
Recognition and Respect: The Transitional Role of Women in Public Life

by Joyce Hayden, MLA

History speaks to the continuing struggle of Canadian women to be regarded equally in public life – whether as candidates, elected officials or voters. I remember in 1967 when the Royal Commission on the Status of Women was set up, I attended the first Strategy for Change Conference in 1968 chaired by Laura Sabia and I remember when the Report on the Status of Women was released in 1970. It would seem that women have been well on the road to equality – recognition and respect – for some time.

A small how-to booklet published by the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women in 1983 entitled *Play from Strength* is about initiating political action. A recent example of a most important and successful lobby was the one which women staged to entrench their rights in the Constitution. Women's organizations started out by asking politely that the proposed Charter of Rights be worded carefully so that women had an unequivocal guarantee of equality with men. More than that 20 women's groups made presentations.

On February 14, 1981, several hundred women attended a Women and the Constitution conference, held in the West Block of the House of Commons. Conference organizers took the conference resolution to Parliament and told the government (less politely this time) that the Charter must be amended to assert that equality between women and men is a primary value in this nation. Two months of hard lobbying won women a new Section 28 in the Charter, guaranteeing all rights and freedoms equally to male and female persons. This new section met with unanimous approval in the House in April 1981.

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Women thought that the direction to the courts contained in Section 28 was the best protection of equality that had yet been attained.

However, at the November 1981 meeting between the Prime Minister and the provincial Premiers, three days of negotiations led to a compromise agreement that would allow the federal or provincial governments to "override" some of the Charter's promised rights and freedoms. Women's groups asked whether Section 28 was covered under the override. The Prime Minister announced that it was. Women started lobbying again. Within three weeks, the furious lobbying all across the country led to statements from all the Premiers that Section 28 should remain paramount and unaffected by the override. Women had won but they were angry that they should have had to fight at all, much less twice.

It seems that eternal vigilance is the price of equality. Women and men, working as equals in a democratic system can do nothing but gain from the experience. People who are a different colour than the majority of people around them, and people who have disabilities know also that it is tough always being the minority, the outsider.

I believe our role as sitting members in various legislatures across the country is to encourage women members to go after the power positions – because when you come right down to it, the issue is one of power sharing. As elected officials who do have something to say about our electoral system, we must ask ourselves why so few women seek elected office. We must face our prejudices and ask the hard questions. Why are there no women Speakers in Canada? Why are so few women party leaders? Why are so few women cabinet ministers?

Women are the backbone of political parties in this country, but they are not in the decision-making positions. They are seldom in power. Women's lack of participation was really brought home when I attended an interparliamentary meeting, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association conference, in Barbados last year.

Some Canadian Women "Firsts" in Politics

1917	Louise McKinney	First woman elected to a Canadian legislative body (Alberta)
1921	Agnes MacPhail	First woman elected to the House of Commons
1930	Cairine Reay Wilson	First woman Senator in Canadian history and first woman appointed Chair of a Senate Standing Committee (Immigration & Labour)
1949	Nancy Hodges	First woman Speaker in Commonwealth history (British Columbia)
1950	Ellen Fairclough	First woman to be appointed a Cabinet Minister
1953	Margaret Aitken	First woman to be appointed Chair of a standing committee of the House of Commons (Standing Committee on Standing Orders)
1953	Marie Ann Shipley	First woman in Canadian parliamentary history to move Address in Reply to the Speech from the Throne
1958	Jean Casselman Wadds	First woman named Parliamentary Secretary (Minister of National Health and Welfare)
1972	Muriel Fergusson	First woman Speaker of the Senate
1972	Jeanne Sauvé	First woman Cabinet Minister from Quebec
1974	Coline Campbell	First woman from Nova Scotia to sit in the House of Commons
1975	Grace McCarthy	First woman Deputy Premier (British Columbia)
1980, 1983	Jeanne Sauvé	First woman Speaker of the House of Commons and later first woman Governor General
1984	Anne Claire Cools	First black Senator in Canada
1984	Sheila Copps	The first sitting MP in Canadian history to give birth
1986	Sharon Carstairs	First woman leader of the Official Opposition (Manitoba)
1988	Ethel Blondin	First native woman MP
1989	Audrey McLaughlin	First woman to head a federal political party in North America
1989	Margaret Joe	First native woman Minister of Justice in any Canadian jurisdiction (Yukon)
1990	Kim Campbell	First woman appointed Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada

The conference itself was enjoyable but I found the international experience somewhat disconcerting. For the first time in my life, I experienced what it was like to be a minority of a minority of a minority.

I was a white person in a predominantly black organization. I was a woman in an almost exclusively

male organization and, of the few women there, most were senators. So I was that rare bird – an elected white woman parliamentarian.

The feeling of alienation was intense. On the last day I started to talk about how I felt to other women, and learned they were feeling the same. At lunch, in the space

of just one hour, 3 senators and I formed the nucleus of a women's caucus. Here we were, two black women, two white women from places as far apart as Bermuda, Zimbabwe, the Yukon and Jersey in the Channel Islands – and we had so much in common. By coffee time, we had included almost all of the women attending – 20 or more (in a gathering of over 200 people).

Unfortunately, CPA International has no women on its executive and is in the words of a senior Canadian politician, "the last bastion of the old boys' club". I was dismayed to learn that none of the elected members of the Canadian delegation was a woman – and only I and Marie Laing of Alberta, two provincial/territorial delegates, were elected women. Out of 20 to 30 Canadian delegates, only three were women! One was a Senator.

We cannot sit and wait. We must get out and do. We must play from strength. I have had my own experiences being a minority of a minority. I know the feeling of being powerless. I have been asked "whose wife are you" with no thought given to the possibility that it just might be me, a woman, who is the elected member. It's frustrating being in public life and having it assumed, usually by colleagues, that I am the spouse of the "real" member.

Audrey McLaughlin, Leader of the New Democratic Party of Canada, once said that the only real physical advantage men have over women in public life is that they wear comfortable shoes. Well, we are wearing comfortable shoes too – and I believe we have earned the right to be respected as partners and leaders in society.

Sandra Mitchell, President of the NDP, once told a Yukon audience that she thought it was nice to finally be able to talk to the leader of the party in the washroom... a small advantage men have always had.

Most politicians today are men. I ask you to think about your daughters and grand daughters. Do you want less for them than you want for your sons and grandsons? The mentoring that has happened for generations by men – of sons and grandsons, and friends' sons and grandsons – is only beginning to happen in public life for women.

"Like chooses like", is a natural tendency – but it is also limiting. Intellectually, I understand the need to have around you those who are like you and to whom you can best relate, but our role as elected officials is changing. We need to be willing to look at gender and racial parity and to be better representative of those who elect us.

Political life for many women is often a third career – after having children and working elsewhere – but we can support women who want to enter public life earlier by advocating childcare facilities in public buildings, and by promoting the role of elected women in our own legislatures.

In comparison to many countries, Canada does not have a bad record. We have six political parties with women leaders – Sharon Carstairs in Manitoba (Lib); Lynda Haverstock in Saskatchewan; Alexa McDonough in Nova Scotia (NDP); Barbara Baird-Filliter in New Brunswick (PC); Elizabeth Weir also in New Brunswick (NDP) and the first woman to be elected leader of a national political party, Audrey McLaughlin.

But on closer inspection, we see more and more of the shortcomings. Women represent only 12 to 16 per cent of elected members in all political parties in this country. There are not great numbers of women judges in either the Supreme Court of Canada, provincial or territorial supreme courts or in the rest of the court systems in the provinces and territories.

There have been many firsts but what about the seconds and thirds? Most women who have been elected have been re-elected. Theirs is not a flash-in-the-pan achievement. So when will the recognition and respect come? When will women stop having to prove themselves just because they are women and begin being judged on the same basis as men – on the basis of their achievements and capabilities, not their hormones?

Forty-four per cent of the Canadian labour force is women – but we do not have anywhere near 44% representation in the board rooms of this country. And a woman earns 66 cents for every dollar that a man earns. Where is the justice in this? Our role, as women and men in public life, is to work for the change necessary to bring about justice and fair treatment for everyone in our society – women and men alike.

In transition, over generations, many women have earned recognition and respect in public life. We will continue to struggle and hopefully the "transitional" role of women in public life will soon be regarded as "permanent". ♦