
Women in Politics: A Prince Edward Island Perspective

by Olive Crane, MLA

Prince Edward Island women have made history when it comes to politics. This article looks at the evolution of women's involvement in PEI politics as well as some recent developments.



Although it has been less than one hundred years that women have had the right to vote, it was not until 1951 that a woman – Hilda Ramsay – stood for election on Prince Edward Island.

She ran for the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation but was not successful in her bid to win her seat.

None of the three CCF candidates won seats, but Mrs Ramsay opened the doors for Island women to enter the political fray.

The first woman elected in PEI was Jean Canfield in 1970, representing the Liberal Party. She was appointed Minister without Portfolio and Minister Responsible for the Housing Authority in 1972. Since then, there has been a woman in every cabinet post in Executive Council. In 2002, Premier Pat Binns appointed my colleague Gail Shea as Minister of Transportation and Public Works, the first time a woman has held this traditionally male-dominated position in this province.

Prince Edward Island also elected the first female Premier in Canada, Catherine Callbeck in 1993. Prior to that, a fellow Progressive Conservative, Pat Mella who served as our Provincial Treasurer was the first female leader of

a provincial political party, when she was chosen leader of the Progressive Conservative Party of Prince Edward Island in 1990.

I would like to also mention another fellow Progressive Conservative woman, Marion Reid, who has many “firsts” to her credit. In 1979, Marion was appointed Deputy Speaker, making her the first woman in provincial history to hold this position. In 1983, she became the first female Speaker of the Legislative Assembly, and in 1990, she was sworn in as the first female Lieutenant Governor in the Island’s history.

So, we can claim our share of firsts in Prince Edward Island and we are proud of this. However, I wish we did not have to discuss this topic at all. I wish it was simply accepted that women play an equally important role in our political process ... end of discussion! I guess that is why my mother always said, “if wishes were fishes, we’d all be throwing nets.”

Maybe before this can happen, we need to determine why women are more reluctant to stand for nomination, and to run in an election. When reviewing this material I realized that all of the women who have been elected in our province came from rural PEI. I do not know if this is an important fact or simply a coincidence.

Our population of roughly 139,000 people is gravitating to the urban areas of the province, but historically our province has been more rural, with families relying on the primary industries of farming, fishing and forestry.

The stereotypical view of a farm wife is the “little” woman in the kitchen, wearing an apron, baking bread and caring for children. In reality, for any small family

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farm or fishing operation to operate effectively, everyone has to pitch in.

This means women, children and men work side by side in the barns, in the fields and on the fishing boats. This is the way things have been for rural families and it has been the way for centuries.

Perhaps it is this history of working side by side with men that first gave rural women in our province the confidence to break into politics. Perhaps it is the sense of community involvement and community service that is so important in rural areas that fosters rural women's commitment to service politically.

Currently in Prince Edward Island, seven out of twenty-seven members of the Legislative Assembly are women, with two women holding cabinet positions. Actually with my campaign win earlier this year women comprise almost 26 percent of the make up of the legislature and this percentage is now at an all-time high. This brings the province closer to the goal of women making up 33.3 percent of our Legislative Assembly after the next provincial election.

This goal was established by the "PEI Coalition for Women in Government" – a non-partisan coalition of individuals and organizations committed to increasing women's opportunities to be elected to government in Prince Edward Island.

In 2004, this Coalition recommended that political parties move in a new direction by nominating at least nine women each in the next provincial election. Each of the official provincial parties in our Province has made a commitment to work toward that goal.

If each party nominates at least nine women in the next election, Prince Edward Island could make national history by being the first provincial legislature to have women make up a third of its ranks.

Indeed, while much more needs to be done on this issue, we are pleased with the efforts being made by all parties to actively seek out and find ways to support potential women candidates.

For instance, all parties (PC, Liberal, Green Party and NDP) actively supported the province's first Women's Campaign School by inviting and/or sponsoring women to participate in the three-day skills and network-building school. Hosted at the University of Prince Edward Island this past spring, the Women's Campaign School featured several prominent keynote speakers and included topics such as:

- Making the Decision to Run
- The Nomination Process
- Winning the Nomination
- How to Run a Campaign
- Getting out the Vote
- Campaign Ethics
- Working with the Media
- Am I Ready?

At this well-attended conference, discussions also included real as well as perceived barriers to women running for elected office in PEI.

The following is a sample of the concerns expressed:

- A perception that the job of being a local politician is one with low pay and long hours (with a lack of privacy and strains on family life);
- The competitive nature of politics and government decision-making;
- Having less access to financial resources required to take the time to campaign or access campaign funds;
- A perception that the power brokers in political parties prefer to support men, and the fact that studies continue to show that women do the majority of the unpaid work in their homes, as well as working outside the home. This does not leave them much time to enter politics.

While I do not necessarily have the answers to addressing these hurdles, I do believe recognizing them is a step we must take before we can face the challenge.

We need more women politicians; not because women's needs have been totally ignored, but because we, as women make up more than half of the population and should be part of the democratic process. It is as simple as that.

It has also been said that women bring a new perspective to politics. Any time a new element – whether it is gender, religious, ethnic, or social – is added to the mix, a new perspective will be offered. We all win when our perimeters are expanded.

The integration of women into politics strengthens democracy, and strengthening democracy is the goal of any good government.