

*Control Over Our Own Organization :*  
*Control Over Our Own Movement*

*A Rationale for the Bylaws of Pennsylvania NOW*  
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## CONTROL OVER OUR OWN ORGANIZATION

Over and over at National NOW Conventions members complain of a lack of communication between NOW as it is organized at the national level and local NOW chapters. Local chapters claim to be unaware of the great bulk of national NOW activity and unenlightened with regard to the remainder. The sense of alienation engendered by this feeling occasionally manifests itself in unfortunate semantic distinctions. Members do not ask what "we" are doing but what "they" are doing and assume an adversary position with regard to their own elected leadership.

Unquestionably this sense of alienation has been fostered by a certain disorganization at the national level, a tolerance for drifting, and a philosophy which tends to equate movement with public relations. More important, however, national NOW structure provides its members and its chapters very limited access to national decision-making. Once every eighteen months great masses of NOW members gather together in a carnival atmosphere to exchange experiences, admire each other's wares, attend workshops, renew the faith, elect individual members to various governing bodies, and in the form of resolutions set national policy and program for the year and a half to come. And all in one weekend! No one attending a National Convention could at the close of that convention claim to be privy to a coherent and developed program adopted to guide the organization for the next eighteen months. Yet the convention is supposed to be the "supreme governing body" of national NOW.

The end of a national convention is like the end of a movement party. When it is all over, the newly elected governing body, suffering a monstrous hangover, must nevertheless go about the job of cleaning up. The task of putting things back together and arranging all the scattered resolutions into a new and meaningful whole is theirs alone. Naturally individual members and chapters may be dissatisfied with the results. Each may have anticipated an entirely different whole, an arrangement designed to highlight other concerns. Worse, elements of the program rearranged may not seem the same and members may suspect gratuitous deletions and additions.

But that's it. It is all over for the next eighteen months and there is nothing members can do about it but fuss, fume, and nurture resentments. In fact within the present structure of NOW there is nothing anyone can do

to rectify this unhappy situation. NOW has simply outgrown the convention as the sole device for membership control of national program, if indeed this single-shot device was ever adequate.

Bylaws at the national level will have to be changed for the problem is not one of communication but control. That there should be any confusion on this point in the mind of NOW members is the most discouraging part of this whole affair. Communication is a sop, a cool-out constantly offered oppressed people who demand some control over the decisions which affect their lives. But communication is a most inadequate substitute for power and justice. Women as a class being handicapped in coping with the greater physical strength of men as a class have maintained a susceptibility to this ploy which exceeds that of other oppressed groups. Indeed, I shudder to think of the number of hours each of us has spent explaining "our problems" as women to men who have had authority over us (husbands included) -- attempting to win through understanding that which organized power alone was capable of delivering. That we should in the bosom of our own organization attempt to solve our problems in the same old inadequate way indicates how far each of us must travel before all of us can triumph.

National bylaws will be changed, I'm sure. This paper does not really address itself to that problem. It is rather a rationale for the proposed bylaws of Pennsylvania NOW. In writing this state's bylaws we attempted to profit from mistakes made at the national level so as not to repeat and compound them. Studying problems encountered by the national organization it seems apparent that holding a convention every eighteen months for the purpose of electing a governing body and determining policy is in itself a procedure inadequate to engender in members a feeling of control over their own organization and a procedure inadequate in fact to place members in control of their own organization.

The problem with simple elections is that when we vote to elect individuals to some governing body each year, two years, or eighteen months we vote for something we hope these individuals will accomplish or, if incumbents, for or against that which they have already accomplished. But expressing a desire for the future or approval and disapproval of the past is not the same as maintaining some control over the actions of a governing body as it governs. Women who have worked year after year to elect men to office only to encounter a deaf ear upon their election should be painfully aware of this difference.

Pennsylvania NOW bylaws contain several innovations designed to insure members of Pennsylvania NOW adequate and ongoing control of their organization. These innovations include: the division of normal convention activities between the State Conference and the State Convention, requiring candidates for the State Executive Committee to run as a slate on a platform, eliminating the Nominating Committee, and the creation of a State Board of chapter representatives to act as an ongoing check and balance to the Executive Committee.

1. The division of normal convention activities between the State Conference and the State Convention. Most conventions, including that of national NOW, elect a governing body, have some policy-making function, and also provide workshops or training sessions for those in attendance. The result of cramming all of these activities into a 2 or 3 day span is to shortchange each. At the 1973 National NOW convention each candidate for office was permitted to address the assembled membership for exactly one minute. Aside from that brief exposure information with regard to candidates was limited to one-page NOW flyers each of which carried a picture of an individual candidate, a history of that candidate's educational, employment, or organizational achievements, and a few short campaign statements.

Considering the gravity of the decisions which had to be made the information available was totally inadequate. But even this minimal information was buried under the avalanche of other convention activity. Campaign speeches competed with caucuses and workshops for member attention, and campaign flyers were lost in the mounds of material distributed free or purchased at chapter booths and tables.

Given the press of business and the excitement and lightheadedness induced by so many convention activities almost any well-financed and organized faction of NOW could have gained control of the national organization without membership knowledge or consent. In fact, the enemies of feminism cheered on by our happy chatter might have stolen the organization right out from under us. As a first step toward avoiding such a catastrophe on the state level we have in the Pennsylvania NOW bylaws provided for a division of routine convention activities into two separate events conducted in separate years.

The State Convention will be held in each odd year for the sole purpose of electing an Executive Committee and adopting general policy and program. A State Conference will be convened in each even year so that Pennsylvania NOW members may hear an interim report from the



State Executive Committee, attend workshops and training programs, and set up chapter booths and tables to facilitate the exchange of chapter information and material.

This division of function between Convention and Conference will free members at Convention for a more deliberate consideration of election and program. That is why it is being proposed. In all probability, however, this division will also serve to upgrade the quality of state workshops and formalized chapter exchange.

2. Requiring candidates for the State Executive Committee to run as a slate on a platform. Candidates for the national governing bodies of NOW run as individuals for individual positions and their campaigns are conducted almost entirely without the context of program, separated from programmatic consideration. In fact, we elect members to our governing bodies before we adopt program so that at the time of their election we may have no information whatever as to how they feel about the program they are finally charged with pursuing.

This situation is fraught with many unfortunate consequences. It means we can elect a governing body that finds itself opposed to the program it is supposed to execute, only half-heartedly in favor of it, or hopelessly divided with regard to it. We could, of course, reverse the agenda and adopt program before conducting elections but that would not help very much. For one thing, serving on a national NOW governing body is a major responsibility and members normally consider whether they are willing to undertake such a responsibility far in advance of the election. That being the case candidates are, by and large, already committed to running at the time of the election and are not likely to withdraw from the race because some facet of the program appears to them to be wrong-headed. Further, because we adopt program by a procedure almost as irresponsible as that used to elect officers, candidates may feel that if elected they ought not to be bound, in any strict way, to the program adopted at convention. And in the present circumstance there is something to be said for that point of view.

Program at convention is now handled in much the same way as elections are handled, each program item like each candidate runs separately and out of context. Most program items considered are resolutions recommended by workshops at convention. That being the case the areas of concern reflected in the program adopted are in great measure determined in advance not by the general membership or even the governing bodies of national NOW but rather by the specific committee

in charge of the convention. More unfortunate still, specific workshops conducted at convention may be determined more by the ease with which the convention committee can find people to conduct them, the availability of space, and so forth than by any conscious attempt on the part of the committee to influence program. This system permits us to be placed in the ludicrous position of adopting a program limited not by conscious choice but by the amount of space available in some large hotel!

It would not be difficult to enumerate other equally pathetic consequences that might arise from our present procedure for electing officers and adopting program. The point, however, is not to ridicule that which we have but to improve upon it.

There are several difficulties involved in attempting to adopt program on an issue by issue basis in convention, no matter how the issues are brought to the floor for a vote of the membership. The problem is that the coherent development of program requires us to do more than recognize the merit of specific projects considered in isolation. There is no end to the things we should be doing, or limit on the number of projects worthy of our attention. On the other hand, there is a very real limit to the size of the program we can mount at any one time. Therefore, if the program we adopt is to be understood as anything but a declaration of sentiments, it must be limited.

The number of projects we are to carry at a particular time must itself become an issue to be decided. Gross numbers, however, have little meaning. Project proposals must be weighed against each other. Which, if effected, would do the greatest good? Which have the greatest chance of success given the present political climate? Given our resources, which are we most competent to pursue at the present time? Which projects will receive greater membership support? Which have greatest educational value? Which are best designed to increase confidence in the organization and build membership? Which will offer the most help to local chapters and state affiliates?

The difficulty in making these particular assessments is exceeded only by the difficulty in balancing one factor against another. How, for example, shall we weigh the possible success of a project against its educational value? And once individual project assessments have been made we must still tackle the problem of arriving at the best mix -- the best assortment of projects for the proposed program, all things considered. It is hard to see how decisions as complex as these can be easily or adequately resolved on the floor of a large convention which

lasts two or at most three days and has other business besides. Certainly sound program decisions cannot be made if we continue to pass judgment on individual projects presented to us serially. That task is like trying to string a good-looking necklace by dipping into a bag of beads and passing judgment on each bead as it comes out of the bag.

It is possible, however, even within a weekend to make sound decisions between necklaces already put together. It is possible even within that time frame to weigh the merits of different total programs and choose with some wisdom that one best suited to our needs, assuming, of course, that reasonable programs have been assembled beforehand and that the projects in each are justified by rational argument.

Now, it would be possible to assign to committees the task of presenting to the State Convention an assortment of program packages, complete with rationales; and that would be an improvement over our present system. It would require members to choose between programs and justify their choices. Unfortunately, however, it would not require the committees who put these program packages together to bear in mind how they might be implemented. It is all too easy to dream up pie-in-the-sky programs when someone else will be burdened with the task of carrying them out.

These other people, that is, those who must carry out the program, can also be troublesome. Even a very good program is of little service to us if those empowered to administer it do not feel comfortable with it, do not understand or know how to pursue it. And with elections separated from program adoption this situation is always possible, even likely. The proposed bylaws for Pennsylvania NOW are intended to guarantee, insofar as it is possible, that those who are elected to run the organization will be in sympathy with the program package adopted for it. They do so by requiring candidates for the Executive Committee to run as slates, with each slate putting forward its own program, its own platform.

Given the rampant individualism in our society and the widespread notion that there is some virtue or moral good associated with each individual doing her or his own thing, some people may feel offended by this requirement. But personal freedom is not to the point. We are involved in politics and politically we cannot afford an Executive Committee composed of members each intent upon pursuing a personal course. A NOW election is not a popularity contest, at least it should not be. An Election should not be held to pass judgment on the candidates or reward them for individual merits of one sort or another. NOW elections are intended to fix policy,

program, and operating personnel. In the proposed bylaws a mechanism is provided whereby the membership can achieve these ends. If Pennsylvania NOW did not require candidates for the Executive Committee to run as cohesive slates on coherent platforms, it would forfeit membership control from the very outset and leave its future to the in-group dynamics of seven individuals, each one elected for different and, in great measure, irrelevant reasons.

3. Elimination of the nominating committee. A nominating committee is always suspect and for that reason it tends to act as a wild card, as a joker in any election. Members assume that the nominating committee is an arm of the administration, even if it is elected by the membership and excluded from the governing apparatus. That being the case, members tend to judge candidates put forward by a nominating committee not on the merit of the candidates but on the merit of the outgoing administration. If members favor past policies and actions they tend to vote for candidates forwarded by the nominating committee, if opposed they tend to vote for individuals nominated from the floor.

That tactic might have some marginal merit if indeed nominating committees were always extensions of the administration. Frequently, however, they are not. In organizations which permit officials to run for repeated terms it is a common practice for the board to rid itself of dissidents not by kicking them out but up. The nominating committee has also been known to serve as a pasture for revered leaders of days-gone-by, sometimes past their prime, a little punchy, and considerably out of touch. At any particular juncture then the nominating committee is an unknown quantity and it is difficult to predict the political outcome of voting for the members it puts forward.

On top of that nominating committees are stultifying and inherently incompetent to function in a politically meaningful way. We are a huge organization and however dedicated and capable the nominating committee may be it can not know more than an infinitesimal fraction of the membership. The best it can discover may be far beneath our real potential.

Further, members known to the majority on the nominating committee must, almost of necessity, have been around for a considerable time; so new talent is generally bypassed. Yet we are a new organization and if we are to grow in size and strength we must utilize our best talent as it is discovered. People no longer believe that age in or out of an organization is revered. If we do not provide within our structure the opportunity for new talent to compete on an equal plane it will go elsewhere, splintering and weakening the woman's movement.

When we eliminate the old nominating committee charged with selecting individual candidates and put in its place self-nominated slates running on platforms we eliminate a lot of the guessing inherent in elections and in that manner secure to the membership greater control over its organization. We also make Pennsylvania NOW more democratic, more appealing, and politically more relevant and effective.

4. Creating a State Board of chapter representatives to act as an ongoing check and balance to the Executive Committee. Many of you reading this rationale may find it a little unsettling. There is a certain comfort involved doing things the same old way. If past techniques have not been terribly effective neither have they been totally disastrous. And, if the truth be told, some may feel, though they would hesitate to admit it publicly, that a large dose of chance in elections is not such a bad thing.

In fact the greater the element of chance the more likely we are, statistically speaking, to end with an average group of people doing an average job -- whatever that is. Chance out of the way, presented with rational alternatives we can do a lot better, though conceivably we can also do a lot worse. Moreover, the very system that affords us a meaningful choice necessitates our assuming responsibility for the organization and our actions in it. We can no longer sit by and bemoan the fact that we were not forewarned, or claim there was nothing we could do. Still, we are not all in position to assume added responsibility and further we must take seriously the possibility that faced with different slates and platforms -- we may goof. Acting in the best interests of the organization we may nonetheless err. What then?

Fortunately, the proposed bylaws provide ample safeguard for this contingency in the form of a State Board composed of chapter representatives which acts as an ongoing check and balance to the Executive Committee. If our choice of an Executive Committee is a wise one, if the Committee pursues its platform diligently, and if the membership maintains faith in both the Committee and its program, then the State Board will simply cooperate with the Committee to facilitate its work on state and local levels. If, on the other hand, something goes amiss the State Board has ample resources to rectify the situation. It controls the budget, it has the power of the purse, it can form its own committees, and it can, with little effort, meet as often as it finds necessary.

The State Board composed of chapter representatives is a familiar instrument. That the bylaws invest so much power in it should still our hearts and embolden us to experiment with the more rational system of electing the State Executive Committee outlined in these bylaws.