

Campaign School for Women: Sharing Political Knowledge Across the North

The Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) – Canadian Region has been engaged in a number of outreach projects to foster interest among women in the political process, including campaign schools for women. The authors outline their participation in a recent Northwest Territories’ campaign school and note that despite differing styles of government (consensus versus party system) across Canada’s territories and northern areas of provinces, there are many similarities in the kinds of relationships parliamentarians create with constituents in largely rural northern communities.

Wendy Bisaro and Lisa Dempster, MHA

As members of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians’ Canadian Region steering committee, we were delighted to take part in a recent campaign school for aspiring women parliamentarians in the Northwest Territories.

In February, 2015, 45 very interested and engaged women from all over the vast territory (though especially from the Yellowknife area) took part in the third campaign school organized by the Northwest Territories’ Status of Women Council. The event was held in preparation for the territory’s general election in November 2015.

Representing the CWP, we joined Jane Groenewegen on a panel to discuss the role of MLAs, managing people’s expectations and maintaining a work/life balance in public service. (Bisaro and Groenewegen were the only two women elected in the NWT at the time). The panel was followed by a lively question and answer period.

In another session, we were able to have a discussion about how to set up and effectively run a campaign. Fundraising appeared to be a particular concern

among attendees, but we also explored varied topics, including working in male dominated environments, the challenges of public life and understanding basic campaigning information.

Bisaro: As an NWT MLA, I was thrilled to welcome Lisa Dempster to our territory. Her expenses were covered by CWP - Canadian Region as part of its ongoing outreach commitment. As noted in the CWP Canada’s Outreach Program Framework document: “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.”

Lisa’s attendance provided a valuable, similar yet different perspective on the job of an MLA/MHA to the school participants. The NWT and Labrador may be at opposite ends of the country, but they have similar geography – vast unpopulated spaces with small communities and little infrastructure to connect them. Although most of the campaign school participants were from Yellowknife, a connected community of about 20,000 people, hearing from Lisa about her work in her large constituency was very enlightening.

Wendy Bisaro was MLA for Frame Lake in the Northwest Territories from 2007 to 2015. Lisa Dempster has been a Liberal MHA for Cartwright - L’Anse au Clair in Newfoundland and Labrador since 2013.



Wendy Bisaro

Lisa is on a first name basis with the majority of her constituents, much the same as NWT MLAs are with their constituents. It was that personal, one-on-one interaction that resonated with NWT Campaign School participants; the North operates in much the same way.

In spite of NWT and Newfoundland & Labrador being very different politically (consensus government vs party system of government) Lisa and school participants were able to discuss the many aspects of an election campaign, and the barriers and roadblocks faced by female leaders and how they can be overcome. Regardless of jurisdiction, the work of a candidate, before or after the election is the same!

I truly appreciated Lisa's obvious commitment to her job and her constituents, her professionalism and openness and I was thrilled to see how the participants soaked up the campaign topics and left feeling empowered.

Dempster: I left the event noting that there are many challenges to campaigning in the remote north. Those challenges include not only getting elected, but once elected, being effective in your role. Towns are very spread out, air travel is costly and often smaller areas speak a language that may require an interpreter at



Lisa Dempster

the door. Because of the vast geography, door to door campaigning isn't always possible, so the importance of signage with a brief but clear message that voters will remember is essential.

These challenges are heightened when you are a female; gender issues and old boys' clubs are still alive and well in many parts. With just two women MLAs in a legislature of 19, it's a glaring statement of just how under represented women are at this level and a reminder of how much work we still have left to do. However, I was encouraged that an impressive number of women are considering running in the general election (at least six) and I hope they will be encouraged and supported. I offered my assistance in the future to any woman who moves forward with an election plan.

It's imperative that we continue to see female representation grow in the legislatures across our country. Women do bring a different perspective to the table. Politics can be a viable and rewarding career for women and those of us involved have an important responsibility to encourage and support those interested in pursuing this worthy vocation. I am very thankful to Wendy and our hosts for organizing this wonderful event and allowing me to be a part of it.