

herizons

FALL 2019 | VOLUME 33 NO. 3

news

6(1)a GOES ALL THE WAY! 6

by Melodie McCullough

CANADA PLEDGES MILLIONS TO AID WOMEN GLOBALLY 8

by Penney Kome

WOMEN DELIVER ON EFFORTS TO END FGM 9

by Lucas Aykroyd

INDIA'S #METOO MOVEMENT TAKES HOLD 11

by Deepa Kandaswamy

ABORTION DOULAS REACH OUT 12

by Elizabeth Whitten



Photo: Nik K. Gehl

features

VIVEK SHRAYA 14

Transforming Transphobia

Vivek Shraya, who came out as trans in 2016, said that her Hindu community helped nurture her gender non-conformity in the 1980s. However, her journey has not been an easy one. Shraya received hate mail, including death threats in 2017, and responded by creating a comic book called *Death Threat* with visual artist Ness Lee.

by Megan Butcher

LIBBY DAVIES 18

From the Grassroots to the Commons

Libby Davies, Canada's first out-lesbian MP, was, for six terms, a passionate advocate for the underprivileged, including those she served as MP for Vancouver East, a constituency that includes Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Her new memoir, *Outside In*, is a fascinating telling of her time in office.

by Cindy Filipenko

ANDREA DWORKIN 22

The Phoenix Rises

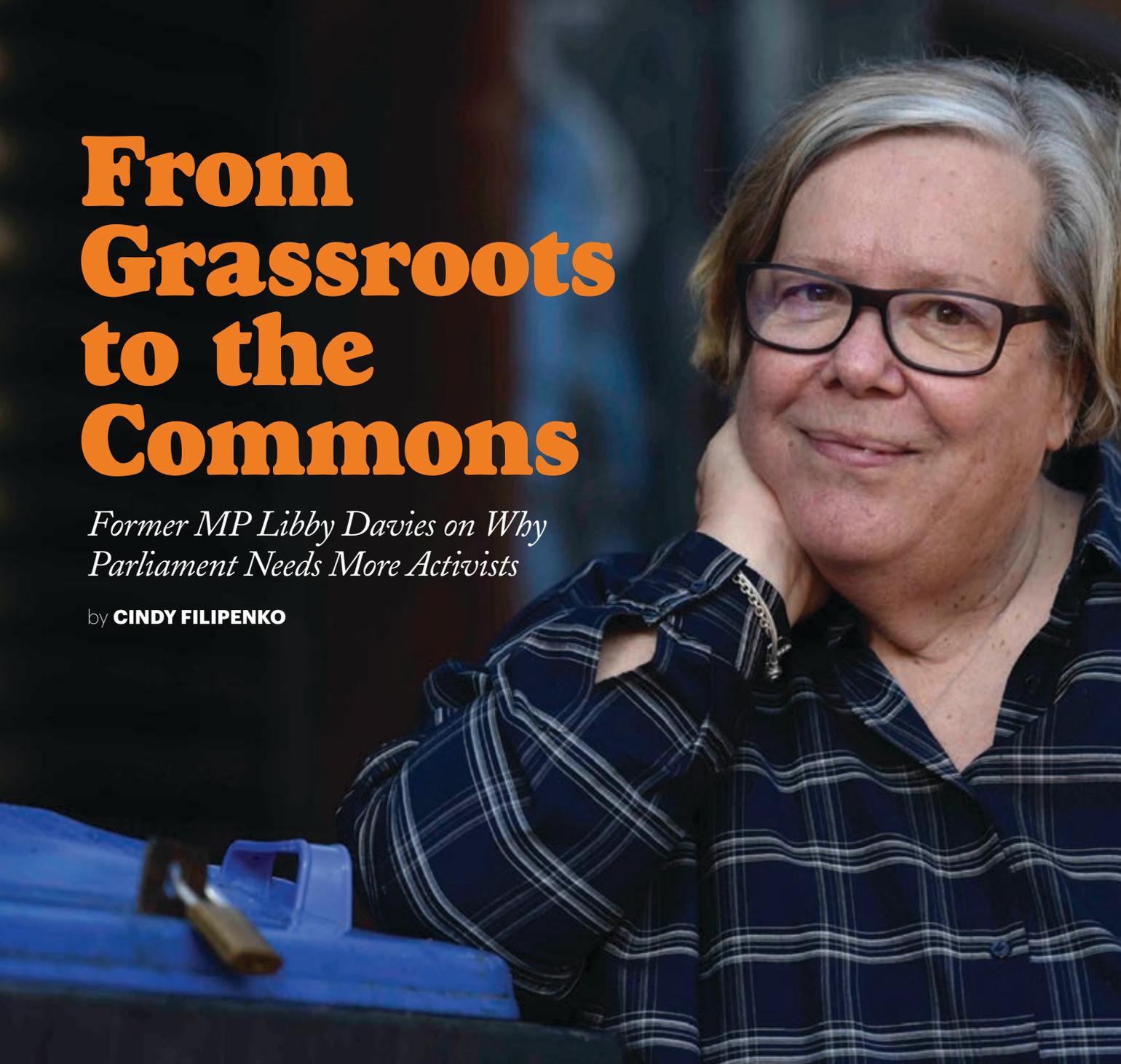
A new collection of the works of Andrea Dworkin offers a timely re-examination of the radical feminist and the era of the 1980s "sex wars" over pornography and free expression. Johanna Fateman, co-editor of *Last Days at Hot Slit: The Radical Feminism of Andrea Dworkin* offers some surprising lessons about Dworkin's works for feminists today.

by Susan G. Cole

From Grassroots to the Commons

Former MP Libby Davies on Why Parliament Needs More Activists

by **CINDY FILIPENKO**



Libby Davies served six consecutive terms as MP for Vancouver East, and, prior to that, served five successive terms as a leftist member of Vancouver City Council.

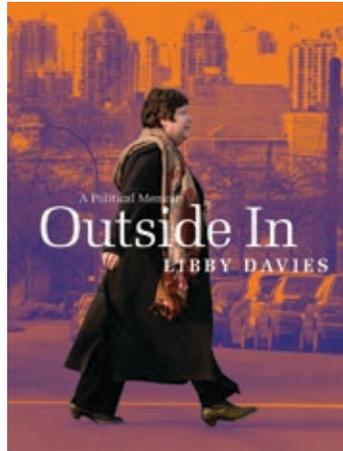
Libby Davies' new political memoir, *Outside In*, is striking in its humanity, hope and honesty. It is very much like the woman herself who was Canada's first lesbian Member of Parliament and a Vancouver MP for more than 20 years.

Matter-of-fact, straightforward and compassionate, Davies served six consecutive terms as MP for Vancouver East, and, prior to that, served five successive terms as a leftist member of Vancouver City Council.

Published in May to enthusiastic reviews, *Outside In* has brought the former MP back to the national stage at a time when her message is critical: people have the power, and they can use it to effect positive change.

Outside In will inspire any left-leaning politico, who will be impressed by Davies' sense of humour and candidness.

An example of this candidness came in 2001, when, speaking in support for MP Svend Robinson's private member's bill on same-sex



Libby Davies new political memoir, *Outside In*, is striking in its humanity, hope and honesty.

deriving inspiration from—a new generation of candidates. The new crop of NDP candidates on the ballot in October’s federal election, she observes, includes many candidates of colour, Indigenous candidates and young candidates.

“I am struck by their inspiration—that it’s a new generation, people who are activists, not coming out of the party so to speak,” she says of the people who are joining politics from the outside in, a journey she knows well.

Outside In is a fascinatingly full-colour account of what it means to come to party politics from the position of being an outsider.

Davies’ memoir details her community involvement in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, a community stretching along Burrard inlet from the fringes of the city’s business district, through Gastown, and to Main and Hastings. Her introduction to the area once known as “Canada’s poorest postal code” or “Skid Row” was through her father’s work with First United, a church and social services agency in the neighbourhood. In 1972, her knowledge expanded further when she was hired through a federal youth employment program to create a community-aware grocery store established within First United.

A year later, together with her then-partner, Bruce Eriksen, and fellow activist Jean Swanson, Davies helped form the Downtown Eastside Residents Association (DERA), and her involvement with the B.C. NDP began. British-born Davies, who immigrated to Canada with her family after a childhood spent in Cyprus, Germany and Malaysia, was barely 20 years old and had found her life’s work: giving voice to the voiceless, effecting social change and busting stereotypes.

“I remember once, in *The Globe and Mail*, there was this story about a young baseball player who was an immigrant and how he was becoming a star. His family lived in Hasting-Sunrise in a working/middle-class neighbourhood. It was a really positive story about the kids and his family. Then in the story, they said his home was located a couple of miles from the ‘sleazy downtown core.’”

marriage in the House of Commons, Davies informed the country that she was in a relationship with a woman. Almost overnight, Davies became Canada’s first official out lesbian MP. (Davies’ partner is rabble.ca publisher Kim Elliott.) On the issue of gay marriage, as well as many other social issues over the years, Davies helped change not only attitudes but the face of Canadian politics.

Retired since 2015, Davies remains active in the NDP, mentoring and championing—and

The story infuriated Davies. Not only was the community denigrated, the story had nothing to do with the Downtown Eastside. Davies' fury found its way into letters to the editors of Canada's national press.

Enduring stereotypes not only impeded community-building efforts in the Downtown Eastside, they also proved deadly for many of the community's missing women, a large percentage of whom were Indigenous. It was years before it was discovered that many of these women had been murdered on a pig farm owned by Robert Pickton, located about an hour's drive from the Eastside.

"Could you imagine what would happen if six nurses or six students went missing?" asks Davies. "The fact was that 69 women went missing from one neighbourhood. They were considered to be of no fixed address, having no family, non-citizens. These prejudices and stereotypes actually killed people, and I don't think I am exaggerating. For years, people in the community, including me, were saying it was a serial killer."

The prejudice continued even as the case against Pickton came together in 2002. One woman, who had escaped from his property, was considered an unreliable witness because she was a drug user. Pickton was convicted in 2007 of the second-degree murders of six women.

After a decade of increasingly high-profile grassroots activism, Davies became a Vancouver municipal council candidate. Elected in 1982, she sat on Vancouver City Council as a member of

the leftist Coalition of Progressive Electors for 10 years. She and Bruce Eriksen, who together had a son, Leif, in 1979, became the first life partners to sit on council at the same time. (Vancouver remains the only major city in Canada without a ward system.)

In 1993, Davies made a bid to be mayor of Canada's third largest city. Despite losing, the experience laid the ground for how Davies would make her most significant political impact. Two years after losing the mayoral race, she was elected Member of Parliament for the riding of Vancouver East. It was a bittersweet victory as Eriksen succumbed to cancer only months before her departure to Ottawa.

For the next 18 years, Davies was a tireless advocate of the disenfranchised, taking on controversial issues such as safe injection sites. She rose to deputy leader of the New Democratic Party in 2007, a position she held until she retired in 2015.

"One of the things ... that I came to understand was that my role seemed to be to take on non-conventional issues and make them mainstream," Davies says, referring to her style of working from the outside in.

The work of supporting activist ideals as an MP was a role Davies often found challenging.

"How do you balance the role without giving your soul and keeping true to your own principles because suddenly you're in caucus and you are in a group?" asks the woman who, at times, experienced a case of imposter syndrome.

Libby Davies addresses a protest in support of sex-workers in Vancouver in 2014. (Photo: Kim Elliot)



“Even in writing this book, it was something I reflected on. Over the years, I experienced a lot of sexism. Being a woman in public life is different,” says Davies. “I still feel like I am an outsider, even within the party. I don’t know why.”

Discussing imposter syndrome with other women made Davies realize that she was not alone. And she thinks it’s crucial that younger women going into politics are aware of the kinds of doubts they may face.

“I do feel things are changing. I look back on my younger self and the younger generation of women who are not taking shit anymore.” Davies credits movements like #MeToo and Idle No More with people finding their voices and exerting their rights.

“I’ve really enjoyed traveling across the country and doing media, talking about what’s going on,” reflects Davies. “How does change happen, and how do we get involved? If we feel cynical and we don’t get involved, we give our power away to people who already have power.

“We have to engage and support each other on the left,” says Davies, answering her own question. “The left can be divisive, and we can say bad things about each other. I am much more conscious about that, and I can tell you that it is a message getting a huge response.

“The big thing we have to take on is to use activism to transform politics,” says Davies. “We are seeing it in the U.S. Young women are stepping forward and not letting stuff deter them. It is amazing to see activism beginning to transform the political world. It is so necessary. I think we are into some kind of new wave in political activism.”

What advice would she give women considering careers in politics?

“I think you have to be ready to get involved for the long haul. This is not a fleeting pastime. Politics isn’t for everybody, but we need more young people to get involved. You have to get used to the idea that you might run for something and not get elected. Well, then try again,” says Davies.

“You need to know that you are not alone. You may feel alone at times, and it may feel

like a strange world. You need to connect with people that have experience in politics that you can trust and talk to. You need supports around you.”

Davies pauses thoughtfully and adds that it’s essential to stay grounded in what you believe in and to walk the walk.

“I think if you have a strong passion about what you believe in and are grounded in something locally or nationally, I think that sustains. What you believe in is important, but equally so is how you do your politics, how you relate to people—even your adversaries.

“Build relationships with those you can work with, build a sense of solidarity—lift each other up.” Important sentiments with a federal election looming.

Davies believes that the NDP’s poor showing in the 2015 federal election was a result of

the party losing connection to its base. She believes that the election platform her party campaigned on in 2015 was very cautious, in contrast to its 2019 platform, *A New Deal for People*, a document she says takes the party back to its bolder positions on social, environmental and economic issues.

“We need ... to be bold and speak the truth about what’s happening globally and in Canada,” she says.

Troubled by the fact that Canada is seeing the growth of right-wing populism, Davies is encouraged by a resurgence of the left in the U.S.

“We are seeing a strengthening of very strong, progressive left politics and I hope we will see it in Canada,” she says. “We know what it was like to have 10 years of Stephen Harper. [Conservative Party Leader Andrew] Scheer would be no different.”

So, just how does Davies maintain her hope?

“I think I am just an optimist by nature. I like to make things work,” she says. “People feel desperate about what’s happening in the world, whether it’s global warming, injustice, human rights. All these things are converging. My role is to help mentor, encourage and support this new generation.” ❁

“It is amazing to see activism beginning to transform the political world. It is so necessary. I think we are into some kind of new wave in political activism.” —**LIBBY DAVIES**