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CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING AND CAMPAIGNING

Betty Underwood

Was it all a waste of time? Dragging the kids on poster parades, turning out on yet another meeting, waiting for the bus to come to take you home when your back is locked solid from 4 hours of signature collecting? We must be careful not to belittle what we have done, we owe it to ourselves to examine our campaign positively as well as critically.

It's a tremendous responsibility we have, after asking thousands of women, and men, to sign our petition and hundreds of women to collect signatures. I've heard it said that we didn't achieve anything, we've been conned into thinking we've won when we haven't and that we've done nothing about the main tax credit proposals. To say this is to show a lack of confidence in ourselves and in our strength. We set out to fight for Family Allowance and the Government have taken notice.

They reacted to the mood of women in this country very quickly, and those apparently vague, soothing remarks made by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in his Budget Speech and at the Tory Women's Conference were a recognition of that mood.

Of course, we don't yet know what the Government proposals are going to be, but they certainly are not going to be able to do what they first proposed. In any case, the success or failure of a campaign should not only be measured by the demands being met. It should also be measured by what we learned.

I think others in the Bristol group would agree with me that we learned a lot in this campaign. We learned more about how to campaign, and how bloody difficult it is! We learned that as the campaign progressed the issues were no longer so clear-cut and you have to keep talking out what you agree on and disagree on (for instance, in our group some support the demand for Wages for Housework and others don't). We nearly made the mistake of thinking that it was peculiar to this Campaign that differences arose from time to time until some of us who are working on the Abortion and Contraception Campaign realised it was the same there, and that it must be a fact of political life. That helped us to face it and stay together.

We tried to be patient with each other when we fell down on the job, as we often did. (At least I know I fell down on it sometimes and everyone was patient with me. I'm hoping the other sisters didn't notice when I wasn't patient).

Why is petitioning not "a waste of time"?

Throughout the campaign some women have said that petitioning is useless, and that it will not achieve anything. What they are ignoring is the fact that when women or men sign a petition they are aligning themselves with a movement (Put my name down, sister!). They are making a statement of where they stand and they are doing something more than just grumbling. When women collect signatures for a petition they are doing something they haven't done before - as many did in our campaign. Everyone knows someone who will sign the petition, but it requires a conscious effort to go and

ask for that signature. You are no longer passively accepting, you will never be quite the same person again.

In Bristol there were women who came out for the first time on demonstrations and marches (including the Women's March in London) as a result of contact through the petition. If we hadn't had the petition we might not have got to know them. Because some of us have been on a lot of marches we must not forget how we changed as a result, and how other women will change.

Coming out to marches, meetings and petition-collecting means getting your children looked after and talking to family and friends about it. Consciousness-raising can take place outside of a small group meeting in a room.

### Could we have done better?

It's true we shouldn't look at the campaign through rose-coloured glasses. Although we were right to put in our evidence to the Select Committee, overall our really serious failure nationally was too much attention to that and to whether the Government was listening to us, and not enough careful planning and thought on how we could mobilise women not just to sign the petition but to take one themselves to collect signatures. We should have made plans to get the petition into more factories and work places, in a detailed and organised way. We should have tried to raise it more widely in Trades Councils, trade union branches, and other organisations. We should have organised messages of support and donations on a much bigger scale.

I think that if we had looked harder, we would have found the forces and the contacts to do this. If we didn't have the contacts we should have looked at the Labour Movement in our cities and towns and visited shop stewards and trade union activists, in particular in those unions with large number of women members.

In Bristol, although we tried to do this I don't think we tried hard enough. We did attract women who were not in the Women's Liberation Movement but I don't think we have done enough to look after those contacts, to discuss with them and to really involve them. I know I feel I have failed in this, anyway.

Having three national meetings in Bristol put a heavy responsibility on us, but we also benefitted because they helped to stimulate and maintain interest. We had a lot of local meetings, and many of the things we did arose out of suggestions at those meetings. Sometimes we got our wires crossed because one of us thought the others were doing something, and I wonder whether we might have got more done if we had been more structured. If our group had been larger I think we might have found our lack of structure a serious disability. As it was, we were able to be more flexible.

### The Press and TV

We found it very difficult to get good Press coverage, or sometimes even any, because of course it's not considered "news" when women organise around a demand, but we did manage some local radio coverage and one or two small notices of meetings. National

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They came along to the first of our national meetings and wanted to film inside the room. They said they didn't want any sound, but we refused anyway.

Is bad publicity better than none? If the coverage had been sarcastic or damaging, the viewing women who want to keep their Family Allowance and saw us on the streets campaigning might have been very annoyed and the role of the media might have been more exposed. I'm not suggesting we should always be open to the TV and Press - I fully agree with the decisions about not letting them into the Women's Liberation Conferences, but perhaps we should consider our tactics on the campaigns in a different way.

#### Getting closer to women

I'll never forget standing behind a stall in the Sunday Market and watching women queue up to sign the petition, with kids, push-chairs, and men in tow. Here was one time when women didn't stop to ask their husbands if they should sign. They often didn't tell him they were stopping, they were so anxious to pick up the pen, so that either the child or the push-chair would be stretched to breaking-point between them, as he walked on unknowingly. Some signed when their men didn't want them to: when he realised it was Women's Liberation one man picked up all the pens in a so-called joking, but really serious, way, but his wife signed anyway.

There was constant discussion around the stall, with other stallholders joining in, some for us, some against. The signatures we got in that Market reflected the multi-racial nature of the community living around it. Amongst women who signed there was no hostility to Women's Liberation and I didn't hear of anyone who said they wouldn't sign because the campaign is a Women's Liberation "baby".

#### Why some didn't sign

There were two main reasons given. One was the population question, which came up more frequently from men than from women. The other was based on attitudes to the Welfare State. Increasingly, in the last 10 or 15 years, the idea of the family looking after itself, of people taking responsibility for their own affairs, has been deliberately encouraged by Big Business and the Government which represents them. Unfortunately, some people have been taken in by this, and there were sometimes heated arguments about women spending their F.A. on bingo and booze.

#### What now on the campaign?

There is still some useful work which we can do. I think telling MPs we want their support in the House of Commons is very important, so that they are in no doubt that we want them to be there when it is debated. Tory MPs must be kept up to scratch and MPs of all parties must be made aware that we are not asking for Tax Credits to be paid to mothers, but for Family Allowance to be kept and increased. In Bristol we are taking deputations to see MPs - it's not easy!

Presenting the petition in the Autumn can mean arranging a bigger demonstration of our support and collecting more signatures. There is the question of legal costs and fines for the women and men who have been arrested as a result of sit-ins and flyposting. Asking for money to help pay for this is asking for support for

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What are women saying?

There is a lot of talk in the movement about starting where women are. I believe we must realise that we are a movement of women who have at least started to raise our own consciousness, and that although we are not better than or different from other women outside the movement, what is no longer relevant for us may still be considered relevant by other women. The petition caused a lot of discussion about the work that women do in the home, about family finances, about the right of women to money of their own, and that of course was one of its purposes. The formulation of a demand does not necessarily exactly correspond to the ideas which led up to it or which are floating around it - those ideas are much more complex.

The right to economic independence is vitally important of course, but for most women at the present time whatever money is coming into our hands is going straight into the housekeeping purse to pay for basic living necessities for ourselves and our children. What I kept hearing during our campaigning was "PRICES" - "PRICES" - "PRICES". Every time we went out with the petition women themselves were talking about prices, V.A.T., the cost of living and the low pay they had to manage on.

We reject the "middle-class" image that has been put on to us by the media and by our enemies, knowing that the aspirations and demands of the movement are relevant to all women. Nevertheless, I feel we must constantly tackle the problem of reaching out in a particular direction and trying to involve wider sections of women who are working inside and outside the home. We made a start with the Family Allowance Campaign and we must really listen to what women are saying and not just hear what we want to hear.

So I am asking the Movement to discuss urgently direct action on Prices, nationally co-ordinated. How about a Day of Action (a Saturday) where groups of women in every large town or city go into a supermarket, take an item from the shelves and stick their own "reduced price" ticket on it. Taking it to the check-out and saying "This is a Women's Liberation protest against rising prices", they should pay only the reduced price. At the same time, other women could be outside the supermarket with banners and posters stating profits made by food manufacturers. (For example, make the item sausages, and publicise the profits of Walls').

Some action needs to be taken because the women of this country are taking a tremendous burden as a result of the price rises in the last couple of years, and our real concern for our sisters must be translated into action on an issue which is of paramount importance to them - and to us. After all, we're paying those prices too.