
Women's Representation in the House of Commons: A Stalemate?

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This article looks at female representation in the House of Commons. It shows that in terms of numbers, a plateau seems to have been reached over the last two decades. The paper also argues that even if demand for female candidates were to increase significantly, this factor on its own would not redress the limited supply phenomenon that originates from other sources – including stereotypic treatments of women in public life.

Since the creation in 2001 of Equal Voice, a group dedicated to increasing the numbers of women who hold public office at all levels in Canada, the issue of gender differences in political involvement has been raised with some frequency. Media stories have celebrated progress and, occasionally, what are presented as breakthroughs in female engagement. One recent example followed the fall 2010 municipal elections in Toronto, when 15 women won seats on the 45-member city council. A prominent story in Canada's largest circulation daily explained the reason for "cheering" as follows: one-third of the new council would be female.¹ The story neglected to mention that multiple borough councils in pre-amalgamation Toronto, alongside the former Metro Council, had attained roughly the same levels or higher, with Etobicoke's borough council reaching 42% women members in 1996 – or nearly 15 years earlier.²

Paraphrasing Edmund Burke, philosopher George Santayana argued compellingly that "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." With respect to women in Canadian federal

politics, it is worth stepping back from contemporary representational circumstances to ask how they compare with those of the recent as well as more distant past. My assessment opens with evidence that proportions of elected women MPs have been stalemated in the roughly one-fifth range for nearly 20 years. This plateau exists despite expectations that women's growing educational and professional attainment, the willingness of two major federal parties to adopt specific rule changes designed to increase numbers of female parliamentarians, and concerted action on the part of groups such as Equal Voice, would ensure this figure rose toward parity.

Using Rosabeth Moss Kanter's typology presented in her 1977 volume titled *Men and Women of the Corporation*, the article argues that the composition of the Canadian House of Commons has only shifted from a uniformly male group in the years before 1921 toward a skewed group in the subsequent ninety years.³ Following from Drude Dahlerup's work on the likely consequences of skewed representation in elective bodies, I discuss how measurable biases in the treatment of female politicians continue.⁴

It is helpful to begin with a brief review of quantitative patterns of female engagement at the federal level, using official election results as a guide. Canadian women became eligible to hold seats in the House of Commons as of 7 July 1919 and, within two and half years, the first woman MP (Agnes Macphail from the rural Ontario constituency of South-East Grey) was elected. Macphail ran as a candidate for the United Farmers of Ontario, a formation which eventually became part of the Cooperative Commonwealth

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Federation, the forerunner to the New Democratic party.

Macphail's early biographers describe her initial entrance to parliament as follows: "She thought of the women who would surely walk this corridor too. 'I could almost hear them coming,' she said later. Her ear must have been tuned to a still remote time, for in the next quarter century only four other Canadian women were elected to the federal House of Commons."⁵ In the roughly sixty years following Macphail's arrival in Ottawa, about 100 other women in total won provincial or federal seats in Canada.

If we fast forward to the mid-1960s era that saw the beginnings of second-wave feminist activism in Canada, we find this same period corresponded with the presence of two women MPs in the House of Commons. One was a New Democrat, Grace MacInnis, the daughter of former CCF leader J.S. Woodsworth, whose role model in her youth – not surprisingly – was Agnes Macphail.⁶ The second was Judy LaMarsh, federal Secretary of State and a member of the governing Liberal caucus.

In the jargon of contemporary gender and politics research, LaMarsh is best described as a "critical actor."⁷ In 1967 she played a pivotal role in pressing Prime Minister Lester Pearson to appoint a federal royal commission on the status of women. LaMarsh's case illustrates the extent to which it may be misleading to assume the presence of fewer than 10% women MPs before the mid-1980s translated into the absence of pro-equality influences on public policy. In fact, her legislative career points toward the importance of studying the other side of the question concerning the conversion from numbers of women MPs to substantive, pro-feminist policy influence. In particular, LaMarsh's contributions suggest it is worth asking whether over time, the growth in numbers of elected women produced a commensurate increase in the willingness of MPs to follow in her footsteps as "critical actors." While the research literature to date has not posed this question, it is likely that future scholars who pursue such a line of enquiry will reach a negative conclusion. Why? Many women elected to the House of Commons in 1984 and following were right-of-centre Progressive Conservative (PC), Reform, Alliance, Conservative and, in some cases, Liberal MPs whose identification with pro-equality interests was either weak or absent. That being said, the question awaits closer empirical attention because some Progressive Conservative MPs and senators, for example, undertook important policy interventions on matters including violence against women and reproductive rights.

As reported in Table 1, data on women MPs during the past two decades show the percentage of seats they held increased markedly from the 1984 level of about 10% to the 1997 level of more than 20%. Numbers of women elected to the House of Commons, in fact, more than doubled from 27 in 1984 to 62 in 1997, a pattern that in the initial period of women's eligibility to hold seats in parliament also took about 14 years -- from Agnes Macphail's election in 1921 to the arrival of Martha Black (representing the constituency of Yukon) in 1935. We need to bear in mind, however, that as recently as 1970, the House of Commons reverted to the circumstances that Macphail faced for more than a decade – that of one woman MP sitting amidst a sea of men.

The fact that numbers increased dramatically in the years between 1984 and 1997 can be attributed to multiple factors, including:

First, the unprecedented size of the PC majority victory in 1984, which elected many women candidates, especially in Quebec, who were not expected to win their seats. Many of these women ran successfully as incumbent candidates in the 1988 federal elections that produced a second, albeit smaller PC majority.

Second, the rise of second-wave feminist mobilization, and the focus of peak organized interests on parliamentary politics in the 1970s and early 1980s. The fact that the National Action Committee on the Status of Women later adopted an increasingly extra-parliamentary protest orientation meant social movement energies were gradually diverted elsewhere, away from questions having to do with women's legislative engagement and

Year	Total Number of Seats	Seats Held by Women	Proportion of Seats Held by Women
1984	282	27	9.6%
1988	295	39	13.3%
1993	295	53	18%
1997	301	62	20.6%
2000	301	62	20.6%
2004	308	65	21.1%
2006	308	64	20.8%
2008	308	68	22.1%

Sources: www.equalvoice.ca;
<http://www2.parl.gc.ca/content/lop/researchpublications/prb0562-e.htm>

the policy influence that elected MPs might exert.⁸

Third, sustained pressure on all major party organizations dating from the 1970s to nominate more women in safe and winnable constituencies. This focus is clear in the Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, released in 1970, as well as efforts dating from the same period by voluntary groups with both cross-party and partisan mandates. In the former category, organizations including Women for Political Action, founded in 1972, and the Committee for '94, created in 1984, pressed the candidacy issue alongside three groups of the latter type – the federal NDP's Participation of Women Committee, established in 1969; the National Women's Liberal Commission, dating from 1973; and the National PC Women's Caucus, formed in 1981.

Fourth, empirical evidence that Canadian voters as a group were open toward and, in some cases, biased in favour of women candidates. Beginning in the mid-1970s, public receptivity to female legislators was assessed using multiple methodologies including public opinion surveys, election simulations and longitudinal analysis of constituency-level results. As Lisa Young reports, this research shows both “a substantial minority of Canadian voters are concerned about the under-representation of women,” and “a moderate degree of public support [exists] for measures designed to make the Canadian Parliament more reflective of the country's demographic composition.”⁹

Fifth, sustained growth in the numbers of Canadian women enrolled in post-secondary education, including in graduate and professional programs, and holding employment in professional occupations. Data from Statistics Canada show the proportions of females holding positions as lawyers, business managers and physicians rose dramatically since the 1970s, reaching roughly 50 percent in many of these areas.¹⁰ These trends effectively prevented parties from arguing – as they had in earlier periods – that they could not find “qualified women” to run as candidates.

Sixth, internal party reforms, particularly those pursued in the New Democratic and Liberal organizations. The Ontario NDP adopted affirmative action guidelines as early as 1989, while the federal party introduced quotas for women candidates in 1991. In their efforts to ensure more women were nominated, federal Liberals since the Chrétien era have created numerical targets and permitted the party leader to directly appoint local candidates. Beginning in 2003, the Bloc Québécois worked informally “to identify and recruit women for nomination.”¹¹ These types of proactive strategies remain far less popular in parties of the centre-right and right, where arguments about individual

merit have tended to trump considerations of group representation.

The impact of this last factor is clearly revealed in Table 2, which presents the breakdown by party in women candidates and MPs for the most recent federal elections, held in 2008. The percentage of women candidates fielded by major federal parties was highest in the Liberal and NDP organizations, at 37 and 34% respectively, followed by the BQ at 28% and Conservatives at 20%. Most significantly, the NDP caucus following the 2008 elections included about one-third women, down somewhat from more than 40% following the 2006 elections. Both figures demonstrate the extent to which internal reforms ensured the NDP fielded female candidates in promising seats. By way of contrast, the governing Conservative caucus following the 2008 elections included only 16% women (an increase from the post-2006 level of 11%), or half the proportion in the NDP caucus in that same period.

The larger point of Tables 1 and 2 is that despite expectations that the rate of growth in numbers of women MPs would continue, female representation in the Canadian House of Commons remains stuck in the one-fifth range. The overall figure has hovered around 20 percent for 20 years – despite progress cited above in women's educational and occupational attainment, internal rule changes in some parties and so on.

What are the consequences of stalemated numbers of women MPs? What other barriers limiting women's numbers in parliament need to be considered?

Turning first to the implications of plateaued numbers, it is worth recalling Rosabeth Moss Kanter's path-breaking account of the dynamics of male/female interaction in a large US corporation. Kanter's study of a firm she called Industrial Supply Corporation asked how women in senior positions in a business organization, as a demographic minority in a majority male environment, responded to their numerically marginalized circumstances. In order to understand better group interaction in this private sector context, she developed a four-way categorization grounded in the magnitude of minority group under-representation. Kanter's schema is shown here as Figure 1.

The baseline of her typology, known as the uniform group, included all members of the majority group and none from the minority, such that the ratio of men to women would stand at 100 to 0. The second category,

Table 2
Percentage of Federal Candidates Nominated and Elected in 2008, by Party

Political Party	Total Candidates		Male Candidates		Female Candidates		% Female Candidates	
	Nominated	Elected	Nominated	Elected	Nominated	Elected	Nominated	Elected
Bloc Québécois	75	49	55	34	20	15	28%	30.6%
Conservatives	307	143	244	120	63	23	20%	16.1%
Liberals	307	77	194	58	113	19	37%	24.7%
NDP	308	37	204	25	104	12	34%	32.4%

Sources: www.equalvoice.ca
www.sfu.ca/~aheard/elections/results.html;
www.sfu.ca/~aheard/elections/women.html;
www2.parl.gc.ca/Sites/LOP/HFER/hfer.asp?Language=E&Search=WomenElection;
www2.parl.gc.ca/content/lop/researchpublications/prb0562-e.htm

termed a skewed group, was defined as one with overwhelming numbers from the majority but some from the minority, with a ratio in the range of 85 to 15. Moving upward on the scale of minority engagement, she identified the third point in her typology as the tilted group, where roughly 65 men worked alongside 35 women. Finally, her fourth category was one with balanced representation, or closer to a 50/50 ratio.

Of what significance is a typology about women's representation in a US corporation during the 1970s to Canadian federal politics in 2011? On one level, this theorization sheds light on exactly how little has actually changed in the House of Commons, since it explores the implications of men's continued numerical dominance in what has remained a skewed group since 1921. According to Kanter's research, women working in environments with skewed proportions experience tokenism – by which individual females are treated as symbolic “stand-ins for all women” – alongside what she described as “the loneliness of the outsider, of the stranger who intrudes upon an alien culture and may become self-estranged in the process of assimilation.”¹² In human resources terms, according to Kanter, the consequences of skewed proportions were measurably disadvantageous to the Industrial Supply Corporation. Patterns of employee turnover in some divisions were as much as two times higher among women than men. In addition, what she termed the “failure rate” for entry-level and next step positions was higher among females than males.

Little comparable knowledge exists of the career trajectories of federal politicians in Canada, but we do know from a powerful 1992 speech delivered in Ottawa by then cabinet minister Kim Campbell that she found “life here unspeakably lonely and very difficult.”¹³ Moreover, research on parliamentary careers conducted by David Docherty concluded that “women [in the House

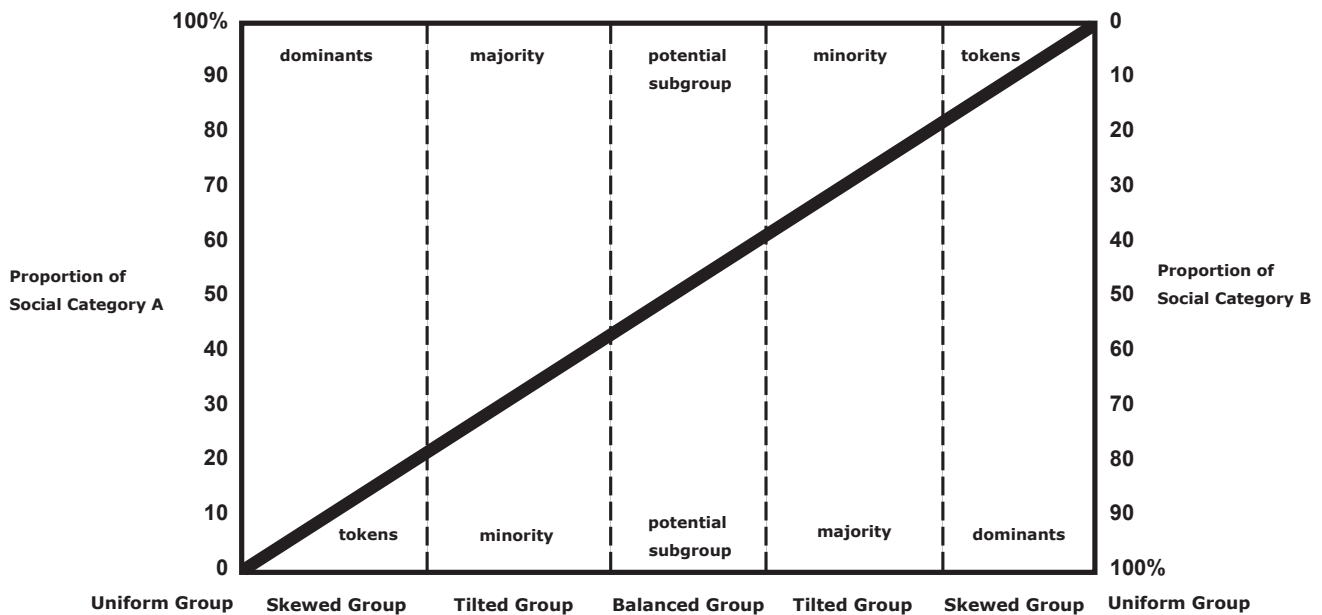
of Commons] are less likely to experience satisfying careers” than their male counterparts.¹⁴

On another level, Kanter's project served as a model for legislative studies and, in particular, encouraged scholars to ask what changes could be expected as proportions of elected women increased. *Men and Women of the Corporation* provided the basis on which Drude Dahlerup hypothesized that one effect of increasing numbers would be less biased treatment of female politicians. More specifically, Dahlerup speculated, growing numbers could make a difference in the public and media responses they provoked, such that discriminatory treatment would tend to decline as numbers rose.¹⁵

We cannot test Dahlerup's proposition with reference to changing levels of representation in Canadian federal politics. Women's numbers have remained in the skewed category from 1921 – when Agnes Macphail entered the House of Commons to a chorus of commentary about her hat, gloves, dress and marital status -- until the present. Research on media portrayals of female politicians suggests Dahlerup is right to the extent that reporters continue to operate within a gendered frame. For example, one study of television reporting in three federal election debates concluded “coverage focuses disproportionately on combative displays of behaviour by female party leaders, but tends to ignore the women when they adopt a more low-key style, especially when the novelty of a female leader has worn off.”¹⁶ Moreover, journalists' stories frequently reflect sustained focus on the leadership style, physical appearance and personal romantic lives of elected women, at the expense of attention to their substantive policy interests and contributions.

The logical question following from Kanter and Dahlerup's work is “so what?” Who cares if the House

Figure 1
Group Types as Defined by the Proportional Representation of Two Social Categories in the Membership
 Source: Kanter 1977: 209



of Commons contains skewed proportions of male and female members and if, as a result, media accounts treat women in public life unfairly? To respond directly: These patterns are important because they likely depress the supply of potential women candidates – the very candidates whose presence in our legislatures could move the House of Commons from a skewed toward a tilted and, eventually, balanced proportion of men and women. Extrapolating from Kanter’s typology, the willingness of both female incumbents and past candidates to run again, and of new candidates to offer themselves for parliamentary office, will tend to be lower in Canada than in the Nordic countries with their fairly gender-balanced legislatures.

From this perspective, it is worth contemplating whether driving up demand for female candidates in Canada—including among parties of the political right that have firmly resisted quotas as well as leader-appointed candidates – can succeed in the absence of changes to the supply situation. One scenario might involve offering monetary incentives along the lines of enhanced subsidies to political parties, whereby organizations that nominated or elected a given percentage of women candidates stood to benefit financially from their actions. Another could entail introducing some element of proportionality into the federal electoral system. Without more potential candidates who could be convinced

to get involved in party politics, however, demand-oriented strategies might prove ineffectual. In other words, altering the composition of Canadian deliberative bodies away from their skewed group proportions, and improving the ways in which we discuss and evaluate politicians, are arguably central to changing both sides of the story – because driving up demand through various reforms does not by itself create supply or, in this case, facilitate the recruitment of women candidates.¹⁷

Does this line of argument mean women’s numerical representation in the Canadian House of Commons is locked in an eternally skewed situation, from which there is no escape? I do not want to leave this impression, since there are many other possible responses to the numbers story which include holding an election that produces a change in government. As Table 2 suggests, if the Liberals and NDP won more seats, this by itself would likely ensure far more women and far more politically progressive women held seats in the House of Commons than was the case following the 2006 and 2008 elections.

It would be naïve to conclude without considering the larger context in which recruitment to the Canadian House of Commons occurs. Not just potential candidates, but also citizens at large, are frustrated by an emphasis on party discipline and conformity to leader-centred organizations that, together with

the limited role of committees and other avenues for cross-party interaction, reduce opportunities for MPs to think and act in independent, creative ways. The tenor of parliamentary debate has been widely lamented because it seems too conflictual, personalized and, in some cases, corrosive to stimulate anything approaching constructive problem-solving. The extent to which legislators and legislatures really matter is doubtful to successive generations of citizens raised on a steady diet of "markets rule" discourse, which dates at least from the late 1970s rise of Thatcherite neo-conservatism. Reversing the dysfunction and devaluation of not just parliamentary politics but also the elections that produce legislative outcomes, is thus a crucial part of ensuring Canada's House of Commons can in the future attract a body of high-quality, highly engaged MPs who look more like our country's population.

While parliament in general may once have been a far more effective institution, in the case of women MPs we have no need to hearken back to a once-glorious golden age. Our House of Commons stalemate for ninety years at the level of skewed representation means there arguably never was a nirvana for female parliamentarians. In response to George Santanyana's stirring sentence, therefore, it seems we are unlikely to forget the past because we insist on repeating it.

Notes

1. <http://www.thestar.com/article/881530--porter-female-breakthrough-on-toronto-city-council> (consulted 30 November 2010).
2. For longitudinal data on municipal office-holding in Toronto, see Sylvia Bashevkin, *Tales of Two Cities: Women and Municipal Restructuring in London and Toronto* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2006), p. 45.
3. Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Men and Women of the Corporation* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).
4. Drude Dahlerup, "From a small to a large minority: Women in Scandinavian politics," *Scandinavian Political Studies* 11:4 (1988), pp. 283-87.
5. Margaret Stewart and Doris French, *Ask No Quarter* (Toronto: Longmans, 1959), p. 63.
6. Sylvia B. Bashevkin, *Toeing the Lines: Women and Party Politics in English Canada* (2nd ed.; Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 85.
7. See Sarah Childs and Mona Lena Krook, "Analysing Women's Substantive Representation: From Critical Mass to Critical Actors," *Government and Opposition* 44:2 (2009), pp. 125-45.
8. See Sylvia Bashevkin, *Women, Power, Politics: The Hidden Story of Canada's Unfinished Democracy* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 122-26.
9. Lisa Young, "Women's Representation in the Canadian House of Commons," n.d., page 4; located at <http://www.ucalgary.ca/iaprfiles/technicalpapers/iaprt-041006.pdf> consulted 1 Dec. 2010.
10. See *Women in Canada 2000: A Gender-Based Statistical Report* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2000), p. 107.
11. Nikki Macdonald, "Women beneath the electoral barrier," *Electoral Insight* (January 2005), consulted at http://www.elections.ca/res/eim/article_search/article.asp?id=125&lang=e&frmPageSize=, 1 December 2010.
12. Kanter, *Men and Women of the Corporation*, p. 207.
13. Kim Campbell speech as quoted in Robert Fife, *Kim Campbell: The Making of a Politician* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 1993), p. 149.
14. David C. Docherty, *Mr. Smith Goes to Ottawa: Life in the House of Commons* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997), xxiii.
15. Dahlerup, "From a small to a large minority."
16. Elisabeth Gidengil and Joanna Everitt, "Conventional Coverage/Unconventional Politicians: Gender and Media Coverage of Canadian Leaders' Debates, 1993, 1997, 2000," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 36:3 (July-August 2003), p. 560.
17. The concentration of women candidates and MPs in Canada's major cities is striking, revealing a rural shortfall that crosses regional and party boundaries. On this dimension of the demand and supply question, see Louise Carbert, "Are cities more congenial? Tracking the rural deficit of women in the House of Commons," in Sylvia Bashevkin, ed., *Opening Doors Wider: Women's Political Engagement in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009), pp. 70-90.