

Women in Politics #2  
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The first step for improved democracy for women in Canada is for women to become more active, at all levels, within political parties. For many years women have participated at the fringes of power in Canada.

Women in the Liberal Party of Canada have done so by becoming members of election campaign teams, association members, involving themselves in local and national executive committees and more recently as candidates for the party in elections. It has been noted, by Fair Vote Canada, that if no special effort is made to involve more women, it will take another hundred years for women to catch up to the same level as men's participation in politics today.

Women's involvement in the party is more advanced than women's participation as candidates for election. At the party level it is time to move into a constitutional arrangement within the party to ensure equal participation at all levels.( As noted in Paper #1)

Both men and women have become acclimatized to shared responsibility and the hidden systemic, unintentional discrimination, and overt discrimination can be overcome with a gender sensitive policy which consistently involves women in Party business and policy development.

The story is not the same when it comes to women as politicians.

The three step approach to conducting a gender based analysis of Canadian politics demonstrates, clearly, that the gender neutral position has not worked. At first, the gender neutral position spelled out, in the Canada Elections Act, that both women and men could run for public office. This has been the case for over a hundred years.

It has often been said by the uninformed that "if women wanted to run they could do so and the voters would decide whom to elect" or you might hear from women that they "got no special consideration or treatment and they won, so every other woman can do the same" Looking at the results of this policy, we can clearly see that a neutral stance did not advance the cause for equality. The numbers are abysmal.

The gender separate position, is an informal policy set by past leaders within the Liberal Party of Canada. This policy set up a hidden, informal system in which women are sometimes targeted, recruited, provided with the means to win nominations, act as party candidates and win elections. Just how this happened, by whom, and when are all a mystery because it was informal and was dependant on the good will of all.

Unfortunately, unwritten policies fade and change as Party leaders change.

One option that can be considered, by the party, is to move to formalize this current practice using rules and funding mechanisms.

To do so would involve providing Liberal women with the information, tools, and means to become successful . Establishing a mechanism within both the Liberal Party office and the Leaders office would be a positive next step in the direction of equality.

This formal mechanism ensures a short time lag for the numbers of women to improve and to actively demonstrate their political skills and become role models for others who might follow. This office might be successful and might achieve greater involvement of women over time. It likely would not provide equity between men and women because there are no public accountability measures as a means of assessment. If the Leader's and the Party's offices worked more closely together, with this women's office, given a set of guiding principles, with annual goals; and money to conduct campaign schools, nominal change could occur.

This policy would depend on the strength of the convictions of the players involved and the terms of reference directed toward the office. It still leaves women in the gender separate position; with little power to begin and slow improvements, and still not in position for women to act as candidates in equitable numbers in the short term. It could be said a "special office for women" is very similar to the Liberal Women's Commission we have now.

The gender sensitive position on women in politics would accept that women and men are different, that accommodations are needed to include more women and legal requirements should be set to ensure full and equal participation of women and men.

Fair Vote Canada, many National, regional and provincial women's groups and unions are supporting this position. Several current candidates for Liberal Party leader are supportive of this goal.

This position sets up a system of proportional representation ( PR), within the country in which all political parties are required to participate. Considerable interest, and study is being carried out across Canada, and within political parties to study, share information, and conduct educational campaigns about various models of PR. Some provinces have held plebiscites to gauge public interest and seek approval on the issue and more have been scheduled for this current year.

There are several models which could be used to implement PR, and across the democratic world all of the models in place, by law, have greatly improved the political participation of women. Everywhere that PR exists, women are represented in greater numbers than in Canada and they are making a positive difference in the lives of their constituents and their countries.