
Changing the Gender Agenda of Politics

by Jan Brown, MP

Politics from most vantage points has been an unfavourable environment for women. It has dwarfed the accomplishments of those women who have challenged tradition, hidden barriers and social biases to pursue a political career. What are the prerequisites necessary for women to succeed in public life where power, influence and aggression predominate? Can women dare to play the game using similar tactics and responses and get away with it? Changing the gender agenda of politics is about the feminine pursuit for equality within a network subtly prejudiced and still punctuated by the prevailing attitudes of today's society.

At first blush the current 35th Parliament appears like no other. Two hundred and five rookie MPs eagerly take their places in the House of Commons and fully 18% of the total 295 are women. Unprecedented in terms of the lack of experience and the large gender mix.

These internal changes may fool us into believing that the increased numbers of female MPs indicates an emerging autonomy and thereby acceptance for women in politics. This is foolhardy in the extreme because the old prejudices of what constitutes "women's work" have not yet been discarded. For example, women still face subtle criticisms because a public life is not yet considered to be compatible with family life. Questions such as "how can you leave your family"? or "who is taking care of the home front"? remain constant reminders that society still has specific role definitions for women.

We do not start our new beginnings with the throw of a switch. There is no simple procedure. Things can be untidy, but even moreso when attempting to establish

oneself in an environment traditionally outside of what is considered normal for women.

For the most part women have taken many of their cues from "pop culture"; assumptions about parenting, the responsibilities of men and women in the workplace and at home, and acknowledgement of traditional conjugal relationships that reflect long-established social norms. Women come from a world that is mirrored on the images of their mothers. It is domestic not politic. So no wonder society continues to define the feminine public persona on the basis of motherhood statements rather than from any particular inner drive or competency level.

This stereotype, sustained by patriarchy, pictures women as servants, nurturers, motherly organizers who often give way to their emotions. How could they ever be competent participants in the game of politics where the rules are tough and ill-defined and the predominantly male players (the guys) are mutually and securely bonded as a group.

Politics then represents an overwhelming challenge for women. Not only are they struggling to rid themselves of a stereotypical social role, but they also have to re-establish themselves in a new environment; one that is quite foreign from the world in which they were initially socialized as children.

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Having said that, it is more than tempting to blame the socialization process for trivializing the role of women. A narrow sphere of expectations exist, rarely challenged, limiting women's aspirations to the domain of hearth and home. This conditioning can be traced back to ancient times when women were denied access to public office, giving rise to the strong prejudice that remains and that attempts to shut women out of political involvement. But why has there been so little change within this belief system?

Quite simply women have not yet learned the fundamental law of political economy; exchange is based on the value the merchandise has when offered to the buyer, not the seller. Subsequently, there is not an exchange between the two sexes that is based upon an equal value system. Therefore, the value of public feminine contributions is not highly prized in our society.

And nowhere is this more keenly demonstrated than when a woman makes it to the backbench of politics. It is considered a breakthrough when a woman moves into territory long held by males. Few see comparable excellence in such an achievement, only a challenge to tradition.

There was a sense after the 1993 federal election, given the increased numbers of women MPs (18%) that Parliament may emerge as more consensus-driven, more collegial, less confrontational. Well, 18% does not of itself constitute a threshold for change. We would be over-indulgent in the extreme to believe that, because

success in politics is not simply a numbers game. Women can talk about a "critical mass" as having influence but the game of politics is brokering; it is the deal-making in the hallway. Women are going to have to make themselves visible and effective here because it is the place of power and influence and it is not decorated in petal pink floral.

Power is predicated on the historical rule of kings and the long-established relationships with the male powerbrokers of the ruling class. The male tradition dies hard especially when traditional roles and the accompanying division of labour between men and women turns inward to perpetuate that male tradition. So one wonders if men will ever feel comfortable using brokerage politics with women. And because women tend to compromise in deal making, their challenge will be to overcome their unpreparedness in developing a full-blown pursuit in traditionally male territory. They need a different kind of savvy.

This is not to say that the dynamic for change has not begun. The guideposts followed in the past are starting to show signs of weathering. Greater numbers of 30-something women are working outside of the home; parenting responsibilities are now being more openly shared by both parents; women are in more equitable ratios in those training settings traditionally held by males; baby boomers are greying; and overall expectations for 20-something women have changed.

These young women are significantly different from previous generations when mobility and role division greatly influenced how we would live and work. They are exposed to a wide array of options and consequently may choose to never marry, may choose to never have children and indeed expect to be treated as equals.

While it is true that women tend to bring with them a different kind of imagination, judgement and reason it is ultimately influence that determines the major political players.

If you were asked to name the ten most successful people you know, doubtless the list would include a disproportionate number of males. We have come to expect men to succeed, and women, well, not to be in the top 10. Even when they are, we tend to question why. Acceptance with cynicism becomes a metaphor for indifference.

The Tory leadership campaign of 1993 drew significant contrasts between the world of the family and the

relationships within it and the public world of work and political achievement. Success appeared to be dependent upon how readily women related to men in a form that was more comfortable and familiar to the expectations of everyone. The effort was illusionary and fleeting.

We are left with the mirage of Kim Campbell, the image of Audrey McLaughlin and the political spotlight has caused both to wilt, maybe in part, because people expected them to wilt. Power and influence have yet to cross gender lines. Women have to build a history of consistent success rates to positively reinforce this particular dimension of job-match. We lack an ability to be successful because we are neither experienced nor very skilful at using the particular form of power expected in a political environment, which is quite simply "power over"; getting your own way.

We are told that aptitudes and skills developed in one setting will be useful in another. This means little in politics when such naiveté can place women at a disadvantage to successfully compete. Women back off from this kind of approach because there is a tendency to be labelled as "bitches" or "redneck." So where do we go from here?

We will have to learn how to build dependencies without becoming dependent, how to access currently under-utilized resources without losing leverage and understand what is important to the various constituencies without becoming compromised. A tall order in a context that is constantly challenged by the agendas of those who roam the hallway.

The heat in the kitchen can be intense and sometimes we are tempted to get out. However, we will never see meaningful change unless we are prepared to confront tokenism and the false pride perpetuated by a "critical mass".

For example, the opportunity to demonstrate how a future Parliament may look was lost recently to the tokenism exhibited on International Women's Day. It was in some respects a male indulgence to placate "the little woman" and we fell into the trap. All the ingredients for success were there; the opportunity for visioning a new Parliament with a new style; attendance by all female MPs so that the numbers indeed would have at least a visual impact. But it failed. The debate did not involve the complete caucus of women parliamentarians and ultimately will become merely yellowed pages in Hansard. It remains a mystery why anyone even bothered. The choice to set women apart in such an orchestrated exercise illustrates we never really play in the game. Both men and women perpetuate this aspect of the "agenda".

Now is not the time for women to avoid the effort required to achieve meaningful political involvement. Women should move away from the established power style of coercion and consider how to use their own sense of political empowerment within the model of brokerage politics. Avoidance, of course, is the easier path and how comforting to know that if we do that we will rarely embarrass ourselves. What paralysis! Let us not ever say we simply died of failure because we did not try. ♦