On 25 April 2012, a small grassroots group of (mostly) young women donned outfits inspired by Margaret Atwood’s 1985 novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, and went to Parliament Hill for a little “cosplay” to protest Motion 312—Conservative MP Stephen Woodworth’s attempt to reopen the abortion debate by proposing that a Parliamentary committee be established to revisit the question of fetal personhood. We called ourselves the Radical Handmaids.

In addition to our red dresses and white “flying nun” hats or gauzy red veils, à la Volker Schlöndorff’s 1990 film adaptation of Atwood’s book, we carried a fabric-covered plywood “wall” to which we pinned many colourful knitted wombs and vulvas. These had been knitted by groups of people united under a Facebook page titled “Womb Swarm Parliament: Textile Artists United Against Motion M-312” and sent to the Handmaids (care of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers) from all over the country. The reasoning behind these multicoloured
Figure 1. The Radical Handmaids arrive on Parliament Hill to protest Motion 312. Photograph: Garth Gullekson, Darlington Mediaworks.
woolly parts was that if politicians wanted to control uteruses so badly, they should have “a womb of their own” to lord it over so that they could leave ours alone. The group’s stated goal was to collect enough uteruses and vulvas to send one to each MP in Parliament. Had we kept going with our call beyond the protest, we would certainly have succeeded.

It was a moving experience to see these knitted works of activism come in. Some arrived with accompanying cards and little notes to the Handmaids. One, from “The Rhizome Kids” in Vancouver, read:

To the Radical Handmaids,
Thank you so much for representing us in Ottawa and taking our crafts to the streets!! You all rock! Enjoy the protest and the wombs and vulvas.

Another read:

Hello,
Here are the 2 wombs I managed to complete. I haven’t stuffed them so they fit in an envelope. I’m sorry there isn’t more, it’s a little difficult with my 4-month-old. If we plan on sending more past the beginning of the debate, please let me know and I’ll try to send more.

Our protest took place the day before the opening debate on Woodworth’s Motion 312, on 26 April 2012. The motion was supposed to return to the House of Commons in June but was postponed until 21 September, with the vote taking place on 26 September. As expected, the motion did not pass, but ninety-one MPs—four Liberals and the rest Conservatives—voted in favour of reopening the abortion debate, including the minister responsible for the Status of Women, Rona Ambrose (who, after the election of the Trudeau-led Liberals in October 2015, became the interim leader of the Conservative Party). Woodworth’s initiative has not been, nor will it be, the only attempt to recriminalize abortion in Canada. In May 2012, another Conservative MP, Maurice Vellacott, tried to appropriate the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia to suggest, bizarrely, that abortion bullies the fetus in the womb.¹

It’s tempting to regard these anti-choice proposals as little more than quaint flare-ups of an outmoded and marginal ideology. Eyebrows may be raised at the suggestion that campaigns against bullying should extend to fetuses, but no matter what’s happening south of the border, in Canada, a perception endures that the War on Women is only a silly skirmish—
Figure 2. Wombs of their own for members of Parliament. Photograph: Garth Gullekson, Darlington Mediaworks.
Figure 3. Knitted works of activism from all across the country.
Photograph: Radical Handmaids.
interesting to observe or debate but unlikely to have any real consequences for women’s lives, even with a Conservative federal government in power. Therefore, the Radical Handmaids were met with shrugs and why-bothers from some quarters. Even Margaret Atwood herself said in 2011, prior to the Conservatives’ return as a majority, that a debate on abortion ought to be had, albeit located within its proper context:

Harper says he will not allow a debate on abortion. But he should allow it. All aspects of this troublesome question—and it has been troublesome throughout history, as there are no lovely answers—should be thoroughly discussed. There should be clarity on Harper’s attitude to women and children and their well-being. Let them die of malnutrition? Supply adequate diet, public support if there’s no income, protection from rape and enforced prostitution, improved adoption procedures, education, better hospitals and access to drugs, new orphanages, enforced chastity, unwillingly pregnant women locked up in mega-jails, payment per baby if baby-making is service provided to the state, pace Napoleon? What’s it to be? Spit it out. Let us know what may be coming soon to a neighbourhood near us.²

Of course—and Atwood’s intention was undoubtedly to highlight this dismal reality—those whose bodies and lives are particularly vulnerable to such debates, fertile women, are condemned to watch from the sidelines.

As Atwood makes clear, the problem with the view that such a debate is harmless is its dislocation from the context in which it needs to be firmly situated—the Harper Conservatives’ relentless erosion of hard-won feminist gains since their first rise to power as a minority in 2006. Looked at in this way, the attacks on reproductive rights, however silly, become not marginal but central to the steady pattern of an anti-feminist backlash. Too often, abortion rights are isolated from their intrinsic connection with the other rights that feminists have fought for. And yet those rights—including access to education, affordable child care, freedom from stifling poverty, and the ability to leave abusive partners, to name only a few—are integral to women’s ability to choose whether, when, and with whom they will have children.

We know that something is wrong with debating fetal personhood, as M-312 would have had us do, as if the woman carrying the fetus has no personhood of her own. Since 2006, feminist organizations have been incessantly battered by policies that treat women as “baby-makers,” as the
irrepressible feminist journalist Antonia Zerbisias puts it, without even the traditional respect for that role that is supposed to be its partial reward.³

Take, for example, child care—or the lack of it. We live in a society that richly rewards financial “experts” who swindle and bankrupt its citizens but that deems it perfectly acceptable to pay its child care workers peanuts. The lack of concern for children and the women who do most of the caregiving work is blatant. One of the first acts of the newly elected Conservative government in 2006 was to kill provincial child care agreements that would have led to the creation of a universal child care program, implementing instead a monthly taxable $100 handout that does nothing to address the lack of child care spaces so desperately needed by working parents.⁴ In Canada, the percentage of women aged fifteen and over who participate in the workforce increased from 45.7 percent in 1976 to 61.8 percent in 2005. In 2001, 69.8 percent of women with children at home (regardless of age) and 65.8 percent of women with children under two years of age participated in the labour force.⁵ Feminists have been struggling for decades to get this through to people, which is why it was so painful to see the
Conservatives—at the time of M-312 still a minority—block our baby steps toward a national child care program that would have been Canada’s first universal social program since the achievement of health care.

Anti-choicers have very little to say on the subject of child care. At the March 4 Life on 9 May 2012, for which tax-subsidized Catholic school boards sent busloads of kids to Parliament Hill, one sign held by a high school student suggested that forced pregnancies were rightful punishments for women who were supposed to have “kept your legs shut,” conveying a demeaning stereotype of promiscuous young women and ignoring the fact that many married women with children also get abortions.

One might suppose that those professing concern for the fetus would support good-quality, accessible, universal child care, but the reverse seems to hold true—the idea that a child is punishment for the mother forces her to drop out of the workforce altogether or, more commonly, in these days of struggling working parents, accept precarious or inferior working conditions and scramble for whatever child care she can find. Such conditions are hardly the best for children to grow up in, but for those who are anti-choice, concern for children appears to evaporate once they are no longer in utero. In a press release issued just prior to our day of protest, we tried to make this connection to affordable child care very clear in our closing comment: “Affordable daycare for working parents isn’t on the agenda,” we wrote. “Apparently you have to be a fetus to matter to a Conservative.” To nobody’s surprise, none of the many mainstream media covering our protest made such a connection.

One goal of our event was to have a protest that was not the officious and boring type of rally so often seen in Ottawa. We wanted a funky, cheeky third-wave feminist protest that would respect the grassroots nature of our group and its roots in cultural production, as well as the DIY spirit of the Womb Swarm. Many of us in the group were veterans of social justice and reproductive rights activism and did not want to simply reproduce the same old hierarchies of tub-thumping speakers and yelling crowds. At the same time, a certain degree of scripting was necessary for us to have an organized event. Representatives of the Canadian Labour Congress and political parties, particularly the NDP, showed up to support us, which we appreciated, and they all wanted to speak at our rally.

One of the ways in which we accommodated our allies while countering the tendency to fall into the familiar patterns of speaker hierarchies was to
Figure 5. Anti-bullying? March 4 Lifers engage in verbal assaults on women. Photograph: Jordan Reid.

Figure 6. Fighting not only for women’s reproductive rights but for social justice. Photograph: Garth Gullekson, Darlington Mediaworks.
form circles wherever possible. We held hands around the Centennial Flame, and we closed the event by fanning out on the lawns of the Hill in a large circle and then coming together while chanting slogans. In this way, we literally put our bodies “out there” to dramatize our solidarity and unity. With the help of some protesters from Montréal who regaled us with funny parodies of pop song medleys—“You Can’t Touch This” being one favourite—we ended our protest in a positive and upbeat spirit, vowing to continue our fight.

Since then, the Radical Handmaids have shown up at anti-abortion events such as the annual March 4 Life and the New Abortion Caravan, which appropriated feminist herstory for a drive across Canada in trucks bearing graphic oversized photos of dismembered fetuses. In Ottawa, Handmaids participated in the protest against the Caravan organized by the Canadian Auto Workers and held a public education awareness day in Byward Market. Radical Handmaids in Vancouver and other parts of the country are also getting active. Despite the election of a new, pro-choice government in 2015, we know the struggle is not over.
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Notes