
Equal Voice: Electing More Women in Canada

by Ann Wicks and Raylene Lang-Dion

Canada's international ranking on the Inter-Parliamentary Union, "List of Women in National Parliaments," has recently slipped to 47th in the world. Despite enjoying economic prosperity and political stability, Canada now has fewer women in parliament than many less developed countries such as Mauritania, Uganda, Rwanda, Afghanistan and Iraq. How long will it take for Canada to catch up – thirty years, perhaps forty years? This article aims to unravel the causes of Canada's under-representation of women in politics and outlines Equal Voice's action plan to address this inequality.

The under-representation of women in the Canadian political system has been well documented by academics, parliament and the media.¹ Despite a 2004 poll conducted by the Centre for Research and Information on Canada, stating that 90 per cent of Canadians want more women elected,² the representation of women in the House of Commons has reached a plateau of 20.8 per cent with only 64 women sitting as Members of Parliaments.³ Similarly, the glass ceiling for women in municipal⁴ and provincial governments hovers around 21 per cent.⁵ Equal Voice is a non-profit organization which aims to change the face of Canadian politics by facilitating the election of more women at all levels of government.

Former journalist Rosemary Speirs and a small group of like-minded women, such as pollster Donna Dasko and Canadian feminist icon Dorothy Anderson, formed Equal Voice in 2001. The mission was to create a national, multi-partisan, volunteer based organization with the goal of increasing awareness of the under-representation of women in Canadian politics. It would be the first

multi-partisan action group to bring together women and men of all political stripes to pressure political parties into electing more women. Equal Voice's Advisory Board includes many women who have played a prominent role on Canada's political scene such as: former Progressive Conservative Prime Minister Kim Campbell, former Liberal Deputy Prime Minister Sheila Copps, and former New Democratic Party leader Alexa McDonough.

Equal Voice continues its advocacy work today by interacting with the media, political parties, Members of Parliament, and Senators to encourage the nomination of more women candidates and to facilitate the participation of women at all levels of political activity. With over 1100 members nation wide, Equal Voice has grown from a small group of men and women in Ontario, to a national, non-profit organization with chapters being developed in every province and territory.

Why only Twenty Percent of Women?

In Canada, women comprise over 52 per cent of the population and yet, only 20.8 per cent of our Members of Parliament are women. Why is this fact important and why must we elect more women in Canada? First, the lack of significant numbers of women represented in positions of public authority generates a "democratic deficit"⁶ violating basic principles of fairness required for a

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truly representative democracy. Secondly, Canada's international ranking in terms of women's representation, continues to slip. As a vast number of countries surpass Canada and become more successful in electing women, Canada risks falling further behind.

What we want to accomplish is so simple and so just. How can anything so sensible take so long to accomplish?

*Doris Anderson
Author, journalist, women's rights activist and
Equal Voice founding member*

The under-representation of women in Canada creates a democratic deficit leaving over half of the population without an adequate voice in political decision making processes. According to the United Nations, a threshold of at least 30 per cent of female legislators is required to ensure that public policy reflects the needs of women.⁷ The lack of women elected or appointed to top political jobs also serves a visible indication of how women are undervalued in Canadian society.⁸ Despite the low levels of women holding elected office, Statistics Canada indicates that majority of students graduating from post-secondary institutions are women.⁹ Given that there is no shortage of talented and educated women, why are they not represented in the House of Commons?

Canada has had two Royal Commissions over the past 4 decades which have documented the barriers women encounter in seeking public office: the 1970 Royal Commission on the Status of Women and the 1992 Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing. In 1970, Royal Commission Chairperson Florence Bird found:

a number of impediments to women seeking candidature; in particular prejudice in the constituency associations, inadequate financial resources and limited mobility... Women who have been successful at the polls confirm that winning the nomination is a more formidable hurdle than winning the election.¹⁰

Many of the hurdles identified by Bird in 1970 were still apparent in the recommendations of the 1992 Royal Commission report, suggesting that more work remains to be done to address the causes of under-representation. Academics have identified the main causes of women's under-representation in politics as a failure on the part of political parties to "adequately bolster female candidacies; the masculine political environment; media imbalances in the treatment of women politicians; and the role conflict that can result from juggling a political career with social and family commitments."¹¹ Additionally,

the power of incumbency can also be a barrier to women. Incumbent Members of Parliament have a better chance at seeking re-election and given that few seats change hands in any given election, the power of incumbency can serve to reinforce parliament's current composition.

Yet, here we are 37 years following the first Royal Commission on the Status of Women and Canada is not even half way towards achieving equal representation; let alone the 30 per cent threshold needed for women to have a voice in the creation of public policy. In fact, during the past four elections the representation of women has not experienced substantial growth and in 2006 the number of women in the House of Commons even declined.¹²

A Call for Action

In order to achieve equal representation, more women need to run for public office and "since parties are the gatekeepers to legislative office [they] have the potential to address the problems of women's under representation."¹³ During the 2006 election, Equal Voice tracked the number of women candidates nominated by each political party. As shown in the following table, the numbers indicate that the percentage of women elected by each party in the House of Commons closely reflects the number of women candidates nominated by the political parties.

This suggests that when presented with the choice, Canadians are more than willing to vote for women candidates. This combined with strong polling numbers indicating that Canadians want more women to hold elected positions and the large pool of educated women to draw from, provides the opportunity for political parties to make a difference. All that is required is political will on the part of the leaders and their political parties to nominate more women candidates. The political parties need to be proactive in recruiting and supporting women candidates to run in winnable ridings; all parties need to make the decision on how to address this inequality; and all parties have to identify processes that work for them.

Equal Voice offers a variety of programming and initiatives to support women involved in politics including: our on-line campaign school called Getting to the Gate; a developing national Speakers Bureau comprised of past and present parliamentarians; our National Awareness Campaign entitled *Changing the Face of Politics, the Ontario Challenge: Getting More Women to Queen's Park*; our growing Youth Chapter and our efforts on electoral reform.

Equal Voice launched a national public awareness campaign in January 2007, funded by Status of Women

Candidates Nominated and Elected by Political Parties – 2006 Election

Political Party	Total Candidates		Male Candidates		Female Candidates		% Female Candidates	
	Nominated	Elected	Nominated	Elected	Nominated	Elected	Nominated	Elected
Bloc Québécois	75	51	52	34	23	17	30.6%	33%
Conservatives	308	125	270	111	38	14	12.3%	11%
Liberals	308	101	229	80	79	21	25.6%	21%
NDP	308	29	200	17	108	12	35%	41%
Green Party	308	0	236	0	72	0	23%	0%

Canada, with the goal of increasing the number of women in elected office at all levels of government across Canada. The national public awareness campaign aims to achieve the following four objectives during an eighteen month period:

- Meeting with key media outlets to increase the awareness of the lack of women in politics and raise awareness of gender bias in the media.
- Providing direct support to women interested in politics by encouraging increased participation in Equal Voice's Getting to the Gate Online Campaign School – which is free of charge and bilingual.
- Assessing and monitoring the level of female participation in Canadian political parties and in political office through surveys at the federal level and in two selected provinces.
- Promoting the incorporation of gender sensitive courses in high school social studies curriculums in at least two provinces.

While proceeding with the national public awareness campaign, Equal Voice chapters across Canada will focus on their own initiatives to increase women's representation in politics, including the encouragement of electoral reform.

Equal Voice Past-Chair Rosemary Speirs issued the Ontario Challenge in 2006 in a letter to the leaders of the Ontario Liberal, Progressive Conservative and New Democratic Parties, asking them to jointly commit to the goal of nominating more women candidates. Equal Voice sought out assistance from women Members of Provincial Parliament (MPPs) from all political parties who were instrumental in getting their leaders to pledge support to the Ontario Challenge. While Equal Voice did not ask the parties to meet specific targets, the goal is to increase the numbers of women elected to Queen's Park. The Ontario Legislature has just 24 women of its 103 MPPs. The three leaders of Ontario's major political parties: John Tory, Dalton McGuinty and Howard Hampton all agreed to take up the Ontario Challenge and committed to nominating more women candidates. With their

statements, the leaders sent the message that they want more women in their elected ranks. Equal Voice will be tracking the number of women candidates selected and will be reporting to the media on the progress of all three political parties prior to the 2007 Ontario provincial election.

The more female role models that people see, that young women see in politics – people who look like them and sound like them – the better it is to try and encourage more women to get involved.

*Janet Ecker
Former Ontario Progressive Conservative cabinet minister
to the Select Committee on Electoral Reform, September 1,
2005*

Equal Voice has created a National Youth Chapter which encourages young women to get involved in politics and raises awareness about the need for young women to vote. We are looking to expand the number of Equal Voice University and College campus clubs in order to provide a venue for young women to get involved and stay involved in politics; as well as providing mentorship opportunities for young women and other women who have been successfully involved in all aspects of political life.

Equal Voice has made presentations to both the British Columbia and Ontario Citizens' Assemblies on Electoral Reform. Rosemary Speirs, the Past-Chair, has lead the initiative advocating for the adoption of electoral reform models favourable to the election of more women. Typically, countries that use some form of a list system of proportional representation (List PR) elect the most female representatives.¹⁴ This system pressures political parties to develop candidate lists that are more reflective of the population; inclusive of women and visible minorities. Finland elects 38 per cent women using the "List PR"

method; likewise, Sweden has achieved 47.3 per cent female representation.¹⁵ Similarly, mixed member proportional systems (MMP), which combine single member plurality with a list system of proportional representation, fair well in electing more women. New Zealand uses MMP and elects 32.3 per cent women in their national parliament; Germany also uses MMP and elects 31.6 per cent female representatives.¹⁶ Regardless of the precise method, countries utilizing some form of proportional representation deliver more women representatives than those employing first past the post systems, such as Canada and the United States. While the benefits of electoral reform are numerous, it alone is not enough to address the inequality facing women. Political will still needs to be demonstrated by all political parties and their leaders to select women for the candidate lists and to ensure the success of electing women.

When we look around the world, we notice that those jurisdictions that have proportional representation elect far more women.

Howard Hampton
Ontario New Democrat Leader
Ontario Legislature, June 14, 2006

Conclusion

According to Ann MacLean, Mayor of New Glasgow, Nova Scotia and Past President of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, "Canada is a progressive country and a world leader in many things. Unfortunately, women's participation in political life is not one of them."¹⁷

With Equal Voice raising awareness with the key political decision makers, party supporters, and the general public, and assisting women who want to run for elected office, Canada has for the first time in history an advocacy group solely focused on getting more women elected. This important fact is the catalyst for making changes. Canada is falling behind on the international stage and needs to address this democratic deficit. Political parties need to undertake decisive action and demonstrate political will to change this inequality. Equal Voice will be working with our committed volunteers and supporters to tackle this important goal of changing the face of Canadian politics.

Notes

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3. Julie Cool, "Women in Parliament," Library of Parliament, February 20, 2006. Available at: <http://www.parl.gc.ca/information/library/PRBpubs/prb0562-e.pdf>
4. Federation of Canadian Municipalities, "Getting to 30% by 2026," p. 1. Available at: <http://www.fcm.ca/english/policy/wreport.pdf>
5. Linda Trimble and Jane Arscott, *Still Counting*, Broadview: 2003, p. 43.
6. Linda Trimble and Jane Arscott p. 4.
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8. Linda Trimble and Jane Arscott, p. 161.
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10. Royal Commission on the Status of Women 1970, p. 349.
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14. Equal Voice, "Submission to the Ontario Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform," p. 7. Available at: http://www.equalvoice.ca/uploads/107_45c0b0a1cae1a.pdf
15. Equal Voice: Submission to the Ontario Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, p. 16.
16. Ibid.
17. Federation of Canadian Municipalities, "Getting to 30% by 2026," p. 2. Available at: <http://www.fcm.ca/english/policy/wreport.pdf>