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# The Struggle for Equality in Parliament and Beyond

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Hon. Sheila Copps

*Much has been written about the dominance of one race and one gender in Parliament and in politics generally. But Parliament is not the only area where there are problems with equality for women. This article looks at Canadian society and argues that what we see in Parliament and in politics is a reflection of larger problems in Canadian society.*

I entered adulthood with the mistaken impression that the battle for equality had already been won. More than a decade had passed since Betty Friedan wrote her famous treatise, *The Feminine Mystique*. Tennis star Billy Jean King had easily whipped Bobby Riggs in the 1973 “Battle of the Sexes”.

## A Personal Journey

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My first hint of how far we had to go in the quest for equality occurred when I secured my first full time job as a junior reporter for the *Hamilton Spectator*. The Editor welcomed me to the team with a remark that I will always remember. He said “I hope you realize that we are exceeding our quota of women by hiring you.”

Thankful to have a job at all, I merely smiled and said “thank you”. In those days one would not think of laying an official complaint to a human rights commission.

Twenty eight years earlier my own mother had been fired from her secretarial job merely for the offense of getting married. In her generation nobody thought twice about a company policy that permitted the firing of females because of a change in their marital status.

Young women were socialized into believing that our lot in life was to find a man who would support us. When I entered university I had some revolutionary ideas. I quickly became active on student council, and as Vice President External at the University of Western Ontario.

I organized a demonstration against nuclear testing off Amchitka Island in the Pacific Ocean. We managed to assemble ten thousand student activists who closed the border at the Sarnia bridge linking Ontario and Michigan. But even with my revolutionary bent I actually believed that life after university would probably involve working for favourite social causes, for free, while my future husband would be the bread winner.

When I was mulling over an application to law school, a friend told me not to apply on the grounds I would be competing with a guy who actually needed the job! I still shake my head today when I reflect on how I accepted the social stereotypes that defined women and men in those days.

I believed in my own capacity to work hard and to succeed. But I did not realize how much my personal ambitions had to be tempered by societal expectations.

The newspaper business was and largely still is a man’s world. To get along you did your job, laughed at their jokes and tried your best to fit in. The same rules applied when I switched to politics running for office for the first time at the ripe old age of 24 and being elected to the Ontario Provincial Parliament at age 28 as MPP for Hamilton Centre.

I quickly experienced the stark reality of discrimination. After posing a question in the legislature I was told by the minister and another MPP

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to get back to the kitchen. Weeks later members of the government were taking bets on how much I weighed.

A fellow MPP actually assaulted me while we were touring Northern Ontario communities studying the issue of spousal abuse. If I attacked my critics I would be branded a “bitch”. If I did nothing I would be supporting sexism.

Discrimination continued when I was elected to the House of Commons in 1984. Media coverage of male politicians focused mainly on their ideas. Coverage of me focused on what I was wearing or whom I was dating. When I proposed the first law to protect gays and lesbians in the *Ontario Human Rights Code*, I was attacked as a closet lesbian.

When I asked tough questions, I was accused of being strident. The pitch of my voice, the cut of my hair, was the subject of much media discussion. I was called everything from “baby” to “slut” to “whiner” simply for doing my job.

By the time I reached the age of thirty I became convinced that the only way for women to achieve equality is by sticking together and understanding that we are not the problem.

***Helen Reddy was right. Her hit song of the 1970s said “I am woman hear me roar.” We need to roar. We need to stick together.***

When a farmer is elected to Parliament, he or she has no problem identifying as a voice for farmers. A Westerner or a Quebecer is determined to carry the message of his or her region to Ottawa. Yet even in 2011 too many women are still afraid to identify themselves as feminists in their fight for equality.

### **Equality in and out of Parliament**

In the year I was born, we passed laws guaranteeing equal pay for equal work. I fully expected that by the time my daughter reached adulthood the only place we would find discrimination was in the history books.

However my daughter graduates from Concordia this year and sad to say as she enters the work force she can expect to earn 15 to 20 per cent less than a male graduate in her class simply because of her gender.

A tenured female full professor in Canada can expect to earn about \$21,000 less than a man. The official explanation is that women happen to be in fields that are less remunerative. When we do achieve equality as women have done very recently in the medical

profession it was the result of a targeted national strategy. Then we are immediately faced with a barrage of complaints about the feminization of medicine and a strategy to get more men back into medicine. Yet for 150 years we managed to have non equity of women and that was not an issue worth tackling.

In the past 25 years women have streamed into the labour force at unprecedented rates. It is no coincidence that during this time Canadian’s real earning power has barely increased. It is rarely discussed in the economic literature but one of the reasons keeping wages down has been the increase of women in the labour force. Men are still getting paid 25% more than women. We need a concerted strategy by governments to pursue true equality.

Our own Parliament is the most important legislative body in the country and yet we are ranked 55th in the world in terms of female representation. There are some bright spots on the horizon. The ongoing work of Equal Voice, a non partisan group devoted to getting more women elected, is bringing the issue to the fore.

But stereotyping is so deeply embedded that most of us have difficulty recognizing that it even exists. When president-elect Obama was ridiculed for racial reasons on *Saturday Night Live*, the offending skit was criticized and pulled after a single night. No similar backlash was felt when Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin was repeatedly portrayed as a baby toting interloper. Why was Sarah Palin’s parental and grand parental status the subject of so much public ridicule while the family ties of Joe Biden were lauded as those that made him a suitable candidate for Vice President.

In 2010 we celebrated the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the *Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women*, chaired by Florence Bird. They produced a ground breaking report on sexism, handed us a blueprint for equality and started us down the road to achieving it.

But if we think the situation is bad in Parliament just take a look at the Fortune Five Hundred companies. A recent report issued by *Catalyst North America* bemoaned the absence of women in Canada’s boardrooms. Even though female business graduates now outnumber men, more than 40% of the Fortune 500 companies do not have a single woman on the board of directors. It does not have to be this way.

A couple of decades ago a young girl in Ontario had to sue the Ontario Minor Hockey Association for the right to play. In 2010 we have the greatest female hockey players on earth. Our women’s dominance in hockey was widely noted by the media during the Olympics but few reflected on the basis for that

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evolution. When I was Heritage Minister we rewrote the guidelines for sports funding. Any organization that wanted public support had to incorporate gender equity in specific targeted programs in order to get funded.

That kind of winning formula works. It worked for the Canadian Medical Association, it worked in women's hockey and we need to apply that formula in other areas.

### **What Needs to be Done**

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Parliament is only one of four pillars of society where we need to fight the equality battle. The others are the media, the financial world and education. They are the key determinants if we live in a society of equality. At the moment the financial and media sectors are actually lagging behind the political in terms of equality.

In politics it is the women who keep the system afloat. They are the office managers, the campaign managers, the door knockers, the list managers. However they stop short of being the candidates. Yet when political leaders take the initiative to recruit more women by establishing targets they are viciously attacked by other parties and by the media.

When a company issues an IPO people expect the company to project targets and to reach them. Why should the political process be any different. Political parties, universities, newspaper publishers and Bay Street board rooms tend to field candidates that offer a certain comfort level. They mirror their own experience and recruit from within their own ranks. Human nature dictates that what we see in leadership is usually a mirror of what we see in ourselves.

The deeply ingrained biases of our society do not start or stop in Parliament. Parliament is twice as effective at recruiting women as is corporate Canada. Parliament is part of the problem but it is a reflection of a society where deeply ingrained views of racism and sexism are still pervasive.

The view that women do not enter Parliament because they perceive it as a rough and tumble man's world is not borne out by the facts. Decorum is not the issue. It is a sideline to the real issue of how we can continue to trumpet equality in our country when sexism exists in just about every sector of the economy.

We go to Afghanistan to encourage young Afghan women to be educated and we do not discuss the intrinsic inequities in our own system that have existed since Florence Bird's report was tabled 40 years ago.

There can be successes. In the public sector a former Clerk of the Privy Council created a political action plan for equity. The public sector now provides a closer match to equality than any other sector in the country.

In my own former department I was told we cannot possibly have equity in appointments because there are not enough qualified women. We managed to appoint 50% women including many boards such as the CRTC which are largely business driven. You need to set a target and go after it and not just talk about it.

On the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Royal Commission we need real action.

- We need to recognize that sexism is alive and well and living in Canada.
- We need to recognize that progress made by women in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has stalled.
- We need an equality SOS that should include, in my view, a second Royal Commission on the Status of Women and Minorities to do a progress report on the last 40 years and to tackle the areas where there has not been enough progress.
- We need a standalone national think tank like the CD Howe Institute or the Canada West Foundation to research and educate Canadian women in the financial, education, media and political sectors.
- We need a party nomination process overseen by Elections Canada. When we are investing millions of dollars of taxpayers' money in political parties they should not be allowed to carry on their business shrouded in secrecy.
- We need a standing committee of Parliament charged with examining the longstanding inequities in the workplace.
- We need legislation requiring public companies to have an equitable board of directors. It does not have to be done overnight but surely if you are a public company taking advantage of the public tax system you have a responsibility to have a reflection of equality on your board of directors.
- We need legislation requiring universities in receipt of public funds to have a published action plan for equity. This takes time but we must make a start.

A Royal Commission will add many more things to this list but let us not wait another 40 years. Canada can do better.

We need to take a page from the book of the famous five – those courageous nation builders who did not wait for someone else to crash through the glass ceiling. They tackled the old boys network with a determination that guaranteed success.