



Number of Women Candidates a Paltry 24%

May, 2005 - The provincial election campaign is underway and that raises hopes for an increase in the number of women in the BC legislature from the current 24% to a number that more closely represents the 52% of the population that are women. A January 2005 poll from the Center for Research and Information on Canada indicated that 9 out of 10 Canadians support increasing the number of women in elected office.

There's just one problem: only 24 % of current candidates running for office are women.

Statistically, female candidates who win their party nominations are elected in the same proportion to males. This means that in all likelihood, the gender composition of the legislature isn't going to change in this election. It isn't going to change in any election until the number of women running for office increases.

This begs the question: Why don't more women run?

It could be because women perceive the political world as an ugly place to be. It could be that it takes them away from families and loved ones. It could be that politics, a traditionally male-dominated sphere, intimidates many women who find it difficult to infiltrate political systems and circles in any meaningful way.

Yet, many women have enjoyed and continue to enjoy successful political careers. Think of May Brown, a bastion of local politics in Vancouver who served for many years on City Council. Joy MacPhail, the outgoing MLA who has held the reigns of the opposition. And then there are Iona Campagnolo, former MP and current Lieutenant Governor of B.C. and Kim Campbell, former prime Minister of Canada. There is a long and distinguished list of female, British Columbian politicians.

Maybe there is another reason why there aren't more women running.

There are a number of barriers that range from historical discrimination to access to adequate financing to electoral systems that favour the current gender distribution. It could be, and this is the most probable reason, that political parties do not make it a priority to field a sufficient number of female candidates.

Indeed, women's representation in British Columbia and Canada lags behind that of countries like Rwanda, much of Europe, countries in Latin America and, notably, Wales, recently the first jurisdiction to elect 50% women among its representatives. Globally, efforts are being made to increase the women who hold seats in elected bodies.

Which begs a second question: Why does it matter that more women get elected?

It matters because women make a difference. It matters because the presence of women in government has been shown to result in more attention to health and education and the protection of vulnerable members of society. It matters because women in office make issues like child care and violence not just women's issues, but society's issues. It matters because women use a long-term view that considers the impacts of policies on children, the elderly and the environment. As the primary caregivers in society, they bring a perspective to government that is needed.

Getting more women elected matters for another reason as well. Women should be equal. They should feel at home in the corridors of power just as men do. Women's representation is a question of the basic democratic principle of equality.

However, until more women candidates earn party nominations, the dearth of female candidates will remain.

There are some changes that parties could make to improve things. First, political parties must make it a



priority to have women win more seats. Quebec recently became the most representative legislature in Canada because Jean Charest made the recruitment and election of women a high priority. Second, changes to electoral financing rules and systems have been shown to greatly increase women's representation in other countries. Changes to federal and provincial financing rules, and the current push to reform the first past the post system may get these balls rolling. Third, generating interest in political involvement among women is crucial to having an electable slate of female candidates.

This third initiative is a process in which we all can play a part. During the provincial election, be sure to encourage newly eligible voters to cast their ballots. Help a woman get to know the candidates in her riding. Encourage women to volunteer in an election campaign if they find a local candidate they are willing to support. Getting women involved in political processes will help them understand that political decisions can significantly affect their lives. It can help de-stigmatize politics as a place where only a select few of them can succeed. It would get qualified women to consider running.

Until existing political parties create conditions that will increase the number of female candidates, the burden of addressing the problem of under-representation for women will rest with women themselves. Until then, the number of women in elected office will continue to fall shamefully short of reflecting the 52% of the population who are women.

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