudden men were taking up more space — before it was the women who ran it," says Abela. Class differences were also challenging in alliance-building. "They didn't get poverty on a really gut level. They'd expect us to come to meetings without saying how we were to pay for transportation or what to do with the kids," Abela recalled.<sup>65</sup>

There are a number of overwhelming challenges that face any anti-poverty organization and the JSM was not immune to these. Yet, from 1968 to 1971 the JSM was a powerful voice for the poor in Toronto. Because of the lack of financial re-

<sup>63</sup>By 1972 the Social Planning Council board no longer included JSM members. For further elaboration of the role of the JSM and Praxis in transforming the board of directors of various social service agencies, see Kevin Brushett, "Reaching Out and Biting Back: Grassroots Activism and Toronto's Social Service Community, 1960-1975," paper presented to the Canadian Historical Association, Halifax, 29 May 2003; "Mother on Welfare Wins Seat for Poor on Planning Council," *Toronto Daily Star*, 27 March 1969; "Munro Names Three on Welfare to Advise Him," *Toronto Daily Star*, 19 January 1970.

<sup>64</sup>Interview with Abela.

<sup>65</sup>Interview with Abela.

sources, the informal organizational structure, the personal crises of its members, it is natural for anti-poverty groups to have a short life span. Yet the life span cannot be equated with the success of the group. Clearly, the JSM was a highly effective organization during its brief history. Organized by the poor, for the poor, the JSM mobilized hundreds of low-income Torontonians and advocated for countless others. Also important to recognize is the leadership role which women, especially low-income single mothers, played in this anti-poverty group. In its time the JSM empowered the poor, made welfare bureaucrats cower, journalists race to their site of protest, and the public take note of an important voice for the oppressed.

*I would like to dedicate this article to the many militant members of the Just Society Movement who fought an important struggle with passion and commitment. For more than a decade I desperately wanted to find JSM members to interview. Finally, through Harvey Schachter I was able to find Susan Abela, Lin Spence, and Jack Heighton. I am indebted to all of them for their patience with my stumbling questions. I thank my research assistant Sarah Miller for her extremely thorough research and enthusiastic interest in the subject. Jonathan Greene provided a listening ear and helpful suggestions at every point in the writing of this article. I appreciate the helpful guidance of Labour/Le Travail's anonymous reviews. And thanks to the staff of the W.D. Jordan Special Collections and Music Library, Queen's University.*

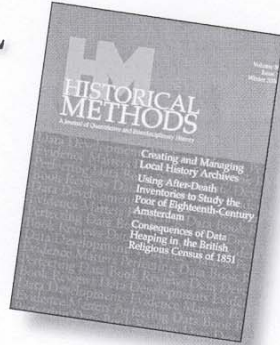
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