

Article

CONFRONTING POWER, MONEY AND MOST ECONOMISTS: THE CLASS ACTION OF THE ANTI-FREE TRADE MOVEMENT

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Free trade and its structures are so fundamental to our current way of life and so taken for granted, that they rarely are a part of debates about the future -- even in discussions of the possibilities of a shift in economic approaches in the post Covid-19 world.¹ Globalization, based on a largely unregulated international market system that was dramatically accelerated by free trade, developed in many of the ways anti-free trade activists predicted, resulting in a world that massively increased the might of international monopolies, facilitated vast surges in unequal wealth and income distribution, and justified ‘austerity’ in public policy in order to limit wages, taxes and social spending. The movement that developed in protest against the first Canada-US free trade agreement in the mid-1980s until the 1988 Canadian ‘free trade’ election anticipated these negative results, although it did not understand how rapidly and thoroughly globalization would condition the actions of governments. Nor did it anticipate the subsequent rise of right-wing fanaticism in the US that accelerated as the consequences of free trade became known.

The Canadian anti-free trade movement was a genuine ‘movement’ that originated locally in many different places throughout the country and was soon consolidated in a loose coalition at the national level. It was extraordinary for several reasons. First, it brought together a large number of groups that had never worked with each other before and their coalitions were strong and effective. Second, it was a movement based on class issues and was understood that way by its

¹ I would like to acknowledge the helpful comments on an earlier draft from Laurell Ritchie, Laurie Edwards, and Duncan Cameron.

leaders and most of those who participated in it. Third, it democratized thinking and knowledge about economic policy, and this, in turn, meant that many groups and issues that were normally absent from a discussion of macro-economic policy, became central to the debate. Fourth, the anti-free trade movement grew in relation to the specific issues of regions and groups but the critical arguments that developed over time focused on the problems of having market mechanisms dominate both the economic and social spheres. This scrutiny and discussion of the market system itself has not been replicated in debates on any subsequent major policy issue.

The loss of the free trade election in 1988 and the subsequent proliferation of comprehensive international free trade agreements profoundly changed Canada. The world is unlikely to shift away from the free trade momentum, despite the obvious problems with a virtually unregulated international market mechanism and heightened US protectionism, yet, the many successes of the anti-free trade movement should be remembered for the way it propelled masses of people to deal with an issue that, until then, was in the hands of government, business, and mainstream economists. It showed that thinking about economics could be shifted away from establishment professionals to become more accessible and that large groups of people can focus on complex details, such as those in the proposed agreements, as they develop their analyses and strategies.

Personal involvement²

My connection with trade issues developed through feminist activism and analysis. Although it is rarely remembered now, the women's movement was central to the first anti-free trade movement of the 1980s and at that time I was vice-president of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC) and also chaired its Employment and Economy Committee.³ My initial interest in trade came in a circuitous way, originating from my work with Latin American and Portuguese Women in establishing a skills training and language centre in Toronto. Preparations for negotiating a new international General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) made it obvious that the kinds of work in manufacturing where many immigrant women were employed would be devastated by the proposed tariff reductions.⁴ I was also a member of the Board of the *Canadian Forum* and was encouraged by the board to write an editorial on GATT and women: this was my first foray into trade issues, but it became the basis for

² The writers in this issue were specifically asked to include our own involvement.

³ Some early analyses of the anti-free trade activism did include information about the significance of the women's movement. See Sylvia Bashevkin, "Free Trade and Canadian Feminism: The Case of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women," *Canadian Public Policy* 15 (1989), 363-75; Sylvia Bashevkin, *Women on the Defensive: Living through Conservative Times* (University of Chicago Press, 1998); Jeffrey Ayres, *Defying Conventional Wisdom: Political Movements and Popular Contention against North American Free Trade* (University of Toronto Press, 1998).

⁴ The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) embarked on the "Uruguay Round" of trade in 1986 and this ultimately led to the creation of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1994. The practice in those days was to re-negotiate GATT every 10 years.

developing a more thorough analysis of the impact of the upcoming trade free trade agreement on women. Because of this piece, I then was asked by Doris Anderson to write an analysis of the Macdonald Commission Report for *Policy Options*.⁵ The Macdonald Commission Report (*Royal Commission on the Economic Union and Development Prospects for Canada*, Sept 5, 1985) championed free trade and other policy changes that were a basic outline for developing a much more conservative country.⁶ Writing the analysis for *Policy Options* was no small undertaking, since the report was three volumes and 1,000 pages, but once I'd developed the analysis, my fate was sealed and I was encouraged by feminists and others to continue with the analytical work, but also with coalition building.

The first anti-free trade coalition developed in Toronto in early December 1985 at a meeting organized by Laurell Ritchie, a member of NAC's Employment and Economy Committee and a trade unionist with the Canadian Textile & Chemical Union (CTCU). It should be noted that the CTCU was part of the Confederation of Canadian Unions (CCU), a small central body consisting of Canadian unions independent from the US-based unions that were dominant in Canada at the time and that were affiliated with the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC). I chaired the meeting that took place in the NAC offices and NAC hosted the event. Its meeting room was neutral ground for a number of groups that did not normally work together including CLC and CCU unions. Invitations were issued to specific individuals from a broad range of groups; it was not an open meeting. In part this was done to ensure the nascent coalition was not dominated by partisan politics. Coalitions were a relatively new way of working together and viewed suspiciously by those who saw them as a threat to political party work. About 30 groups were represented at the first meeting and it grew to over 55 groups over the next few years.⁷ I co-chaired the organization, *The Coalition Against Free Trade* (CAFT), with John Foster from the United Church.

At the national level my first experience with the heavy hand of the CLC was in early 1986 at an economic roundtable in Ottawa, *Dialogue '86*. This was a follow-up to the National Economic Conference organized by the Prime Minister, Brian Mulroney, a year earlier that attempted to bridge the divide between business and labour on economic government policy. In *Dialogue '86*, representatives from government, business and labour, and a few other groups such as me representing NAC, and others representing religious and popular sector groups, were to discuss Canada's economic issues and future goals. To me the most important issue at hand was the upcoming free trade negotiations, and I raised this in my initial introductory remarks: "A conference like this lets us focus on goals and real, viable alternatives to those the government wants. We hope in the next few days to form stronger coalitions around the economic issues we

⁵ "Weakest to the Wall," in *Policy Options*, (December, 1985).

⁶ Duncan Cameron and Daniel Drache, very early in the debate on free trade, produced an excellent compilation of the briefs of twenty organizations to the Macdonald Commission. Duncan Cameron and Daniel Drache, eds., *The Other Macdonald Report: the consensus on Canada's future that the Macdonald Commission left out*, Lorimer, 1985.

⁷ Among the groups at the first meeting were UAW/CAW, the Toronto Labour Council, Assembly of First Nations, National Farmers Union, United Church, NAC, Writers Union, Playwrights Union, Social Planning Council, National Anti-Poverty Organization, the Canadian Environmental Law Association, Federation of Students and about 20 others.

see as particularly threatening to women in the coming year – namely free trade and more reliance on only the market as the arbiter of our future.”⁸

I was swiftly told, at the break, that the CLC was demanding that this issue not be discussed. It was stunning, and totally unexpected, although I learned sometime afterward that Dennis McDermott, who was President of the CLC and co-chair of the Roundtable, was about to be appointed ambassador to Ireland and he did not want anything to disrupt his relationship with the government. Fortunately, my approach was strongly supported by many other community-based groups, including the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops and not all trade unionists obeyed the CLC directive. By that time, I was fairly well informed (at least as far as possible at that point), and spoke about the danger this would pose to specific industries and groups of people. Leo Gerrard, newly elected director of the United Steel Workers District 6, immediately supported what I had to say, as did other groups, and as a result the whole focus for the roundtable changed into an exploration of the dangers of free trade.⁹ As will be discussed later, this change shifted the relationship between the CLC and other groups in movement building and the CLC gradually became more collaborative on anti-free trade issues.

At the national level, I was co-chair and spokesperson (along with three others) of the national coalition against free-trade, the Pro-Canada Network (PCN), later renamed the Action Canada Network (ACN).¹⁰ This was a demanding role and I worked hard travelling around the country almost every weekend, speaking at events, presenting briefs to parliamentary committees, organizing events, and writing a great deal about free trade.¹¹ The major analytical contribution I feel I made was in defining free trade as a women’s issue, and bringing the whole issue of the services sector and public services into the purview of the movement itself. My book *Free Trade and the Future of Women’s Work: Manufacturing and Service Industries* was written early in the organizing period and was the first time the services industries had received attention from those opposing free trade.¹²

⁸ Marjorie Griffin Cohen, brief submitted to Dialogue ’86 Conference on behalf of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (January 1986), p. 3.

⁹ The United Steelworkers were a US based union and its US parent had taken a position against free trade. Gerrard became a staunch anti-free trade activist.

¹⁰ The PCN was renamed Action Canada Network in 1991 in a belated attempt to encourage more collaboration with organizations in Quebec. The other initial co-chairs of the PCN were Nancy Riche vice-president of the CLC, Mel Hurtig honorary chair of the Council of Canadians (COC), and Gerald Larose, President of Confédération des syndicats nationaux (CSN), the second largest trade union central in Quebec. The staff consisted of Tony Clarke and Peter Bleyer.

¹¹ I have never explained the effort it took me at that time, but maybe now it’s ok to present the circumstances that were specifically challenging: I had recently received my Ph.D. (1985), taken a new job at Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (University of Toronto), separated from my husband, and had two children aged 11 and 15 at home who were dealing with the distress of the separation and all of the other angst of their respective ages.

¹² Marjorie Griffin Cohen, *Free Trade and the Future of Women’s Work: Manufacturing and Service Industries*, Toronto: Garamond Press, 1987.

Women's groups were a very important part of the movement, both because of the addition of new knowledge relating to women's experiences, but also because we were able to bridge the historical divide between other groups. This was the first serious action for NAC on issues of macroeconomic policy. Our free trade contribution was to deal with areas that were not the focus of the major trade unions involved, that is, unions that dealt with major manufacturing industries like the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) and United Steelworkers. It is not that these were not important to us, but most women were employed in the services sectors, and the manufacturing sectors where women were employed were not associated with the major trade unions. Once it was clear that the agreement would include the services sector there was a terrific amount of work to do. Of the seventy-two background papers commissioned by the Macdonald Commission Report, not one dealt with services. This omission is quite stunning. By 1984 the service sector was already the dominant player in Canada's economy, accounting for 65% of the GDP and 70% of the labour force.¹³ And, no studies were subsequently commissioned before the government committed to include 299 services industries in the agreement.¹⁴ Most of what was known about the impact on services was from what we did. Our initial interest was in the employment impact, but, as more was known about the agreement, we were increasingly concerned about the delivery of services and the right of US firms to provide services within Canada on a non-discriminatory basis. This would be particularly significant as some aspects of public services were privatized, something we anticipated would be one of the results of free trade.

The Extent and Significance of Activity

The very lengthy negotiating period of the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement (CUSFTA) provided many significant pressure points for the anti-free trade movement. These days, Canadian governments are particularly circumspect in their intentions with regard to foreign and trade policy, so that any decision is basically a done-deal by the time the people have a chance to respond. But this was not always the tradition and at specific points in time Canada did have a more consultative approach to public policy: sometimes, when governments were anticipating major policy changes, a 'green paper' or a 'white paper' would be prepared for debate before a government acted.¹⁵ None of this happened with free trade. Immediately after the publication of the Macdonald Commission Report, Brian Mulroney declared his government's support for free trade

¹³ Statistics Canada: https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-402-x/2006/0163/ceb0163_000-eng.htm

¹⁴ The services covered are listed in Chapter Fourteen of the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement and includes all services related to agriculture, forestry, mining, construction, distribution, insurance and real estate, commercial services, professional services (engineer, accounting, librarian training), public relations, repair and maintenance, computer, telecommunications, and tourism services, to name just a few.

¹⁵ The green paper, an official government document, would be the first document to raise the issue at a point when government had not committed itself to a specific position and it could act as the focal point for debate and discussion. After this a white paper would be issued that indicated the proposed legislation the government intended to introduce in Parliament, but it was still considered debatable by the general population.

and the major questions for us, as a movement, would be about the scope of the potential agreement and if it could be stopped.¹⁶ For a long time the anti-free trade movement was responding to an unknown document, and even during parliamentary hearings on free trade, what was being negotiated was not fully known.¹⁷

The three years of concerted activity between the release of the Macdonald Commission Report in September 1985 and the 1988 Free Trade election (November 21, 1988) began by harnessing the energy and organization of groups who had worked hard to develop an analysis for the Macdonald Commission. The main projects demanding attention were to find out what was being negotiated, to develop sophisticated analyses of the implications of free trade for all aspects of Canadian life, to communicate and provide information to people in our various organizations, and to organize and coordinate political opposition to the agreement.

The clash over this first free trade agreement was the closest Canada has come to class war in the 20th century. The lines were clearly drawn between big business and Conservative Party interests and almost everyone else.¹⁸ Extraordinary relationships formed in the anti-free trade movement: It was the first time that groups with often diverse objectives and political approaches worked together, and in the process they created many alliances that remain to this day. Groups learned from each other, and this plus the regular interactions through meetings to organize mass education and action led to greater understandings, more listening, and a new appreciation for the main concerns of others.

The comprehensiveness of the movement was its strength. Free Trade was a threat to almost everything our organizations championed. The over-arching critique understood free trade to be about empowering corporations through deregulation, privatization and massive market expansion and the rules, which focused entirely on government actions, amounted to a bill of rights for corporations that greatly limited governments' ability to control corporations. This was sometimes referred to an external constitution for the way it amounted to a globalization of Canadian laws and governance.¹⁹

At the national level, through the Pro-Canada Network (PCN), the anti-free trade movement included all of the affiliated trade unions in the CLC and CCU groups, the 585 women's organizations represented by NAC, and the social justice arms of the Anglican, United, and Catholic churches. The churches were effective both through an organization called GATT-Fly

¹⁶ In the election of 1984 Brian Mulroney and the Conservative Party ran against free trade. Four days after the publication of the Macdonald Report, Mulroney declared his support for free trade with the US.

¹⁷ In November 1987, for example, I was invited to appear before the House of Commons Standing Committee on External Affairs and International Trade. I took this opportunity to begin by talking about the shameful lack of information and detail, so that anyone's analysis could only be on what was generally thought might be in the agreement. The text was initialed and made available on December 10, 1987, signed on January 2, 1988 and implemented on January 1, 1989.

¹⁸ For a general overview of the issues see James Laxer's "At the Crossroads" produced for the National Film Board. https://www.nfb.ca/film/at_the_crossroads/

¹⁹ See Stephen Clarkson, *Canada's Secret Constitution*, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, October 2002. For a

and the Conference of Catholic Bishops.²⁰ Other major actors were farmers' groups throughout Canada and Quebec, anti-poverty organizations, immigrant groups, peace organizations, environmental groups and indigenous people represented through the Assembly of First Nations, Native Council of Canada, and the Inuit Committee on National Issues.²¹ Social services groups became active against free trade specifically with regard to childcare, housing, education, and health care. The addition of arts and cultural organizations added a powerful, and until then, a seldom experienced dimension to this kind of political action, and we were even joined by a small business group, Business Council for Fair Trade, in some of our work. Also, a national organization, the Council of Canadians (COC), began in 1985 and developed with country-wide chapters to specifically confront free trade. Over time it became very large and effective in its activities, first under Mel Hurtig, then with Maude Barlow as chair.²²

The Pro-Canada Network formally convened in Ottawa in March 1987. Coalitions in all provinces belonged, as did specific organizations who worked together on providing information and organizing events. [See Appendix A for list of organizations belonging to PCN at the outset for an idea of its breadth]. PCN played a significant role in organizing research and coordinating national activities, while other groups throughout the country carried out their actions independently. Most of the work occurred on a volunteer basis with very minimal staff, if there was any at all.²³

The activities to engage the public varied across the country. My community involvement, aside from the national level and the connections I made with other groups through speaking at their events throughout the country, was with the Coalition Against Free Trade (CAFT) in Toronto, so I will give some idea of the kinds of things that were organized there to inform people and to encourage opposition to the agreement.

The participation of the arts community had a big impact on the kinds of events that occurred. One of the most thrilling was a large CAFT-sponsored public event, the *Anti Free Trade Review*, at a full-house in Massey Hall in March 1986, a venue that holds 3,000 people. The arts community took a lead in organizing it and the intentions were clear -- they wanted the evening to be fun and uplifting.²⁴ To that end they enlisted the support of well-known entertainers and limited the speaking time of 'the politicians' to two minutes each. The 'politicos' included Walter Gordon, Ursula Franklin, Monique Simard, David Suzuki, Bob White, Bishop Remi De Roo,

²⁰ John Dillon from GATT-FLY and Bishop Remi De Roo were particularly important for their analyses and actions within the coalition.

²¹ Michelle Swenarchuk, Executive Director of the Canadian Environmental Law Association was crucial for an analysis of the environmental implications and for bringing the environmental movement into the coalition.

²² Laurie Edwards initiated the first Toronto COC chapter and was a significant participant in the anti-free trade movement there. John Trent and Ken Wardroper served as national chairs of COC between Hurtig and Barlow

²³ In Toronto CAFT had one staff person, Scott Sinclair, for most of the period. He later became Canada's main source of information on international trade agreements through his work with the CCPA.

²⁴ Rick Salutin, Susan Crean, Laurie Edwards, and Susan Feldman brilliantly cajoled many, many others to help with organization and production.

Carmencita Hernandez, Wayne Easter, and others including me. This was the first time I'd ever spoken to such a huge audience. Having Roger Abbott and Don Ferguson of the Royal Canadian Air Farce MC the evening, along with performances by Sylvia Tyson, Eric Peterson, Erika Ritter, Lillian Allen, Nancy White, and other performers made for a raucous and energizing event. At the door, a 4- page broadsheet about free trade was handed to all who attended. The evening was such a success that another similar event was held at Massey Hall the following year, with the highlight being the Clichettes who wore one big stretchy dress, outsized wigs and sang "You Don't Own Me."

Two other arts-based actions in Toronto significantly added to the national campaign. One was the logo, designed by Michael Cavanaugh: it was brilliant – part of a US flag, with a red maple leaf as one of the stars and "no, eh." on the bottom. It was used on buttons, tee shirts, and pamphlets throughout the country and was the one big money-maker for our Toronto group. The other important visual contribution was the comic book, *What's the Big Deal?* that came out just before the 1988 election. This was written by journalist Rick Salutin with drawings by Montreal cartoonist Terry Mosher (Aislin) and explained, in a dialogue, some of the major issues of the Agreement. It was distributed through local newspapers in major areas of the country, including in French in Quebec. The money for this came from trade unions mostly, and from fundraising spearheaded by Margaret Atwood and Adrienne Clarkson.²⁵ As throughout CAFT activities, most people involved donated their labour.



²⁵ Rick Salutin, *Waiting for Democracy: A Citizen's Journal*, Viking, 1989.

At the national level the actions focused on lobbying of political parties, appearing before Parliamentary committees, and finding ways to get information about the contents of the Agreement. The government's communications strategy at the outset was to keep Canadians as ignorant as possible. A leaked government document that made it into the *Toronto Star* (Sept. 20, 1985) was detailed in how education about free trade was not the objective and that "benign neglect from a majority of Canadians may be the realistic outcome of a well executed communications programs."²⁶ The government realized that the more people knew, the less they were going to like it. Finding out the details of negotiations was a major hurdle and during the last year, for a considerable period of time, the media lost interest and stopped reporting about it, under the impression that it basically was not going to happen. We sensed this was a ruse, so a group from PCN went to Washington in July 1987 to talk to people in Congress and in the trade union movement. The Americans in government, unlike their Canadian counterparts, were open and willing to talk about the negotiations and what they still wanted to see happen. A few sticky issues remained, but it was clear there was going to be an agreement. The trade unions concurred and said there was no one in opposition to talk to in Congress and those few who appeared to be against it were bargaining for further advantages. Everyone especially liked the trade and investment provisions that had never been a part of a trade agreement in the past.

Linda McQuaig, at the *Globe and Mail*, was briefed about our findings from the visit and the story made the front page. Throughout the whole anti-free trade campaign, communications were a challenge. It was well before the internet could so quickly connect and inform people, with the *Toronto Star* being about the only major newspaper in the country willing to provide up-to-date information. This meant communicating free trade issues to Canadians was a major part of our work. This was done both by central organizations, but also by local groups. The PCN regularly produced the *Pro-Canada Dossier* and member groups created their own information pamphlets, particularly the major trade unions, like CAW, Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC), United Steelworkers, CLC, CCU and other large organizations like NAC, COC and the church groups. The efforts of smaller local groups were enormous, and they worked hard to define their special interests relating to trade, but also to inform their members. Mostly it was done through local events and distribution of pamphlets. One small pamphlet is illustrative, and particularly poignant: *Work Plans for Aboriginal-Canadian Effort to Oppose Free Trade* (Aug 5, 1988) deals with issues related to an *Express to Oppose Free Trade* march to Ottawa planned for September. The pamphlet is an organizing tool with directions, explaining the short-term goals, but it also raises the issue of what will happen after the election: "All the groups who participate in the *Express to Oppose Free Trade* will carry on with their own goal and objectives. Hopefully, however, the *Express* will serve as a foundation for a future

²⁶ Prime Minister's Office, "Communications Strategy for Canada-U.S. Bilateral Trade Initiative," in Duncan Cameron, ed., *The Free Trade Papers*, James Lorimer, 1986, p 8.

relationship between the aboriginal people and the citizens of Canada, and that it would not be the end of our association to build a better Canada together”.²⁷

It is hard to convey the tremendous amount of activity occurring throughout the country. The accounts of the actions against free trade that so far have been published rarely acknowledge the extent of mobilization outside Toronto and Ottawa. The diverse activities were not directed from the centre by the PCN, but were organized by local groups and trade unions across the country. The comprehensiveness of the agreement meant that virtually every sector and region could be affected in some way and, as groups learned more about the implications, they became more alarmed. They also knew what type of information and action would work in their own areas and understood the strategic importance of solidarity.

Research: All Economists Agree

The strength and sophistication of the research on the anti-free trade side made the crucial difference in the effectiveness of the movement: we knew what we were talking about. Lloyd Axworthy, a Liberal MP, noted the significance of this:

the PCN was very useful – their representatives could marshal arguments, provide information, and present sectoral analysis on a deal that was so big and so comprehensive that we just did not have the resources to cover [it]. And we could also use the threat of the PCN’s electoral base – as a leverage against other members of the caucus – that it might turn on us if we didn’t use their information and listen to what they had to say.²⁸

“All Economists Agree” was the collective government and mainstream media mantra on free trade and it genuinely did reflect traditional liberal economic theory that showed free trade would be best for everyone, in all countries, all the time. For example, in an effort to counter the feminist movement’s massive anti-free trade involvement Status of Women Canada, a federal government organization, published a document on free trade that began with: “One of the very few things that economists agree upon is that free trade improves economic welfare.”²⁹ However all economists did NOT agree. A relatively small group of economists and other academics on the left quickly organized to confront mainstream economists with a serious research regime that rolled out an impressive amount of material in a relatively short time. At the national level research

²⁷ The groups listed in the pamphlet are Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs, Native Council of Canada, National Association of Friendship Centres, Native Women’s Association of Canada, Odawa Native Friendship Centre, Inuit Tapirisat of Canada, Assembly of First Nations.

²⁸ Ayres, pp. 84-85

²⁹ Canada, Status of Women Canada, *International Trade Policy: A Primer*, 1988.

was coordinated by Duncan Cameron, who chaired the PCN research committee, and who edited several collections that published the development of knowledge over the years.³⁰

The participation of progressive economists and other academics in the free trade debate is probably one of the finest hours for showing how something as complex as an international trade agreement and its implications could be worked on collectively by men and women, all across the country. We economists did not know all at once what the impact would be, nor did we immediately grasp the breadth of the implications for all aspects of the economy. Some of us worked individually, others worked together in publishing and distributing analyses within organizations, but the main point was that we learned from each other. This education involved not only academics but most decidedly people close to where the impacts would be noticed – in trade unions, among community-based groups, and in activist groups like NAC. Normally, research on the possible impacts on various aspects of the Canadian economy and its social structures would be undertaken by those specifically trained to do this kind of work – the academics. But there was no way that the vast amount of information for each sector could be evaluated without the resources and insights provided by activist groups. These groups and individuals used the basic analyses of free trade provided by the academics and applied it specifically to their own areas. Farmers, teachers, nurses, social workers and even some business owners wrote or provided information that enabled a broad and surprisingly deep analysis of the probable impacts of free trade, and how institutions that had been designed to protect people from the free working of the market mechanism would be undermined.

Ultimately the biggest collective understanding of the free trade agreement was that it would move Canada toward the type of economic system the US wanted, one that would subject most government decisions to meeting international market objectives of corporations. This in turn would mean that harmonizing the economy would mean harmonizing the social aspects of peoples' lives as well. Through the anti-free trade movement, people were intimately involved in the debate about the future of the nation and the role of the public in that future.

Politics of working together

Over time groups learned to adapt to coalition politics and to understand the issues of others. As a feminist, representing a feminist organization, it had to be explicit at the outset that we were not bringing the women's movement into a coalition to just say that women were there too. Our needs and analyses needed to be an integral part of the campaign, something that was not fully comprehended by some other organizations at the outset. The CLC and some other large trade unions were used to running things whenever they joined coalitions: the thinking was that

³⁰ These were *The Free Trade Papers*, Lorimer 1986; *The Free Trade Deal*, Lorimer 1988; *The Facts on Free Trade* (with Ed Finn and John Calvert) Lorimer 1988; and a post-free trade publication with Mel Watkins and Daniel Drache, *Canada Under Free Trade*, Lorimer 1993. At that time Duncan Cameron was a professor of Political Science at Ottawa University, CCPA President and the editor of the Canadian Forum.

because they were paying the bills (the trade unions were among the few groups who had any money) they got to say what would happen, who would do it, and what types of political risks would be taken. Not all trade unions approached coalitions this way, but some of the biggest did, and certainly that was the CLC approach at the outset. But to the great credit of the progressive activists within the trade union movement, this attitude changed and they began to recognize that while some groups could not contribute money, they had equally valuable ways to support a coalition.

Some groups had struggles within their own organizations as well, although over time these too became minimal. Within NAC some skepticism existed at the outset about how significant the impact of free trade would be, aside from its impact on manufacturing. This meant I had hard work to do to research and analyze not only labour issues in the services sectors, but also the possible implications for the delivery of social services. At the same time, some within NAC felt that the organization needed to focus its actions not on large economic issues, but more on the things particularly problematic for women that would not be the subject for action from any other groups. Fortunately, at the annual meeting in Ottawa in 1987, NAC passed a resolution fully endorsing the anti-free trade initiative. This was the beginning of NAC focusing more on analyses and activities that dealt with systemic issues and macro-economic policy, in addition to its more familiar roles of dealing with discriminatory action and needed programs to ensure equality.³¹

Like other large groups, the people associated with the CLC spanned a wide spectrum of ideas about political action. According to Tony Clarke, who came from the Conference of Catholic Bishops to work as the head of a two-person staff at the PCN, Dialogue '86 was a turning point because groups stood up to the CLC: "Popular sector groups gave a signal that things would not be able to operate along established models – that new models would have to be created for working in coalition politics in the future."³² Fortunately, there were enough progressive forces within the trade union movement that the changes happened quickly. In Toronto, CAFT's work with trade unions was successful from the outset. The CAW had just separated to become independent from the US based United Auto Workers, and they put considerable resources to support the anti-free trade movement. So did the Steelworkers, and the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL). All of these CLC unions worked closely with people from the CCU, who were the initial driving force in the coalition. While there may have been some suspicions at the outset, the work on activities quickly dispelled any tensions that might have existed. Ultimately the dynamism of the coalition relied heavily on connections and friendships that had been built up over the years. The significance of the trust derived from friendships through previous actions and those that developed through free trade activities should not be underestimated in assessing the effectiveness of the movement and its visibility.

³¹ The NAC AGM vote was a turning point for many member organizations who had shied away from any issue not easily identified as a "woman's issue." The commitment to the anti-free trade initiative also affected individual women associated with NAC who were active in political parties. For both organizations and individuals, a new feminist independence emerged.

³² Ayres, p. 58.

The most complicated politics of political cohesion was working with the opposition political parties. The NDP seriously misjudged the situation and saw any anti-free trade action as a support for the Liberal Party. When the election date was announced the leader of the NDP, Ed Broadbent, did not even mention free trade as an issue in his first media reaction. Part of the suspicions of the anti-free trade movement probably arose from the relatively closed Ottawa bubble, where the Ottawa-based Council of Canadians, at least at the outset, had ties to the Liberal Party. At that time, both Mel Hurtig and Maude Barlow were perceived as being Liberals and both relied heavily on nationalist rhetoric, although this changed over time.³³ For some unexplained reason, the NDP did not understand the seriousness or even the degree of nation-wide support for anti-free trade activities and were not inclined to trust their closest allies. Most of the anti-free trade activists (other than those in COC) were NDP supporters or held political positions that were further to the left, but the NDP wanted to run on the leader's reputation, rather than the issue on everyone's mind. At no other time in living memory had an election focused on a single issue such as free trade, yet the NDP refused to make it their priority.

In contrast, the leader of the Liberal Party, John Turner, was a staunch opponent of the free trade agreement. The extraordinary part was that he actually read the agreement and knew the issues in the way only policy nerds tend to do. It was a true quandary for those who really wanted the NDP to win. The NDP was not usually accessible, although whenever we had information from our US contacts, we would first give it to the NDP, but then it would go nowhere (we were hoping they would give it to the media), so ultimately we had no alternative but to give it to the Liberals too.³⁴ It is also clear now, as a result of a great deal of rehashing of the politics, that there was a serious struggle within the Liberal Party and Turner had a huge problem with internal dissent about his position on free trade. We did not know that at the time. The NDP was against the agreement, but basically let the Liberals take the lead.

Failure

The 1988 election was unique in that it was about a single issue, something that had not occurred in living memory. Sides on free trade were clearly drawn and, going into the election, the polls showed that the majority of people opposed free trade, although electoral politics do not usually reflect majority opinions, as occurred here. Particularly noteworthy was the gender gap: By October 1988, 53% of males favoured free trade, but only 33% of females did.³⁵

³³ Many of us in CAFT were also suspicious of the COC's positions at the outset, but over time the COC shifted its analyses and became much more highly critical of liberal doctrine. Mel Hurtig had left the Liberal Party in the late 1960s although tried to run as a Liberal in the anti-free trade election but did not win the nomination. In 1988 Maude Barlow also tried to win a Liberal nomination (in Ottawa Central), but lost. Subsequently she focused on environmental issues and disavowed her ties to the Liberal Party.

³⁴ Stephen Langdon, the NDP trade critic, was sympathetic to the anti-free trade movement but it appeared that his was not the dominant voice within the party on how to deal with the movement.

³⁵ Bashevkin, "Free Trade and Canadian Feminism," p. 369.

On election night I had invited folks from CAFT to my house to watch the returns on TV, which in those days dribbled in from across the country, so it could be a long evening of celebration or commiseration. Subsequent to issuing the invitation, I was asked by a radio station to comment on the election returns, along with right-wing economist John Crispo, so I spent the night watching and trying to comment on the dismal results and frequently calling friends at my house on advice for what to say. The win for the Conservatives in Quebec could be expected. During the campaign some very important sectors and groups in Quebec were against free trade, and polls on free trade showed a close race with 47% in favour, 42% opposed and 11% undecided. But the government was in favour of it, and Brian Mulroney, the leader of the Conservatives was from Quebec. In any case, Quebec was not the reason the election was lost – it was Ontario. This was particularly distressing because a one percent difference in the Ontario vote would have changed the outcome. And the polls going into the election showed that 60% opposed the agreement.³⁶ The problem was that, while Liberal Premier, David Peterson, was resolutely against free trade, he was strangely silent during the election period and even left the country in the last few weeks. The NDP leader of the opposition, Bob Rae, also was officially against the agreement, but like the federal NDP, he sensed that any discussion of free trade would boost the Ontario Liberals so he avoided it.

The major problem, as we understood all along, was the effect of the tremendous disparity in the money and access to the media between the anti-free trade movement and those championing free trade – the corporate sector and the government. After the election there were no recriminations among the anti-free trade groups, as sometimes happens when something clearly went wrong. The effort was massive and extensive, but ultimately during the election, we had to rely on political parties and their own agendas, and the unique situation in Quebec. Quebec's nationalism meant that almost anyone from that province who was running as Prime Minister would be supported. But for us, the most significant was the serious miscalculations of the NDP, its suspicion of coalitions, and only a grudging willingness to work with them.

Critics from the left, primarily from those who did not participate in the anti-free trade movement, had a variety of complaints: the movement was too nationalistic, it did not sufficiently understand the strength of those supporting free trade, and that it naively believed that the state in Canada had been a reliable defender of economic independence and social justice. Some others felt it needed a bigger vision for Canada and should have focused on how it wanted Canada to evolve, rather than what it was against.

Most of the activists who objected to the free trade agreements (CUSFTA, then NAFTA) were not isolationists or protectionists, or particularly nationalistic. At least they did not adhere to nationalism in the traditional sense of 'my country, right or wrong,' nor did they believe they were supporting a state structure that met their needs. Most were serious critics of the Canadian establishment. Yet, somehow confronting the might of the US and the Canadian establishment was construed by some critics as an overtly nationalistic action. Others criticized the movement for being naive in the understanding of the strength of their opposition, or for "presenting a

³⁶ Ayres, p. 101.

mythologized portrait of the Canadian state as if it had always been a staunch defender of economic independence and social justice.”³⁷ No one I knew in the anti-free trade movement had any illusions about the state as an ally in any of their struggles, or that we were not up against true power. One characteristic of all of the groups was their constant confrontation with the might of state, and its corporate backers. Each time something was won, through political pressure, it was not because the state was progressive, but because people forced change. Women’s groups, trade unions, poverty groups, indigenous peoples, and virtually all activists in the anti-free trade movement understood that the state only supported them when forced to do so by effective political action.

Anti-free trade activists objected to the agreement primarily because of its scope: it cast a huge net, reaching far beyond an agreement that was simply about trade. People were not objecting so much to the reduction of tariffs and genuine trade barriers as they were objecting to the changes that would be required in the economic and social institutions of the country, changes that would lead to a deterioration in the quality of life. It was understood implicitly that the rules would constrain governments in ways that would make struggles that were already difficult, even more problematic: CUFTA would serve as the primary context for too broad a range of government decisions.

Postscript and The Future

After CUSFTA:

As the 1988 election came closer it was clear CUSFTA would be expanded relatively rapidly to include Mexico. The government strongly denied this, but the preparations for NAFTA were underway. Many of the leaders of the anti-free trade movement continued with their various activities, including providing a different type of analysis that was essential to understand the effects of including a very much poorer country. One of the most significant achievements at this time was the connection with anti-NAFTA activists in Mexico. This was markedly different from the relationship with the potential allies in the US, which were marginal throughout the CUSFTA debate. The American trade unionists, feminist and others did not consider CUSFTA a major threat to their jobs or other interests, although this did change when NAFTA was being negotiated.

The Canadian debates and differences of opinion on free trade were closely watched in Mexico as organizations there tried to work out their own interests in the proposed NAFTA. At one point in October 1990, representatives from both the pro and anti-free trade side in Canada were invited to a conference in Mexico City to replicate the debates we had had earlier in Canada. One of the Mexican political parties paid our way, but the Mexican economist who was involved in the invitations for the Canadians against free trade, Teresina Gutierrez-Hace, ensured that after this conference we would meet with independent trade unionists and other activists on the left for

³⁷ Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, *The Making of Global Capitalism: The Political Economy of American Empire*, Verso 2012, p. 227.

another few days at a separate conference. This strengthened the ties with Mexicans and continued through research and political initiatives that exist to this day.

After NAFTA was signed, the anti-free trade movement no longer performed as a movement, although the research to examine Canada's trade interests continued. One of the most important legacies of this was the confrontation over the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) initiative to institute an international Multinational Agreement on Investment (MAI). The negotiations for this occurred between 1995 and 1998 and through a draft agreement acquired by Tony Clarke, who at that time chaired the COC, it showed the intent was to provide a supra-national agreement that would give unconditional rights to investors, rights that would supersede national laws. The Canadian experience and knowledge about free trade was crucial in stopping this agreement by providing a very quick analysis and organizing an international coalition against it. This succeeded in getting the French government on side. It was the one trade agreement where protests that originated in Canada were successful in preventing the agreement from proceeding.

Free trade agreements expanded rapidly after CUSFTA. Some are bi-lateral agreements and others are more comprehensive and multi-lateral, such as those through the World Trade Organization (WTO)³⁸ The main function of these agreements is to expand markets, and after all of these years there is still not an international mechanism to control market behavior: this is still left to individual nations and easily circumvented with free trade rules. The trade agreements are about what states cannot do, and they do not govern what other international actors do. One continuing legacy of the anti-free trade movement is the monitoring and analysis of these agreements, primarily through the work of Scott Sinclair at the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

The Future:

The rights granted to international corporations through free trade agreements continue to hamper progress on many crucial issues. Two that are most visible currently relate to issues arising from Covid-19 and the on-going problem of dealing with climate change. Attempts by governments to promote greater self-sufficiency within nations, something that seems important (particularly with regard to the critical medical and food supplies and border restrictions), will come up against free trade rules as soon as a more normal economic situation returns.

Even more critical is the stark contrast between the kind of economy that would be necessary to seriously combat climate change and the main point of free trade. Free trade is inherently in conflict with any market-controlling activities that will be necessary to seriously deal with climate change. Free Trade agreements are fundamentally about creating bigger and bigger markets, more consumption, and encouraging export-led growth regimes as the primary economic model in all countries. Any attempt to reduce the pollution related to production and trade would be inconsistent with the intent of the agreements.

³⁸ By September 2019 Canada had 31 free trade agreements in various stages of negotiations and 14 that were in force.

Developing an international opposition to increased trade as the economic direction for the future seems distant at the moment, but perhaps the health and climate crises will force serious rethinking about international economic structures.

Conclusions

The 1988 election was unique because it was public debate about an issue. The focus on free trade did not happen because the political parties orchestrated it, but because people demanded it. All the might and money of the corporate sector and governments did not prevent them from being forced to respond to the issues related to free trade – something they specifically wanted to avoid.

The coalitions surprised even themselves as the movement gathered steam and it drew out the talents, resourcefulness and energy of those who cared about the future and the ability of people to be able to have a say that future. The anti-free trade movement did not over-romanticize the state – it understood that the state's main roll in Canada is to support capital and, only when there is overwhelming pressure from the public, does any progressive change occur. This was the history of any progress at almost every turn, and rather than fearing the withering of the state, the anti-free trade groups feared a strengthened state, through free trade, with the corporate sector as its main client. This is why opposing free trade mattered so much: its market-generating and supporting aspects would undermine the existing avenues for wringing concessions for laws and programs that people needed.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CAN	Action Canada Network
CAFT	Coalition Against Free Trade
CAW	Canadian Auto Workers
CTCU	Canadian Textile and Chemical Union
CCU	Confederation of Canadian Unions
CLC	Canadian Labour Congress
COC	Council of Canadians
CUPE	Canadian Union of Public Employees
CUSFTA	Canada-US Free Trade Agreement
GATT	General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade
MAI	Multilateral Agreement on Investment
NAC	National Action Committee on the Status of Women
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
OFL	Ontario Federation of Labour
PCN	Pro-Canada Network
PSAC	Public Service Alliance of Canada
WTO	World Trade Organization

Appendix

National Organizations belonging to the Pro Canada Network included:

Association of Canadian Television and Radio Artists (ACTRA)
Assembly of First Nations (AFN)
Business Council for Fair Trade (BCFT)
Canadian Auto Workers (CAW)
Canadian Conference of the Arts (CCA)
Canadian Environmental Law Association (CELA)
Canadian Labour Congress (CLC)
Canadian Peace Pledge Campaign
Canadian Teachers' Federation
Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW)
Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE)
The Centrale de l'enseignement du Québec (CEQ)
Confederation of Canadian Unions (CCU)
Confédération des syndicats nationaux (CSN)
Council of Canadians (COC)
Customs Excise Union, Public Service Alliance of Canada
Friends of the Earth
GATT-FLY (social justice project of Canadian churches)
National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC)
National Anti-Poverty Organization (NAPO)
National Farmers' Union
One Voice (Senior Citizens)
National Federation of Nurses Unions (NFNU)
Union des producteurs agricoles (UPA)

Regional Coalitions:

BC Coalition Against Free Trade
Saskatchewan Coalition for Social Justice
Alberta PCN
Manitoba Coalition Against Free Trade
Manitoba PCN
Coalition Against Free Trade, Ontario
Ottawa Coalition for an Independent Economy
Centrale d'enseignement du Québec (CEQ)

Coalition quebecoise d'opposition au libre-échange (CQOL) comprised of the three large labour centrals, FTQ, CSN, and CEQ as well as the Union des producteurs agricoles (UPA)

Metro Halifax Coalition Against Free Trade

R.C. Social Action Committee, New Brunswick

P.E.I. PCN

P.E.I. Coalition Against Free Trade

R.C. Social Action, PEI

Newfoundland Coalition for Equality