

Liberal Party Task Force on Women
Notes from Ottawa meeting
May 15, 2006

Present: Hon. Anne McLellan, Hon. Maria Minna, Hon. Judy Sgro, Anita Neville – MP, Isabel Metcalfe, Salma Siddiqui, Senator Lorna Milne, Lee Farnworth, Karen Redman – MP, Elena Mantagaris, Deborah Coyne, Penny Collenette, Senator Claudette Tardif, Corrine Rawana, Lise Racicot, Monique Trottier, Catherine Bélanger, Councillor Diane deans, Beverly Munn, Nikki Macdonald, Nicole Foster-Woollatt, Heather Watson, Gail Richardson, Sylvia Duncan, Marcia Knockleby, Stephanie Crites (Sen. Pèpin's office), Valence Young, Dhalia Stein, Valoree Jack, Hilary Geller, Geneviève Tremblay.

The Liberal Party of Canada is in disarray, out of touch with the grassroots, is distant from Canadians and lacks vision. It persists as an old boys' club, obsessed with control, and conjures manipulative schemes that work against the advancement of women in politics. Such was the opinion of the women who gathered in Ottawa. The cure for their discontent was seen as nothing short of a major overhaul of the party machinery that can only come from a full-scale campaign by women and like-minded men who feel it is time the organization embraced gender-inclusive policy.

Barriers:

- Term was controversial, as was the use of the word challenges. Structural constraints seemed to be a more acceptable term
- Normative constraints (families, husbands' careers, etc...)
- Old boys club culture still pervasive – needs to change
- Political career lacks appeal
- Fundraising and nomination process – women need to be nominated in winnable seats.
- Process is skewed – party talks the talk of nominating women, but does not walk the walk – Diane Deans was elected 4 times as city councilor and was seeking nomination in winnable riding. Party brass shut down the process sending the message that women like her were not welcome
- Sense that not every one is equal within the party and that some are more important than others
- Politics is a blood sport, full of conflict (does not reflect women's consensus and negotiation approach). Should women worry if they are tough enough?
- Women feel they can make a bigger difference at other levels of government (local, municipal, provincial)
- While the elected party executive could be construed as democratic, the fact remains that the election campaign is chosen by the Leader.

Strategies for removing structural constraints:

- Could modify the party's constitution to ensure that 30% of candidates must be women (concern was expressed that younger women would not react well to affirmative action)
- Mentoring, outreach, profiling and sharing successful women's stories (their life in politics and the steps that got them there)
- Need to increase the number of women within party executive ranks (at national level, but also at riding levels where men still outnumber women presidents)
- Women are natural fundraisers – but are women helping one another fundraise?

- Help women attend conventions (Totspitality \ child care suites to allow young families to participate)
- Need a vision statement to promote respect, fairness, ethical behaviour, transparency
- Should Elections Canada run nominations – could prevent situations where candidates, including at least that of a current sitting female MP, lose nominations because of forged memberships?
- Need to restructure the Liberal Party – too top heavy. Need to increase accountability
- Need to remove barriers to membership – having to drive to Toronto for membership forms is not helpful

Policy Agenda:

- A call for a full debate on the role of women at the party's convention in December.
- Direct questioning of all leadership candidates on where they stand on women's issues.
- Liberal party is no longer perceived as defendant of the environment (Elizabeth May should have been running for the Liberals, instead she turned to the Green party).
- We have missed many opportunities: Liberals "should have" introduced Child Care Act – no longer exercising leadership/ loss of relevance to Canadians
- Rural/Urban differences – liberal daycare policies did not ring true in rural Canada
- Engaging grassroots: party is no longer reaching out to many groups (ie. Highlighting nurses week, etc.)
- Grassroots disconnect: policy of the party was not reflected by the Liberal Government – many questioned the origins of the electoral platform
- Need to frame issues in terms of equity.

Short Term Actions:

- Need to develop solutions in time for the next election as well as for the longer term
- Need a drive to ensure that a guaranteed number of women candidates are fielded in federal ridings. Fifty percent was viewed as fair.
- Need to conduct a grassroots outreach campaign, especially in large cities where the NDP is considered to be the real threat to Liberals.
- Caucus needs to pull together a women's issues SWAT team in the short term.

Process for Task Force – how to reach as many members?

- Need to contact riding Presidents and tell them about Task Force, provide them with set a questions.