
Reflections on Politics and Gender

Premier Alison Redford

This article looks at factors that determine the number of women in politics. It suggests that family influence and role models are important. It also outlines some personal experiences that culminated with the election of Alberta's first female Premier.



I believe it is our collective duty, as parliamentarians and as Canadians, to strengthen our democratic institutions. This is something I have worked toward, beginning in my pre-government career in many nations where democracy was just taking root and it is something I still strive to do, here in the midst of a country where democracy is something many people take for granted.

Democracy can sometimes shock us with its vigor, especially when it flourishes in countries whose histories are steeped in authoritarianism. But just as often, it can surprise us when it fails to thrive in what had appeared to be fertile ground.

Even in Canada, with a long history of responsible government, we must still work together to strengthen our democratic traditions and institutions. And the best way to accomplish that is to encourage greater participation in the political process. Governments are most effective when they mirror the society they govern. They do not achieve that until every group has the confidence to reach the corridors of power.

Unfortunately too many people who are leaders in their families and their communities are not reflected in decision-making structures. That has to change, particularly when it comes to women, who bring unique perspectives to public policymaking.

Alison Redford is Premier of Alberta. This is a revised version of her presentation to the Canadian Section of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians at their Conference in Edmonton on July 15, 2013.

My Path

When I first decided to seek the leadership of our party, one of the first questions I was asked was: Is it going to make a difference that you're a woman? I remember saying, "No, it's not. People will take a look at the candidates that are running, and decide which candidates and which party best represent the future of our province." I absolutely believe that is what happened.

Once I became Premier, I was quite surprised by the number of young girls who looked at me in a different way. Well, lots of people looked at me in a different way. But I was struck often, when I went to events, by how many young girls were there. And when I say young, I mean Grade 5 and Grade 6. It really struck me, because that is the age of my daughter.

I had this sense that there was a vacuum — that smart, young girls who were thinking about what they wanted to do in their lives, and what they cared about, and what the possibilities were...they thought it was kind of neat that they could see a woman who was politically active and successful in a leadership role.

So my view on this has changed somewhat, since I became Premier. I now see it as a tremendous responsibility to make sure we are encouraging young girls and young women to become involved in public life. I also think we need to recognize that there is more than one way to do this.

When I was growing up, there were not as many women in politics. But I had my mother and my grandmother to inspire me. Neither were politicians but both were active in their communities and their churches and their families. They lived the values of compassion and service. They did that because they understood that they had a stake in shaping their community and the society that I grew up in. Their interests sparked mine and it seemed to me only

natural to make something out of it — and to carry on a culture of compassion, of respect, and living with integrity, and staying true to yourself, which is not always easy.

I became involved in party politics and I was lucky enough to end up in Ottawa. I worked on political campaigns, and I was privileged enough to work in government. It was just another step, and it was not always ideal, and it was not always successful. We all make mistakes in life. Sometimes, when we look at CVs and biographical notes, everything seems to be very clear and deliberately planned. But it rarely is. For me, there were times when it was very hard, when I was young and I was ambitious and I was a bit of an oddity.

But I will tell you that did strengthen my resolve to do what I had been taught to do — which was to work in community, to be involved in public policy, and to find ways to support initiatives that would allow people that I cared about in the communities I lived in to have a better life.

Young girls ask me: “when did you decide to be Premier? How did you end up doing this? What was your plan?” All I ever say to them is: “Follow your passion. Find your space. Find space so that you can think. Find space to learn, and to be accepted for who you are, so you can stay true to your convictions.” I believe that is how to inspire people, and how we as leaders have to inspire people in the society that we live in.

We have more women serving in more and higher public offices. Currently 30 percent of our caucus are women, and many of them sit in our Cabinet. Fort McMurray, which is the heart of the oil sands, the great stereotype of Alberta, a city of heavy machinery, is run by a petite, feisty woman – Mayor Melissa Blake. There are many women serving as councillors, reeves and municipal leaders who are leading our province forward. I am very confident that my daughter Sarah will enter a society that is even more accepting of bright, ambitious women. One of my goals as Premier is to nurture that sort of an environment, for her and for every little girl who dreams those big dreams.

Conclusions

I want every Albertan to see and understand what their governments are doing, and to be excited to part of it from a young age. The more government inspires people, especially women who have taken ownership of their community, their province or their country, the more inspired they will be to become involved in the political process.

Community engagement at every level is so important, and it carries on from generation to generation, when we lead by example. Every generation has the same wish: they want the next to enjoy even more opportunities for success and happiness than they did. That is what I want for my daughter. That is what my mother wanted for me. That is why my family came to this country.

My mother was not the loudest talker in the room, and she did not seek the limelight. But along the way, she showed me the impact one person could have, with dedication, hard work and service.

Every little girl who can see a woman making a difference in the lives of others — whether she is volunteering once a month, or holding public office, or perhaps she is a young woman who goes back to school and upgrades her skills and ends up becoming an engineer— that is one more little girl who will be inspired to follow suit.

This process is not something we can take for granted. Victories always look inevitable, when seen with the benefit of hindsight. But victory only comes with determination and perseverance against the odds.

Women who have achieved success have won a victory for us, but unless we all follow up and press onward, the advantage will be lost.

Nellie McClung

My promise to my daughter, when I head out for a busy week, is that every Canadian woman and young girl will have the ability to build on the legacy of women who have come before them. I want all of them to believe wholeheartedly that they can have my job. I want them to know they have a stake in our future, and that our nation, with all its beauty and wonder and precious, hard-won democratic freedoms, belongs to them now and forever.

The role of parliamentarian is a difficult one, regardless of gender. For women, the challenges of finding balance in our lives and succeeding in a tough environment are never easy. But they are made easier with mentorship, friendship and encouragement which is what Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians do. Our parliaments, and our country, are stronger and better for it.