

Why Women Choose Not to Stand for Elected Office at the Federal Level - What to Do

In my discussions with some very qualified women who could have made excellent Members of Parliament, the view was often that the House of Commons remains a male bastion of fruitless argument on topics that are not the main concerns for women. The Liberal Party must work to set a better tone in Parliament so the public sees that their issues are the priorities and are seriously discussed. The spectacle of Alexa McDonough being shouted down during the debate on Afghanistan was a disgrace and turned off many women who certainly wanted her views to be heard. Where was the Speaker of the House? Why would women bother with politics if that is the way women at the top are treated? Members of the House accept that confrontation and abuse are the way things have always been. Women often tend to be more conciliatory and may avoid confrontational environments. My experience is that male dominated environments change when women enter in larger numbers.

If we did indeed have 50% women in Parliament, I believe that the issues and policies would also change. Canada would achieve universal child care, improved public health care, less poverty, and we would not be fighting in Afghanistan but would be providing more humanitarian aid to the poorer countries. The Liberal Party must stop pandering to the issue of bringing more women into the Party; they must walk the talk. This task must not be left to women; every member of the Party, every member of the House must recognize its importance. The Liberal Party must seek the views of women and listen to them and act upon them. When the Liberal Party makes policy it must consult women in the Party but more importantly outside the Party for advice and take their views seriously.

In the last election, the Liberal Party failed on the issue of daycare which is crucial to women. The men did not explain the issue well nor give it the priority it deserved. They did not gather support from women outside the Party (most Canadians do not belong to parties). The issue was poorly handled by the media and appropriated by Conservatives who pitted stay-at-home mothers against working women. Where were the media photos with women working at Tim Horton's in need of subsidized quality care?

Women must be attracted to politics at a younger age although they may not be available as candidates until later in life. (A fact that must be accepted and appreciated). Many women in university do not see politics as something they should find out about. They may regard politics as just for the activists. One young woman told me she wasn't interested as she was a science student. Asked about whether someday she might need quality daycare, she saw that these decisions would affect her life.

When you really commit to bringing women into the Party you don't just talk, you set up a clearly defined process by which the goal of 50% is to be achieved. Reasonable time frames need to be set - an overall time frame of say 15 years but at each election an immediate target. Rather than having the leader appoint candidates, the Party must insist that in the nomination process women are sought and appear on the ballot. This must not be a token process but an ongoing attempt to attract potential women, support them with money, skills training and media exposure. The leader may reserve the right to appoint certain outstanding candidates that could bring much to the Party, especially if the targets are not met. They have done this with men, however, it must be used sparingly as it can backfire. The local riding must have input and any objections must be seriously considered.

Every local riding must be required to seek and identify potential women candidates as part of their regular activities and report on this process. Last minute selection of election candidates will favour men as women need more time to prepare and put in place the supports that will allow them to move into politics. When women are identified as possible candidates they must be given opportunities to

participate and have media exposure well before the nomination period. We must not create another bureaucracy in the Party to do this but put the responsibility at the local riding where the results will come. In my own riding, no such process is in place. If our incumbent MP were to retire, I can only speculate on what would happen. The member himself might have important input, as well as a small number of loyal members. This type of process perpetuates the status quo.

When women do get nominated they should be offered training in such things as media relations and speaking and networking not necessarily by political persons. In many cases family responsibilities have resulted in less exposure than men. When women do become MP's they must be fast tracked by giving them more special training in media relations etc. and opportunities to learn the role of an MP more quickly.

The emphasis should be on drawing women into the House of Commons where they will be visible to Canadians and can contribute and make decisions. We should not get bogged down trying to put women in bureaucratic positions in the Party as these people rarely end up in the House. The Prime Minister has the responsibility of appointing these women to positions where they can contribute - Cabinet, parliamentary secretaries, committees and special envoys etc. The Prime Minister must establish a small department whose sole role is to support the women in Parliament. Experienced MP's, male and female must help these new women move forward. The current female candidates in the federal leadership race demonstrate that no such work has been done. Dr. Carolyn Bennett, for example, needed more media exposure as a minister in scrums and in the House and help with her voice and hand movements in front of the camera.

Margaret Bedore

Member of the Policy Committee
Kingston and the Islands