
Reaching Out to Canadian Women and Youth

Myrna Driedger, MLA

The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) and the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) have come together to work for better representation of women in legislatures throughout Canada and the Commonwealth. Created in 2005, the CWP-Canadian Region is comprised of women parliamentarians of the provincial and territorial Canadian legislatures and the Federal parliament. Its aims and objectives are: To provide opportunities for strategic discussion and development for future and present parliamentarians; To increase female representation in our Parliaments; To foster closer relationships between Canadian women parliamentarians; To foster relations with other countries having close parliamentary ties with Canada; and To discuss, strategize and act on gender-related issues in Canada and internationally. The CWP pursues its objectives by means of annual Commonwealth parliamentary conferences and regional conferences, outreach programs and participation in many campaign schools across the country. This article looks at the 2013 Outreach Program held in Québec.



The importance of creating awareness and sharing information with women and girls about the role of parliamentarians, the parliamentary system and the political process is key to increasing engagement of women in politics. Outreach programs provide an invaluable opportunity to encourage

involvement and to de-mystify the political world.

The CWP-Canadian Region also participates in many campaign schools across the country – sharing insights and experiences – in the hopes of inspiring women to take that step into politics.

The purpose of our Outreach Program is to increase women's representation in all levels of government. During the program, discussions are held concerning the role of the CWP and the objectives of the CWP Outreach Program; the multiple roles

of parliamentarians; increasing youth engagement; the road to election day and the election process; the support available to candidates; increasing women's representation in the public service; and the importance of community and constituency involvement.

The 2013 Program

As Chair of the CWP – Canada, I led a delegation of members from Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Prince Edward Island, and the Northwest Territories to attend the CWP Outreach Program in Québec, from March 20-23, 2013.

The sixth annual Outreach Program built on the successful visits to Prince Edward Island, in 2011, British Columbia in 2010, Nunavut in 2009, Nova Scotia in 2008, and the Northwest Territories in 2007.¹

During the 2013 Program, the delegation met with members of the following institutions and organizations in Québec:

- Group Femmes, Politique et Démocratie;
- Members of the Assembly of First Nations of Québec;
- Students from Neufchâtel secondary school;
- Journalists from the Québec Press Gallery.

The Group Femmes, Politique et Démocratie (GFPD) is an organization that promotes citizenship, education and political involvement. It also provides coaching

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for women interested in entering politics. Since 2004, close to 150 women have attended its École Femmes et Démocratie, offered in cooperation with Québec's national school of public administration (ENAP), and participated in a mentoring pilot project for women in politics.

We must open doors and we must see to it that they remain open, so that others can pass through.

Rosemary Brown
First African Canadian Women of the
BC Legislative Assembly

The GFPD developed a program to help women who are interested in entering politics by pairing them with mentors and helping them develop both interpersonal and career-related skills. However, another goal of the pilot project, which was launched in 2004, was to educate women about the steps involved in entering politics. Ms. Hémond described the pilot project, its objectives and the co-development approach to coaching women in politics.

It was pointed out that it is important to create a mentoring agreement that sets out participants' respective roles and objectives, the terms and conditions of the mentorship, and the medium and long-term goals. Having good listening skills and being open, empathetic, trusting and non-judgmental are critical to the success of the partnership/mentoring arrangement. It is also essential to develop a network and have regular meetings to help the participants adjust, ask questions, provide advice, and share knowledge and experience.

The women of the Assembly of First Nations of Québec and Labrador was created in 2007. An objective of the group is to work towards providing supports to First Nations women who are already active in politics, those who are looking to pursue a career in politics, or to those who wish to get involved in their communities.

The group shared with us that all 11 Nations (First Nations and Inuit) in Québec shared similar issues: such as spousal abuse, discrimination and lack of access to higher education. The members of the working group shared their background and their struggles around issues of equality, gender, justice, prostitution, and violence – saying that all of these issues need to be addressed. They feel that education is the key to helping women: they need access to higher education, and they also need the opportunity and/or the mandate to teach and learn at a higher level, which many felt was not currently available to them.

The working group also said that more women need to get involved in their communities and help

to create a network to promote self-esteem, sports, healthy living and support between themselves and their children. One member pointed out a challenge they face: "The *Indian Act* favours men. Women are treated like minors. We can't get bank loans. How do you expect us to enter politics if we don't even have the most basic rights?" It was also highlighted that the band chief decides who will go to school, and that the only thing First Nations women can do is present resolutions at band council meetings, and very few of those resolutions are ever adopted.

Neufchâtel Secondary School's student model parliament is a leader in its field. This school is the first in the Québec City area and the fourth in Québec to have changed its student council into a model parliament. In 2006, with the goal of increasing young people's knowledge of democracy through education, the Jean-Charles Bonenfant Foundation (a non-partisan organization) proposed a new way of operating high school student councils, inspired by aspects of the National Assembly.

The administration benefits from the initiative because it puts students in a hands-on setting that they like, and enables them to exercise their right to free speech. The model parliament is a consultative body, but the administration considers all its requests and works with students to advance projects deemed to be in everyone's interest. This encourages all students to participate in the decisions that concern them and their school. It allows young people to learn and put into practice democratic values such as freedom of speech, the respect of other's opinions, the art of compromise, solidarity, justice, tolerance, equity, equality, representation, the right to vote, and access to information.

Women's presence as public actors confirms, while their absence weakens, the legitimacy of basic democratic principles."

Professor Sylvia Bashevkin
University of Toronto

The 1,450 students work hard to be models of commitment. They comply with a code of ethics (respect-rigour-integrity-involvement), and take an enriched program in science and technology, music, physical education/sport, or visual arts – all the while participating in a school-based democratic setting.

Students were curious to learn more about the work of an elected official; how they balance their work and family lives; how they deal with their respective regional issues and party issues; how youth are



Members of the 2013 Outreach Delegation (l-r): Wendy Bisaro (Northwest Territories), Bridget A. Pastoor (Alberta), Myrna Driedger (Manitoba), Nadine Wilson (Saskatchewan), Paula Biggar (Prince Edward Island), Leanne Rowat (Manitoba), Laura Ross (Saskatchewan). Note: Photo taken during a tour of the Québec National Assembly and does not include Québec parliamentarians who participated in the Outreach Program: Charlotte L'Écuyer, Denise Beaudoin, Diane Gadoury-Hamelin and Michelyne C. St-Laurent

involved in their election campaigns; their views on social media; the differences and difficulties of being a woman in politics compared to men; and their advice to young people to encourage them to go into politics.

A very informative conversation took place with a group of women journalists from the Québec National Assembly Press Gallery. We had an opportunity to discuss our views on how the media portrays women in politics, while also engaging in a discussion about the issues and opportunities that women political journalists encounter.

Conclusion

Hosted by Québec MNA Charlotte L'Écuyer, with great support from the staff of the National Assembly, the sixth CWP Outreach Program provided the opportunity to promote engagement in political life, to talk with Québec community leaders and organizations, and to raise awareness of women's issues. Lengthy consultations took place prior to the delegation's arrival in Québec to identify key community organizations,

leaders and potential candidates in each region. Consultation with local networks is imperative to the success of the CWP Outreach Program. Throughout the program, CWP members were able to interact with many accomplished, passionate and engaged women in the community.

Canada's CWP Outreach Program is a true success story. Hundreds of Canadian women have now connected with our women parliamentarians and we hope we have educated, connected, empowered and engaged them to want to take that next step and join us on a political journey.

Notes

- 1 For information on previous programs see Charlotte L'Écuyer, "The First Outreach Program of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians" *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, vol. 30, no. 3, Autumn 2007, pp. 4-5. Gary Levy, "50th Canadian Regional CPA Conference, Québec", *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, vol. 35, no. 2, Summer 2012, pp. 56-57.