



## *Parliamentary Book Shelf*

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**Québécoises et représentation parlementaire, Manon Tremblay, Presses de l'Université Laval, 2005, 328 pp.**

This work is the fruit of exhaustive research on the representation of Quebec women in the National Assembly, the House of Commons and the Senate of Canada. The author adopts an approach that draws from both history and political science. Her study is a timely one, because statistics show that Canada is losing ground in this area internationally. In fact, according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union's figures on the proportion of women in the legislative assemblies of some 180 countries, Canada fell from 16th in 1998 to 31st at the end of 2004.

In the first chapter, the author traces the history of voting rights and eligibility. She relates the various moments that shaped the political citizenship of Quebec women and their access to parliamentary representation. She then turns to the ideas that animated the debates on women's suffrage in Quebec. She centres the great debate around five speeches: the specificity of the sexes, democratic modernity, substantial representation of women, constitutional jurisdictions and the practice of suffrage. These speeches were given in the House of Commons in 1885, 1917 and 1918, and in Quebec's Legislative Assembly in 1940. What the author brings out in this historical overview puts the primary emphasis on the historically difficult relationship of democratic principles faced with the difference, the relationship between federal-

ism, nationalism and women's rights, and the evolution of women's political citizenship in terms of representation.

The second chapter seeks to understand why women, while a slight majority in the population, are still, after so many years, a minority in legislative arenas. According to the author, for whom inclusion does not imply representation, there are a number of hypotheses that might explain this anomaly, including the process for appointing elected Members of Parliament. After analyzing the eligibility, recruitment, selection and election criteria, the author notes that, since 1921, only 134 Quebec women have been chosen to represent a riding in the House of Commons or Quebec's National Assembly. Turning then to the process for appointing unelected Members of Parliament, she notes that, since 1929, only sixteen Quebec women have been named to the Senate.

The third chapter explores the identity and ideas of Quebec's female MPs and senators. The author concedes that women transform the descriptive representation of parliamentary governance by their very presence. After all, these female parliamentarians are often part of an elite that is more educated and politicized and that occupies more desirable positions than the average Quebec woman. During her research, the author often heard them say that they felt that they had a responsibility to represent women. This cause requires these parliamentarians to expand their mandate beyond the boundaries of their

electoral districts. The author believes, however, that this expansion remains modest, since she thinks that certain factors of a personal and, more especially institutional, order, such as respect for the party line, greatly diminish the freedom to speak and act that these parliamentarians have. The author feels that before they can really think about representing other women, they will have to begin by increasing their ranks. In order to be able to influence and contribute to the deliberations and debates, numbers matter a great deal.

In her fourth and final chapter, the author examines what could be done to increase the number of Quebec women in politics. The solutions are quite familiar and some more controversial than others. Beginning with quotas in the legislative assemblies, the author lists the arguments of proponents and opponents before declaring herself against this option, which she deems ineffective. She supports mixed voting systems in which quotas could be applied. According to her, a balance between a plurality system and a proportional system would be much more effective.

The author then examines the motivations of the feminist movement with respect to the descriptive representation of Quebec women in the legislative assemblies. She feels that, essentially, two great philosophies, rejection and investment, characterize women's groups' attitude to political power. While the first school of thought rejects power for women in the name of tradition, the second wants to invest in politi-

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cal power by adapting women to it or changing it from inside.

The author concludes with a study of the proposals put forward by the federal and provincial governments to increase the representation of Quebec women in the House of Commons and the National Assembly. Citing the prevailing indifference to women's representation in both Ottawa and Quebec, and even though a parity act seems promising, the author feels that the "nepotism" of the political parties remains a fundamental obstacle to the parliamentary equality of women.

This work is a grand historical and political analysis of the parliamentary representation of Quebec women in the two federal Houses and the provincial House. The book begins with a disturbing finding: not only have women gained little ground in sixty years, they have faced setbacks in recent years.

In her conclusion, the author proposes a partial solution that is not completely satisfactory. According to her, the remedy, indeed the panacea, to the limited presence of women in politics lies in the proposal to reform the voting system in Quebec tabled in the National Assembly on December 15, 2004, more particularly in two provisions of this project. The first is designed to increase the allowance given to a party based on the percentage of candidates who are women or members of ethnocultural minorities. The second increases the refund to a candidate who is a woman or member of an ethnocultural minority. The author says that while the mixed proportional system proposed by then-Quebec minister Jacques Dupuis is encouraging, it still leaves room for improvement. Since the solution is addressed specifically to Quebec, the author re-

mains mute in her conclusion on possible solutions for the House of Commons and Senate.

Overall, this work looks at every aspect of the representation of Quebec women in provincial and federal politics. It is an important reference document and makes us aware of how difficult it is for women to carve out a place on the political scene. This book also makes the reader aware of just how much Quebec women currently in politics remain pioneers, and the immense amount of work still to be done. The book's weak point is its conclusion, which limits itself to Quebec's National Assembly and ignores the House of Commons and Senate, a dichotomy that is all the more surprising since almost the entire book looks equally at all three Houses. This last-minute change is rather confusing.

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