



## **What lessons can be drawn from France's new parity law?**

### **A report on Ottawa based conference**

November 2001

Last week, I attended a conference in Ottawa on what happened to female candidates in the 2000 Canadian federal general election, and what lessons can be drawn for Canada from France's new parity law.

The conference on women in politics in the two countries was sponsored by the French Embassy, the University of Ottawa's Research Centre on Women and Politics, and the Chief Electoral Officer of Canada, and held at the Chateau Laurier Hotel Nov. 29-30.

About 40 interested people attended. I'd seen lots of media stories written in advance of the French municipal elections last March about this being the first vote under France's law requiring equal numbers of men and women candidates. But when the actual election was held, the Canadian media appeared to lose interest and I could find nothing on the result. So I was very interested in the findings of a paper by Karen Bird, assistant professor of political science at McMaster University who found "the parity law was effective--where it applied--in bringing women into politics."

The new French law, passed in June 2000, got its first test in the March , 2001, municipal elections in France, although the requirement that electoral lists contain equal numbers of male and female candidates applied only to municipalities with populations of more than 3,500. In the last election, in 1995, when there was no parity law, women obtained 25.7 per cent of seats on local city councils (remember this is cities with more than 3,500 inhabitants). After parity, the percentage of women elected to council increased to 47.5 per cent.

Almost double, and almost parity! (Parity did not apply to the election of city executives, and in France, only 6.9 per cent of mayors are women. However, four of France's largest cities now have a women mayor.)

Bird noted that the next test of the French parity law will be the legislative elections of 2002, where the law is less restrictive. Parties may nominate women to fewer than 50 per cent of candidacies, although party campaign subsidies will be reduced as a consequence. As well, a disproportionate number of women candidates could be nominated in unwinnable ridings.

**Still, France's spring municipal elections brought 39,000 women into elected council office at a very visible and accessible level of politics. Bird says the parity law will**



**become a model for other countries. "We think that imposing parity is an important and necessary step for increasing the number of women in the political sphere," her paper said.**

**Parity in nominations is an idea we need to be thinking about in Canada.**

Speakers on Canada's experience in recent years expressed deep discouragement over what they described as stagnation in the movement to get more women elected. In the Nov. 27, 2000 election, 62 women won seats in the House of Commons, about 21 per cent of the 301 total seats. This was the same number of seats won by women in 1997. Worse, there were only 375 women candidates in 2000, a decline of 4 per cent from 1997.

Andre Blais, a professor of political science at the University of Montreal, supervised a major study of voter attitudes during and after the 2,000 election. He said the research found no significant tendency for voters to prefer male over female candidates. **"So if women are under-represented in the House of Commons it is not because of the voters,"** Blais said.

Sonia Pitre, a New Brunswicker teaching at Laval, said the "selection process is the key." The NDP is the only party which has adopted affirmative action for women and other under-represented groups at the nomination level. Local party executives may not discriminate against women directly but because they define their ideal candidate as articulate lawyers, businessmen or professionals, potential women candidates are weeded out by a process of indirect discrimination.

Women generally have less political capital, which she defined as "money, networks and political experience." Her experience, she said, was that although women are ostensibly wanted by the parties, they aren't made welcome, and seldom are given the financial or other assistance they may need to run. **"It must be brought to the attention of local selection committees that the process isn't democratic when half the population hasn't had the chance to step to the plate,"** Pitre said.

Lisa Young, of the University of Calgary, said the participation of women in politics steadily increased to 1993, but then the favorable conditions fell apart. The New Democratic Party had been the "dynamic element" in Canadian politics, and both nominated more women itself and pressured the other parties to nominate women. As well, this was an era of pan-Canadian politics when large national programs were being introduced. The Canadian women's movement believed that progress for women could be made through the established parties. Group representation was alive within the political parties and women's caucuses pushed for the nomination of more women. "There was steady upward progress."



But in 1993, the Reform party replaced the NDP as the dynamic element of the Canadian political system. Reformers oppose group rights. "Their notion of citizenship is relentlessly universal." (Canadian Alliance MP Betty Hinton explained to the conference later "I am not a feminist, I am an equalist.") Where the NDP had pushed for the nomination of more women, Reform targetted the Liberals for criticism because leader Jean Chretien appointed women to certain ridings, over the objection of local riding associations. By the 2000 election, the prime minister backed away from appointing women. Women's organizations within parties were either disbanded (the Tories) or weakened (the Liberals).

*"In English Canada anyway, these factors mean all the momentum is versus the nomination of women. . . It will take substantial change either in the party system or in the pressure brought on the parties to change that dynamic in the future,"* Young said.

Besides the scholarly papers, the conference held a round-table of women politicians from different political parties. Liberal MP Carolyn Bennett, chair of the Liberal women MP's caucus, said an internal study of what happened to Liberal women nominees in 2001 showed women felt disadvantaged by the preferential ballot. A woman might have the largest number of votes going into the nomination but still face defeat by *"the guys getting together"* to overcome her on the final ballot.

Hinton (Canadian Alliance) said she opposes quotas or appointments of women. She argued women need to solidify their mutual support systems the way men do. Men in the "old boys club" support one another, and women too should "back each other up". Particularly she called for women encouraging and supporting younger women to run. Life in Parliament "is not a pleasant climate," she said. *"It is difficult in many ways . . . To be in the minority all the time and to have to deal with people who don't see women as equal partners in this country."*

Judy Wasylycia-Leis (New Democrat) said she was very disappointed in the 2000 election results for women. "The best we can say is we are holding our own at 20 per cent. . . We have a problem on our hands, and we have to overcome it. *"She argued "we have to have affirmative action in all parties at the grassroots level for women to succeed in politics."*

I'll see what I can do to get copies of some of the academic studies in a form that we can post on the website. The Women and Politics Centre at the University of Ottawa has its own website with useful research. It is [www.crfp-rcwp.uottawa.ca](http://www.crfp-rcwp.uottawa.ca)

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