



## **Equal Voice: Who we are**

Presentation to the Ajax chapter of the Canadian Federation of University Women

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Thanks for inviting Equal Voice this evening. I'm delighted to substitute for Rosemary

Speirs and to tell you more about our organization.

From the outset, I believe our two organizations share the conviction that women must get involved in the political process and, ultimately, get elected as councillors and legislators.

We, in Equal Voice, strongly believe that the next battle women must win is equal representation in all elected councils, legislatures and Parliament. This is where decisions are made. These decisions affect the lives of all citizens, half of whom are women and our voices must be heard.

Back in the mists of time, in the early 1980's, a group of women got together and organized themselves as the Committee for 94. These women came together from all political stripes, occupations, careers, backgrounds. The common denominator was the vision: 50% of the members sitting in House of Commons were to be women by the year 1994. No sweat, we had a decade to accomplish this goal. Well, 1994 came and went and if anything, women lost representation in the House of Commons.

Disappointing? Yes. Discouraging? Yes. Demoralizing? Definitely. But were we going to give up? Hell no!

We still want to help create a climate in which more women will be elected *at all levels of government* to help govern Canada... We are convinced changes that promote women in politics will improve the opportunities of other underrepresented Canadians and create a healthier, more democratic political system. In fact, not only do we want to create such a climate, we **MUST**.

Women do a lot of things very well – especially organizing! Especially women who share a common vision, even if they embrace this vision from many points of departure. So, .... we organized! And this time we organized ourselves by building on past strengths and adding new strengths.

Whereas the Committee for 94 was rather Toronto-centric and focussed on the House of Commons, Equal Voice is a national voice for women's representation in all the legislatures and municipal councils of Canada.



Equal Voice was created about five years ago by a group of women who got together in the evenings. We talked. And discussed and debated. We were united by the fact that most of us had worked at getting women elected in the 80s and 90s.

We were now at the beginning of a new millennium. And, sadly, we had not reached our goal of equal or at least fair representation in our national Parliament, our provincial legislatures and our city and town councils.

The proportion of elected women at all levels of government was not moving beyond the 20-21% threshold. Yet women now represent 52 % of the population and are more than ever involved in the economic life of our country.

Equal Voice was founded to address this disconnect.

We are now a national organisation with some 800 members across Canada and flourishing chapters, including a very active national youth chapter. We had our first virtual agm on Monday January 22, 2007 linking Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto, Calgary, Edmonton and Vancouver for two hours of reports, presentations, discussions, voting, and commentary. Margaret McGovern and two representatives of the CFUW were there.

It was awesome!

Our members are as diverse as our country. We have past and present elected representatives from all levels of government, and several were federal or provincial cabinet ministers. One was even the Prime Minister of Canada for a brief period of time. Equal Voice members from the Durham area include Janet Ecker, former provincial Finance Minister, and Bev Oda, the federal Minister of Canadian Heritage.

We also have a network of 44 women's organisations with whom we join forces on certain issues. I invite you to visit the Equal Voice website – it's listed on the bookmarks I have brought – to see the complete listing ConneXion groups.

So, with our stated goal to elect more women at all levels, what are we doing? How are we going about implementing the requisite steps for the election of more women?

Like all good organizations, we have rigour and discipline. We have good governance, audited financials, succession planning, a vision and a mission statement. And above all, extremely dedicated volunteers who do what it takes “to get the job done”. But this is the framework. Good governance and audited financials are not going to put more women in our legislatures. Concrete actions will.



So, in neither chronological nor strategic order, here are some of the concrete actions we are taking to put more women in all our legislatures.

We built a bilingual website to create awareness and communicate our goals and activities to as broad an audience as possible. This web site boast one of the easiest navigation profiles I have encountered and it is continually refreshed with new content. I hope you will visit the Equal Voice site often as a source of information and inspiration!

We lobby all political parties to encourage them to nominate more women candidates. Last year in Ontario, Equal Voice launched the “Ontario Challenge”. We challenged Messrs. McGuinty, Tory and Hampton to elect more women. All three accepted the challenge. We await the results. If any of you have ever considered contributing to your community through the provincial legislature, your time is NOW!

If you wish to run for the Liberal Party of Ontario, your contact is Kim Donaldson (416.979.1115 ); for the Conservative Party – I’m your contact <Marilyn Mirabelli, 416.658.5518> and if you’re considering representing the New Democratic Party, Leader Howard Hampton is your contact. Give this some thought. Each and everyone of you would make an excellent MPP.

But back to our list of concrete action steps:

We attend political conventions, policy conferences and staff booths or distribute Equal Voice literature. Our most recent foray was at the Liberal leadership convention in Montreal last December.

We participate in every possible forum on electoral reform and advocate changes that will enhance our democracy.

We give speeches. All over the country. We share our speaking notes. So my apologies if you might have heard some parts of this presentation somewhere else.... But you must admit, it makes for a very consistent message! Recently, Rosemary Speirs, the founder of Equal Voice, spoke in Kingston at Queen’s University on the subject of ‘Values-driven Electoral Reform.’”

Patricia Dumas, one of our founding members, spoke about Equal Voice at the Canadian Council of Muslim Women Consultative Conference, in Gatineau, Quebec. Incidentally, the Canadian Council of Muslim Women is a member of EV’s ConneXion.

And just last Thursday evening, two of our youth members, Charm Darby and Louisa Moya, made separate presentations to the Citizens Assembly on election reform in Ontario.



In addition to giving speeches and then posting them on the Equal Voice website, we use the internet and email to spread the Equal Voice message far beyond our group. We summarize, reproduce and generally share Equal Voice information with our near and dear. Let me give you an example. I chair an organization called WIN, Women in Nomination.

WIN encourages women to seek nominations for the Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario and provides them with financial assistance to do so.

WIN was established in 1986 by the late P.C. Leader Larry Grossman on the recommendation of the Task Force on Women in the Progressive Conservative Party, led by Jane Pepino, Q.C. A major finding of the Task Force revealed that the largest obstacle facing women's candidacy was funding for the nomination.

As the chair of WIN, I manage its database of 126 names and growing. This database is composed of women and men – and yes for the most part they're Tories, but what I find very encouraging is that I'd say half of this database is composed of young women – women whom I think are younger than 35 years of age and are ripe for a career of public service in elected office. At any rate, about two weeks ago Equal Voice announced the launch of *Getting to the Gate*, our on-line campaign school – and guess who got an email notice about this from me – the WIN database. The response has been very encouraging and one recipient, Pamela Taylor, who is contesting the PC nomination in Toronto Centre Rosedale, has already started this on-line course.

This example of communicating the equal Voice message far and wide brings me to the last concrete action step.

I've mentioned *Getting to the Gate*, the Equal Voice's online campaign school. This virtual tool aims to educate women of all ages, origins and walks of life on the importance of political involvement and to provide them with information and tools to get involved.

I have brought *Getting to the Gate* Postcards – and again information about, and the course content, are available to everyone through the Equal Voice website.

Equal Voice did not re-invent the wheel in creating this campaign school. We simply made it available online... a first we are led to believe. We did it with the support of Status of Women Canada, representatives from the Federation of Canadian Municipalities and the Canadian Autoworkers Union, and numerous past and present elected women and political organisers who provided us with insights and material.

If I haven't yet convinced you to consider a new career in public service, perhaps *Getting to the Gate* will! Do check it out – and encourage your friends and family to check it out



too – particularly young women. Each one of us, in one capacity or another, is an influence and role model for young women. If you are a mom, a teacher, a librarian, a business woman, I challenge you to introduce Getting to the Gate to a couple of young women you know.

I want to conclude my remarks by shining a spotlight on the work the CFUW is doing to also encourage women to run for public office. I am quoting from a letter to the editor which appeared today, Thursday, February 1, in the Guelph Mercury:  
Dear Editor,

Re; “Women Coming Into Their Own” Guelph Daily Mercury, January 20, 2007 and “Many Amazing Women in Guelph”, Guelph Daily Mercury January 23 (Reporter Laura Thompson.)

Guelph Wellington MPP Liz Sandals is quoted as saying, “Guelph accepts that women can do the job as well as men.” Thompson still wonders why.

In response, the Civic Affairs Group of the Canadian Federation of University Women/Guelph (CFUW/Guelph) offers their experience and perspective as a possible explanation for this local political aberration.

With a membership of over 200 University Women graduates from many different universities across Canada and the world, CFUW/Guelph has been active locally for over 50 years. The Civic Affairs group was formed around 1970 for members to learn about municipal matters and issues. Activities of this group have evolved from monitoring city council meetings, to making presentations to council about issues of concern to them, to encouraging and supporting women to run for election to city council, and to apply for positions on boards and commissions. Women from this group fanned out and served as chairs of the Police Commission, the Hydro Board, the Hospital Board, the Transportation Board, the Museum Board, and other positions. The Civic Affairs Group has also organized municipal candidates’ meetings for many years which are open to the public.

Thompson mentions trailblazers Marg MacKinnon and Ann Godfrey who were the second and third female councilors. They were soon joined by councilors Linda Lennon, Clara Marrett, and Marilyn Shapka in breaking the gender barrier. We are proud to say they are all members of CFUW/Guelph as are current councilors Maggie Laidlaw and Leanne Piper.

Thompson also states that “Women are this city”. We would proudly argue that many are also CFUW members. We therefore suggest that CFUW/Guelph and the Civic Affairs Group are major contributors in influencing Guelph’s culture of accepting and supporting women.

While our local playing field has been leveled it is regrettable that issues of family and careers have remained for both sexes particularly at the provincial and federal level.



At least Guelph has a good mix of men and women who are gaining experience in the municipal and school board positions. We can anticipate that there will be some among them who be representing us at Queen's Park or in Ottawa in the future

Pat McCraw, CFUW/Guelph

Joan Goddard, Chair, Civic Affairs, CFUW/Guelph

Thank you.