

Report From The National Women's Caucus

by Margo Zelie

Shirley Chisholm's calypso voice seems to emanate from an invisible box slightly to the left of her brown mask-face, "Remember how people organized for Earth Day? Why can't they organize for human issues? I can't get excited about whales in the ocean. I get excited about ghetto children." Her body is erect, contained, hooked up to some private power source separate from the energies that ebb and flow across the Rice Hotel lobby. A traditional political convention structure discourages the kind of lateral thinking that permits you to make a connection between the fate of a whale and the fate of a ghetto child. At the National Women's Political Caucus each state in the union has its delegation: radicals, lesbians, unionists, blacks and Chicanas have their free-floating caucuses, but no one speaks for the female whale. I found myself assuming the perspective of a free-floating Moby Jane, hoping that she was as valid an entity as Norman Mailer's Aquarius.

Approximately 2000 women joined Congresswomen Shirley Chisholm and Bella Abzug, feminists Gloria Steinem, Liz Carpenter and Jill Ruckelhaus, and NOW founder Betty Friedan for the first convention of the National Women's Political Caucus, held in Houston. These four women and others had founded the NWPC in July of 1971, to support women running for political office. They have served as an ad hoc National Policy Council since that time. The convention priorities called for a restructuring of the organization from the local caucuses upward and the sharing of expertise in workshops on electoral politics. There was a heavy predominance of Democratic Party members attending.

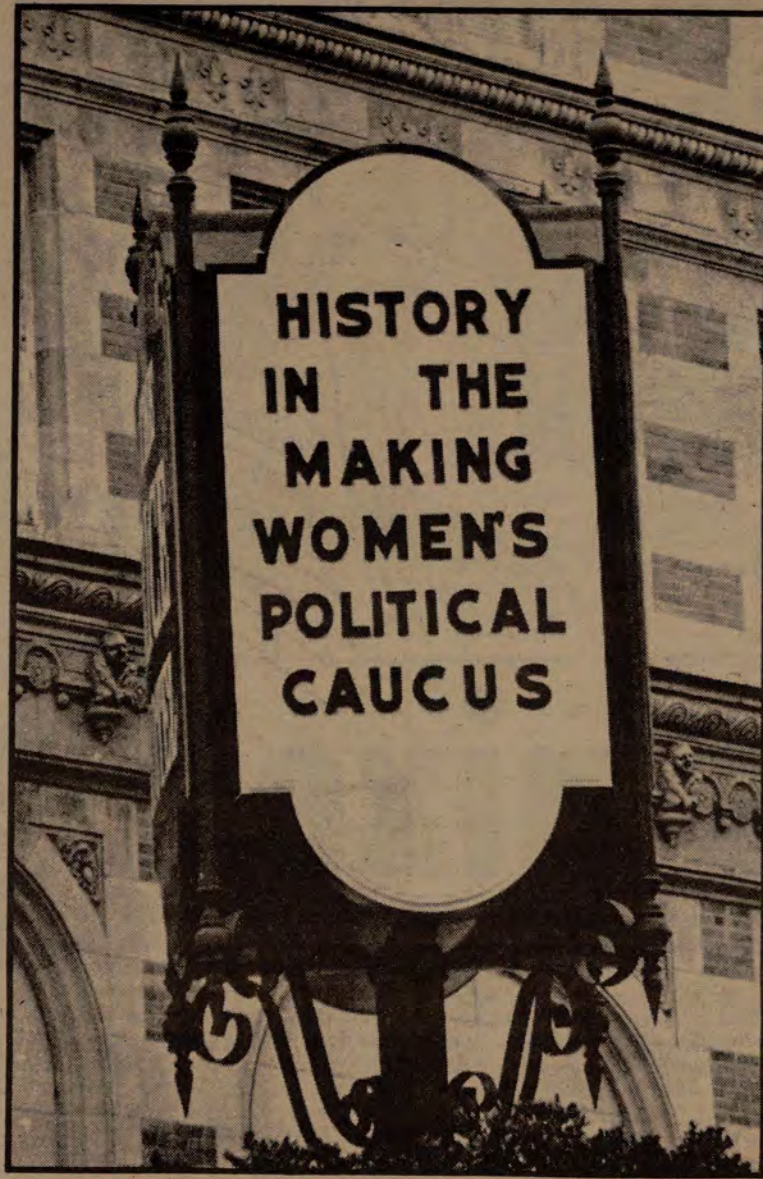
On the floor the scene was indistinguishable from any other political convention except for the gender of the delegated. In all but its official non-partisan stance, the NWPC exists as a shadow organization which parallels the structures of the male-dominated political system. The caucus has never questioned the assumption that geographical divisions are and should be the bases of power in our country. In reality political women di-

vide along racial, ideological and economic lines. At the convention the entity to which an activist owes the least allegiance, a geographical unit, remains her primary vehicle of expression. Why? Presumably because that is the way it has always been done.

Traditional structures trap women into traditional modes of action. The workshops dealing with the nitty-gritty of campaign tactics and local organizing stressed the how-to aspects of electoral politics and reformist legislation. "In the workshops I been going to," complained a black radical, "not anybody talking about anything but the Equal Rights Amendment." The workshops were necessarily limited in scope but various independent caucuses felt the convention had provided no official channels for discussing the relationship of electoral politics to broader issues. "Don't alienate the local power structure" was a predominant theme of many of the workshops.

The radical caucus, a group of participants and observers organized by Bobbie Nelson and Judy Smith of Austin, formed to remind the convention that the revolutionary thrust of the original feminist movement had been blunted by a similar preoccupation with suffrage and electoral processes. "This is really the last revolution," said one member of the radical caucus. "If women entering politics don't enter with different ideas, with a real attempt to change the structure of this society, then I don't believe our situation as women is going to change." The radical caucus was sharply divided on whether or not to work within the convention structure but all agreed that the convention organizers were consciously suppressing a discussion of women's politics in a context broader than that of electoral processes.

Moby Jane followed the activities of the radical caucus not because it significantly influenced the direction of the convention but because she feels at home in the deeper waters where one kind of comfortable political reality ends and another more mysterious projection of possibilities begins. An observer-participant finds it all but impossible to impose coherence upon the 1000 simultaneous realities of a major political convention. The of-



The welcoming sign at the conventioners hotel.

ficial agenda often presents the least significant perception.

The presence of a large and visible lesbian caucus and the contingent of radical women seemed to disturb many of the delegates who were supportive of the black and Chicano caucuses. Hundreds of delegates joined the noon-time picket of Foley's Dept. Store Saturday, to show solidarity with the Chicana women on strike against Farah Slacks. It was more difficult to identify with the oppression of sexual minorities. "Why do you suppose lesbians would want to caucus?" asked one older delegate. "They're all over the place anyway," answered her companion. "I suppose they may as well get together." The convention structure was flexible enough to create modes of expression for

special interest groups as they formed.

Agitation on the fringes may not have been nearly so radicalizing as a first-hand participation in the democratic processes as they are defined by the NWPC. Young, idealistic or politically naive delegates in the free-form supportive atmosphere of feminist groups were dismayed and frequently angered by the realities of a struggle for power and parliamentary and procedural hassles. The dynamics of a political convention are male in nature. Dif-

fuse energies are channeled through to some sort of arbitrary conclusion. An observer finds herself inclined to respond by faking orgasm, by investing certain limited goals and processes with more significance than they merit. In the artificially induced intensity of a convention it is easy to equate politics with electoral processes, just as it was once easy for women to equate sexuality with penetration.

Between the formal workshop and delegation of the convention and the philosophy of the National Policy Council there existed a gap that the independent caucuses had tried to bridge. Gloria Steinem reminded the delegates that "we are past the time when anyone can think that feminists want only a piece of the action... revolutionary feminism is the only path to human liberation." Bella Abzug called for a broader definition of women's issues, asking the Caucus to "liberate our country from the military machine." The injection of controversial issues into the official non-partisanship of the convention was a challenge to the grass-roots organizers which could not be dealt with through the existing structure of the convention and the caucus.

Chisholm's thinking more accurately reflected the whole tone of the convention than Steinem's call for feminist revolution. It may be that a convention seeking broad-based support for women candidates is no forum for the discussion of the relationship between militarism, ecology, capitalism and feminism.

Abzug, commenting upon Farenthold's near-miss in the Democratic Party's nomination for Vice-President said, "Sometimes in the desire to be politically safe, political organizations and their leaders fall short of being just daring enough to win." A similar caution seems to be afflicting the woman's movement at this point in its history.



Bella Abzug makes a point.



Gwen Cherry and Francis Farenthold.



Gloria Steinem. All photos by Nancy McKay.

FROM PAGE 6
less money for it.

Sexism is in the mind, not the body. The women have to want to stop dancing before we have a right to close the place down. And we can only offer them an alternative by accepting them as women, understanding and loving them and winning their trust. These women have taken a lot of shit from the white, upper-class society, but many of them are too bruised, lonely or just plain desperate to be bothered holding grudges.

It is practically impossible for me to express the real traumas of being a prostitute, as I have never been one. In the recent Sexuality issue of *Women - A Journal of Liberation*, Cathy Nossa, a prostitute of 3 months, explains the gut feelings on her article, "Prostitution - Who's Hustling Who?"

"The most depressing side of prostitution is the isolation of the prostitute's lifestyle." She says that because her profession is illegal and socially abominable, the only person with whom a prostitute can openly and comfortably talk is another prostitute. All others (except pimps - which is one reason why so many prostitutes sign themselves over to them) relate to her/him is a mystery or curiosity or disease and cannot supply the empathy that neutralizes her/his isolation.

She also testifies to the fact that the profession is usually chosen for economic reasons rather than sexual thrills: "Since the overall supply of prostitutes is very low in relation to the demand for them, I am experiencing a greater degree of financial security than I had ever thought possible - in any job. An honest recognition of the economic motivation for becoming a prostitute, that it provides the best pay

in relation to a women's skills, would fail to justify the contempt with which society and the law, in particular, regard her."

And to those who still hold onto the argument that even a secretarial job would be better, Nossa says, "It's a choice between sucking cock or kissing ass!"

She adds: "Prostitutes are largely hidden from each other unless they happen to be on duty at the same time and place - a situation which they are more likely to be in competition rather than solidarity with each other. The brothels are an enigma because of this. They seem to be an ideal setting for the emergence of political resolve and concerted action, yet none seems to have evidenced itself."

Some of the strongest voices in the women's movement begin to stutter when asked about pros-

SEE PAGE 15