
British Columbia Reaches a New Benchmark for Women's Representation

Hon. Linda Reid, MLA

With 36 per cent of its MLAs now women, British Columbia currently has the highest proportion of women parliamentarians in Canada. Moreover, women hold key decision-making positions in the province as Lieutenant Governor, Premier and Speaker. While celebrating these milestones, in this article, B.C. Speaker Linda Reid warns against complacency and urges parliamentarians across Canada and the Commonwealth to continue implementing changes designed to facilitate a level playing field for women interested in political life. She provides several examples of innovations which have contributed to the province's success at bolstering the number of women representatives and improving the quality of their work life in politics.



The importance of ensuring equal representation of women in politics has been a recurrent theme in recent issues of the *Canadian Parliamentary Review*. Parliamentarians have reflected on their experiences in public life, and stressed the importance of women

participating in political decision-making processes. Women care about different issues and offer important perspectives and experiences. Furthermore, research shows that gender balance in politics results in well-rounded policies and better organizational performance.

Notable advances in women's representation have been made in British Columbia in recent years. The May 2013 provincial general election saw a significant

increase in the proportion of women elected over the previous parliament and the highest number of women ever elected to hold provincial office in B.C. Thirty of the 85 total seats were won by women – five more seats than in the previous general election. The by-election victory of Premier Christy Clark in July 2013 increased that number to 31.

With 36 per cent of its MLAs now women, BC currently has the highest proportion of women parliamentarians in Canada. The province is now well above the United Nations' minimum threshold of 30 per cent for women as a group to exert a meaningful influence in legislative assemblies. In addition, BC also now surpasses the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association's threshold of 33 percent for women to become a critical mass and to have influence.

In addition to holding a significant percentage of seats, BC women hold notable positions in decision-making roles. For example, our Premier, seven of the 19 members of the executive council, and the Lieutenant Governor are women. In addition, several Opposition critics are female, as was the Leader of the Opposition from 2001 to 2010. I am proud to serve as the province's fourth female Speaker and the first since 1994. For the first time in our provincial history, the positions of Lieutenant Governor, Premier, and Speaker are held by women.

Linda Reid is Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia. She will become chair of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians, Canadian Section, in 2014.

While we have surpassed some notable milestones in BC, we must not be complacent in wider efforts to increase women's participation in political life. Much work remains to increase women's representation, both nationally and abroad. Despite some provinces making great strides in recent years, Canada remains ranked 54th on the Inter-Parliamentary Union's "Women in National Parliaments" list, and trails other governments in Europe, parts of Africa, and Australia.

How can we attain more proportional representation for women to ensure we serve society's interests more fully? Are there changes we can make to our political institutions to achieve this end? What lessons might be learned from recent successes in BC? These are some of the questions I ponder as Speaker and as Vice-Chair of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians.

Some of the options to increase female representation have been well-documented in the *CPR* and elsewhere. Actively encouraging women to consider running for office, particularly in winnable ridings, is an obvious first step. Establishing rules to keep campaign spending limits within reasonable amounts will also ensure a level playing field for women to run. Other targeted actions could include providing specific funding to assist women candidates with expenses such as child care, and supporting efforts of non-partisan advocacy groups that work to support women and raise awareness. Electoral reforms could possibly achieve the broader goal of parity of women's representation. These are but some of many ways to encourage and facilitate the entry of women into political life.

As an MLA for 23 years, my experience has been that pursuing women-friendly initiatives in the workplace can have a significant impact. Indeed, we need to ensure that our work environment is conducive to both attracting and retaining women. For example, adopting a parliamentary schedule and sitting times that recognize the need for work-life balance provides stability and predictability of working hours. In BC, we have had a parliamentary calendar with fixed sitting days for several years. Rather than a session called at a moment's notice and daily sittings that extend late into the night, we have scheduled sitting days, and

no Friday sittings. Some weeks during the session are also set aside for working in the constituency. This has made it much easier for women to balance their responsibilities as an MLA with those of their family.

During my time in office, I have seen the benefits that even seemingly minor changes can make for women entering politics. For me, the decision to allow women to take maternity leave without penalty when the House is sitting was a godsend. It meant that when I gave birth to my son, I was able to take four weeks off, rather than a mere four days, as was the case with my daughter. Other physical changes to the parliamentary buildings can also have an indirect impact. For example, providing more women's washrooms and improving barrier-free access for persons with disabilities has benefitted women working in our precinct. BC now has three MLAs who use wheelchairs for mobility, two of whom are women.

Another factor I'd like to stress is the important role that mentorship can play for women, particularly

"As an MLA for 23 years, my experience has been that pursuing women-friendly initiatives in the workplace can have a significant impact. Indeed, we need to ensure that our work environment is conducive to both attracting and retaining women."

~ Linda Reid

those new to political life. Entering the world of politics can be daunting for any person, and experienced parliamentarians can play a key role in mentoring newer colleagues, whether in the form of advice or support. For instance, in my earlier role as Deputy Speaker, I hosted

monthly lunches with women MLAs from both sides of the House to discuss relevant issues. After becoming Speaker, I invited new women MLAs for lunch and a discussion on safety and security issues. Providing time and common ground to meet with other women, regardless of their political affiliation, is something I cherish and will continue.

According to a recent study in the United States, men are more than twice as likely as women to have thought about running for political office. This thinking needs to change. As Hillary Rodham Clinton once said, "There cannot be true democracy unless women's voices are heard." I agree with this principle wholeheartedly, and I hope that a time will come when women will make up at least half of all elected members and Cabinet. Narrowing the gender gap, however, will require a joint and concerted effort by both women and men.