
Women Cabinet Ministers in Canadian Provinces 1976-1994

by Gary F. Moncrief and Donley T. Studlar

Women's participation in leadership circles in Canadian politics has moved beyond "firsts" of various sorts. This is perhaps especially true at the provincial level, yet at this point there has been insufficient study of women holding elite positions. Attention has more often focused on the federal level, and on legislative rather than executive positions. The article, which examines patterns of women's roles in the cabinets of the provinces at three-year intervals over an 18-year period, from 1976 to 1994, presents some general conclusions about the process in Canada.

Across Canada women held only seven cabinet positions in 1976; by 1994, they held 38. Female ministers increased from less than four percent to almost 21 percent of the membership of the ten provincial cabinets over this period. There was a noticeable upward surge in both legislative seats and portfolios held by women between 1985 and 1988. Interestingly, except for 1985, women held a slightly greater share of cabinet posts than legislative seats; in other words, women were slightly better represented in cabinet than in the legislative assembly as a whole.

However, since ministers are drawn from the governing party, it is useful to examine the trends in terms of the percentage of women from the governing party who hold portfolios. The proportion of women in the governing party who hold a position in cabinet is generally higher than is the case for men (1985 is again the exception). Over time, the proportion of women in the governing party who hold portfolios has actually declined slightly. However, this is largely due to the fact that the number of cabinet ministers has declined. In 1976 there were 186 cabinet positions in the ten provincial governments; by 1985 that number had increased to 225. But the overall number of cabinet ministers in 1994 was

only 182, indicating an era of leaner cabinets. Thus, women are holding their own in terms of the number of ministerial offices, compared to their ranks in the legislative majorities.

Are there discernible patterns of women ministers by province or party? In regard to the first of these, numbers are not as relevant as percentages since smaller provinces tend to have fewer people in cabinet than larger ones. In the first year of our study, 1976, half of the provinces (Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Manitoba and Saskatchewan) had no women in the cabinet. In four of the seven years examined, Ontario had the highest percentage of women cabinet ministers. In general, the Atlantic provinces have trailed the rest of the country in placing women in political executive positions, which corresponds to a similar deficit of women in their legislatures¹.

By 1994, the provinces averaged 20 percent women in cabinet, led by the New Democratic governments of Ontario (37 percent), British Columbia (32 percent), and Saskatchewan (22 percent). Although Prince Edward Island, led by the first elected woman provincial premier, Catherine Callbeck, was right on the overall average in 1994, the other Atlantic provinces were the three lowest, ranging from 6.7 percent (Newfoundland) to 15 percent (New Brunswick). Saskatchewan in 1991 under the Progressive Conservatives was possibly the last ever provincial government in Canada to be without a woman in the cabinet.

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Table I
Percentage of Female Cabinet Ministers, by Year, Province, and Party

	1976	1979	1982	1985	1988	1991	1994
Alberta	4.17 (PC)	3.45 (PC)	8.00 (PC)	6.67 (PC)	15.38 (PC)	11.11 (PC)	17.65 (PC)
British Columbia	6.67 (SC)	6.25 (SC)	5.00 (SC)	5.26 (SC)	12.50 (SC)	10.00 (SC)	31.58 (NDP)
Manitoba	0 (NDP)	6.67 (PC)	16.67 (NDP)	10.53 (NDP)	15.79 (NDP)	11.11 (PC)	18.67 (PC)
New Brunswick	0 (PC)	10.53 (PC)	13.04 (PC)	9.52 (PC)	14.29 (Lib)	17.39 (Lib)	15.00 (Lib)
Newfoundland	0 (PC)	11.76 (PC)	11.11 (PC)	10.53 (PC)	5.00 (PC)	6.67 (Lib)	6.67 (Lib)
Nova Scotia	0 (PC)	0 (PC)	0 (PC)	0 (PC)	4.76 (PC)	5.88 (PC)	11.76 (Lib)
Ontario	11.54 (PC)	8.00 (PC)	6.90 (PC)	6.06 (PC)	20.00 (Lib)	44.44 (NDP)	37.04 (NDP)
Prince Edward Island	10.00 (Lib)	0 (PC)	10.0 (PC)	10.0 (PC)	9.09 (Lib)	18.18 (Lib)	20.00 (Lib)
Quebec	3.85 (Lib)	7.69 (PQ)	8.00 (PQ)	3.57 (PQ)	14.29 (Lib)	20.00 (Lib)	19.05 (Lib)
Saskatchewan	0 (NDP)	0 (NDP)	12.50 (PC)	8.33 (PC)	6.25 (PC)	0 (PC)	22.22 (NDP)

Is party, rather than province or region, the key to understanding where women will obtain ministerial positions? As noted above, the recent performance of NDP governments in promoting women into cabinets is impressive. Yet in the late 1970s there were NDP governments without women in the cabinet. Since then, the NDP has been the most active party in advancing women, but the Liberals are a close second overall. This should not obscure the fact that all parties, including Social Credit in British Columbia and the Parti Québécois as well as the Progressive Conservatives, have appointed more women to ministerial positions in the provinces they have controlled, especially since 1985.

What about the qualifications of the women ministers themselves? These are hard to assess. Data on legislative

experience indicates that women in the governing party holding portfolios have had longer tenures in the legislature, compared to women without portfolios (5.1 years versus 3.8), but the difference has shrunk over the years as more women have been elected to and stayed in the legislature.

Even if women have been achieving appointment to more cabinet positions, which positions are they? In the days when women ministers were few, they were often limited to so-called "women's positions", including culture, education, social services, and consumer affairs", leaving not only the premiership but also major financial and legal positions reserved for men. Has this changed in the Canadian provinces over the years?

Table II
Distribution of Portfolios
Type of Portfolios Held By Women Cabinet Ministers

Type of Portfolio	% All Years	% 1976-1985	% 1988-1994
Women/Family	10.5	5.1	13.1
Culture	7.2	8.5	6.6
Consumer/Corporate Affairs	6.1	8.5	4.9
Health/Welfare	21.0	27.1	18.0
Education	12.1	22.0	7.4
Environment	3.3	3.4	3.3
Infrastructure/Administration	5.0	8.5	3.3
Economics/Finance	5.5	3.4	6.6
Intergovernmental Relations	5.0	1.7	6.6
Extractive Resources	3.9	0	5.7
Justice	2.2	0	3.3
Premier	1.1	0	1.6
Liquor/Lottery	1.1	0	1.6
Deputy/Associate Prime Minister	7.7	5.1	9.0
Labour	4.4	6.8	3.3
Minority Issues	3.9	0	5.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

The second table groups the variety of cabinet positions into 16 categories, both overall and in two time periods, reflecting the surge of women's appointments after 1985. Although women are still confined to traditional "women's ministries" (the first six) to some degree, increasingly they have been appointed to a more diverse set of offices. Overall, women held 60.2 percent traditional positions, but this dropped from 74.6 percent in the first decade to 53.3 percent in the second. The drop in several traditional categories has been counteracted somewhat by women's increase in women/family positions, as more of the latter ministries have been created recently. Altogether, women's opportunities to serve in ministerial offices, even the most powerful ones,

no longer are as limited as they were only a few years ago.

When we combined several of these variables with others in a statistical analysis, the percentage of women in the governing legislative party turned out to be the most important factor affecting the percentage of women's cabinet appointment. The percentage of women in the majority party, however, was highly correlated with the overall percentage of women in the legislature.

In short, in the Canadian parliamentary/cabinet system, the most important factors in getting women into provincial cabinets are having women nominated for winnable legislative seats and then having a party with a

large percentage of women legislators form the government. This has often meant the New Democratic Party or Liberal Party, but there are notable exceptions. Perhaps because of its urbanized environment, Ontario has done better than expected in appointing women to cabinet-level positions³. The Ontario Progressive Conservative government, elected in 1995, had 21 percent women in its first cabinet, the highest ever for a Conservative administration in the provinces.

There has been little research on women in executive positions in other democracies, but the major work that has been done on women at the central level in European democracies shows one major difference from these Canadian findings⁴. In countries with coalition governments, it appears that the overall proportion of women in parliament is a more important influence on women becoming cabinet ministers than the share of women in the governing parties. The typical Canadian single-party legislative majority, with disciplined parties, makes it more straightforward to translate women's legislative gains into executive offices.

In summary, women have secured an increased share of cabinet offices in the Canadian provinces over the past two decades, and in the process they have broken out of

the traditional women's positions to which they had previously been confined. In the aggregate, women now have accumulated substantial experience in a variety of executive positions, which augurs well for continued advance in both positions and policy impact in the future, in all regions of the country and under governments of various political stripes⁵.

Notes

1. Donley T. Studlar and Richard E. Matland, "The Dynamics of Women's Representation in the Canadian Provinces, 1975-1994", *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 29 (1996) pp. 269-293.
2. Jill McCalla Vickers and M. Janine Brodie, "Canada", in Joni Lovenduski and Jill Hills, ed., *The Politics of the Second Electorate*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981, London, p. 74.
3. Gary F. Moncrief and Joel A. Thompson, "Urban and Rural Ridings and Women in Provincial Politics: A Research Note on MLAs", *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 24 (1991) pp. 831-837.
4. Rebecca H. Davis, *Women and Power in Parliamentary Democracies*, University of Nebraska Press, 1997, Lincoln.
5. Sylvia Bashevkin, "Confronting Neo-Conservatism: Anglo-American Women's Movements under Thatcher, Reagan and Mulroney", *International Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 5 (1994) pp. 275-296.