



Rosemary Speirs
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Photo: Sandy Lee, MLA, NWT
Leading the charge on starting a NWT Equal Voice Chapter

If you are concerned your keynote speaker is a big city feminist who knows very little about life in the Northwest Territories, you are quite right. Suit-wearing, feminist agitator is what you've got.

I thought I would say that straight up, so you'll know I have no illusions about what I can contribute. Still, I'm very honored you invited me and delighted to attend your conference.

I'd like to congratulate the organizers, for this conference's practical program and networking opportunity; for the larger effort at encouraging women's leadership in the North; and for the quality of the participants. This is a wonderful event. We should have many more of them across Canada.

Coming as I do from the Toronto area, I suspect I have a lot to learn here, and if you want to come up after and educate me, that's very welcome.

But, in my own defense, let me also say that if you think being an urban feminist means I am an anti-men radical, you are wrong. Too often, when women are trying to encourage other women, they do it by putting men down. Here's a famous example from Charlotte Whitton, the former mayor of Ottawa. She said:

"Whatever she does, a woman must do twice as well as any man to be thought just half as good. Luckily, it's not difficult."

Now, we women love that. It feels good. But, frankly, it is sexist. We'd be in an uproar if any man dared say it's easy to be twice as good as women.

I think we need to like and respect the other sex. I have a terrific son at university in Ottawa, playing a lot of sports— he's teambuilding, which is something we women could learn from men. Men are smart and tough, and running things comes naturally to them.

But women have a great deal to offer too—different skills and perspectives. As things are run now, we're hardly beginning to use the talents of the female half of the population. Surely, our governments will be more effective if men and women make laws together—as equal partners. We'd more likely get it right the first time.

Talking this way about male-female teams is actually becoming quite trendy. Even the conservative business magazine *The Economist* commented recently:



“Women remain perhaps the world’s most under-utilized resource A recent study . . . found that American companies with more women in senior management jobs earned a higher return . . . than those with fewer women at the top. This might be because mixed teams of men and women are better than single-sex groups at solving problems and spotting external threats.”

I like the idea that mixed teams of men and women work better. It is my kind of feminism, which used to mean working for equal pay and equal opportunity for women. Somehow a label of which we used to be proud has been turned around on us. Today’s young women in particular, are embarrassed by feminists like the late, great Betty Friedan who questioned the notion that women raising children at home alone were living lives of domestic bliss. I like what Friedan told Life magazine back then (1963):

“Some people think I am saying, ‘Women of the world unite, you have nothing to lose but your men. It’s not true. You have nothing to lose but your vacuum cleaners.’”

Those were the heady days of the so-called women’s revolution, a movement that today seems to be to have lost its fire. Women are still far from equal—in politics we are only one fifth of our elected representatives. In business, women are just 14 per cent of corporate board members and in management we occupy the lower tiers. In the sciences, women get less research support than male colleagues. Women are nearly half the work force but still earn only 70 per cent of what men earn. Thirty per cent of working women are in the low-income category. And 38 per cent of families led by a lone woman parent are below the poverty line.

Yet, young women talk about this being the “post-feminist” age, and declare the feminist agenda has been realized. When I go out to talk about needing more women in politics, inevitably a young, sometimes even a middle-aged woman, comes up after to talk but feels compelled to start by saying: “Of course, I’m not a feminist”

I went on the Status of Women website and read the remarkable life stories of some of the Women in Leadership who are here today. I was stunned by the adventurous, trailblazing things some of you have done. I suspect that—by my definition—everyone in this room is a feminist, and I hope you are damn proud.

I know she’s not from the Territories, but you must have been thrilled last week when Sheila Watt-Cloutier, of Iqaluit, was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, along with Al Gore, for her efforts to put the dangers of climate change on the global agenda. I felt proud as a Canadian.

I was told my topic today would be “steps toward leadership”. I have to admit, I feel out of my depth. I’m not a motivational speaker. I’m not even a very experienced speaker. I’ve never been elected. On top of that, this is my first visit to Yellowknife.

I have learned you are a dynamic, relatively young society. You have a consensus-style of government which is different from the adversarial party model to which I am accustomed. I can only hope you in this room still cling to one first nations’ tradition—that is respect for your elders, and I can slide by on my gray hair.

First, I’d like to talk about why I think it is so vital for more women to step up to the plate and run for elected office in Canada, and in the Territories. I’m aware you have Territorial elections this fall. A federal election is coming, and municipal elections and band council elections. Now I am not suggesting everyone in this room should be standing for election. Some of you may prefer the jobs you already have. Or you may feel you cannot leave your communities. Others may have no taste for politics.

But if you are interested at all, let me encourage you to think of getting elected. You already have the necessary talents. You can make a bigger difference on a bigger stage. And, heaven’s knows, we need more women helping those men run the country. We are half the population, and our voices aren’t being heard, or our concerns adequately addressed.



If you can't see yourself running, look around you, find a woman you think could do the job, and support her. A woman who is a candidate or running for nomination needs women to talk to for advice and support. She needs other women—men too—to go knock on doors, make phone calls. And she needs money. Small cheques from a lot of women can make up for the cheques from corporate donors that often go to male candidates. So, if you do nothing else, write a cheque.

Let me tell you a little about Equal Voice, and about our shared conviction that the first thing we need today is a lot more women in politics.

Where did it start for me personally? I wish I could take you with me in imagination to the press galleries where I used to sit as a journalist, looking down on the House of Commons, or the Ontario Legislature, or the Quebec Assembly, or Toronto City Council. What I saw in all these law-making bodies was a sea of men—90 per cent men at first, and today 80 per cent men—making decisions on matters that often affected women more; debating abortion rights, setting the rules for divorce, deciding funding for hospitals, schools, housing and social and family assistance. There are only 64 women in our House of Commons today, or 20.8 per cent, one fewer woman than in the last election.

I sat watching your Territorial Assembly yesterday, and it was the same old story—two women, Sandy Lee and Jane Groenewegen and 17 men. Two women, no matter how outstanding, are not enough to represent the different needs of women, half the population.

Equal Voice started the way so many women's groups do. A dozen of us got together at a potluck dinner, and talked about how the once-vigorous women's movement was going nowhere. We decided we didn't want to go back to the days when women would get themselves together to lobby government for child care funding, or homecare or shelters for battered women—these are still very important things to fight for, but predominantly-male governments too often say the public purse can't afford them. So, I say enough of standing outside banging on the doors. No matter what the flavor of the government—right wing, left wing or middle, we need many more women inside.

As Equal Voice grew, we decided we had a couple of fundamental rules. One: We have only one issue—electing more women: we don't comment on anything else. Two: We are careful to make sure we include women from all parts of the political spectrum. Our members are either non-partisan, or they are active as organizers or elected members for all the main political parties. We include well-known women politicians working across party lines in the cause of fairer-representation for women.

In one of the first speeches I gave, at the University of Ottawa, a First Nations woman got up and said "why should we want more white women in suits?" She had me there: I was definitely white and wearing a suit. My only answer was—and still is—that breaking down the barriers for women will also help under-represented minorities get easier access to politics. Equal Voice has made a determined effort to be inclusive—as you have clearly done here. Our membership includes many women from diverse backgrounds—we want women in politics in all their variety.

One thing we've learned since we started five years ago is that most women, young and old, feel very strongly on this issue of our unfair representation in politics. Recently I listened to one of our members talking to an Ontario audience. Charm Darby put it very well so I'd like to quote her:

"I speak to you as a woman; an immigrant woman, a woman of colour, raising a teenage daughter who wonders why she does not see the reflection of herself in the political spectrum. I am certain that young girls all over this province wonder why there are so few women in positions of political power."

Women who are elected now, or women who have been there—like the Western Arctic's Ethel Blondin-Andrew, who was the first aboriginal woman to sit in a federal cabinet, or Nancy Karetak-Lindell, MP for Nunavut, could tell you how true this is. Women who have been elected know they are role models for aspiring women and girls, and they also know women have too few role models in politics. Elected women say we need at least a third women at the cabinet table or in the legislatures, so women's concerns cannot be considered of secondary importance.

Recently, I listened to Elizabeth May, the new leader of the Green Party, talking to young women about what she hears when she goes to listen to the House of Commons. The comments about women MPs, coming



particularly from the backbenches are the worst she's ever heard, Ms. May said. This was about the time when Belinda Stronach had been called a dog by a fellow MP, and a "bitch" by a former Mulroney staffer.

"Politics is not a blood sport", said Ms. May, it is supposed to be about serious deliberation and higher causes. I felt deeply uncomfortable. We are all failing to do our job of making the public arena attractive to a generation of women, raised they thought to equality, and now being told a career in politics is not for them—politics is too rough a game.

I still think the cure is getting more women into politics. When both sexes see each other as equal partners in political life, I think we will see an end to this locker room culture.

One place where women are winning is in Guelph, Ontario. Guelph's mayor is Karen Farbridge, and eight of the 12 city councilors are woman. Guelph's Member of Parliament is a woman (Brenda Chamberlain) and its member of the provincial legislature is a woman (Liz Sandals). How did this happen?

I found out from Joan Goddard who chairs the Federation of University Women's local civic affairs group, which was formed in 1970. The women monitored city council meetings, made presentations to council about issues of concern to them, encouraged and supported women to run for election to city council, and to apply for positions on boards and commissions. And they organized municipal candidates meetings, open to the public. The first women councilors elected in Guelph were members of the group, and so are some of the city councilors today. This persistent little group of women volunteers made a huge difference in getting women into Guelph's political life.

But how else has change ever been achieved than by a small group of determined citizens making a noise?

The Status of Women Council here is providing a supportive circle for women. The Council also has some excellent, how-to pamphlets on its website to teach women to be community leaders, including an election manual. One of Equal Voice's major achievements last year was the creation of our bilingual on-line campaign school, Getting to the Gate, full of practical advice to tell women how to create a team and win a nomination. Financed largely by a grant from Status of Women Canada, it's available to you, free, wherever there is a computer. You'll see a lot of advice there from women who have been elected—you might call them on-line mentors. Sandy Lee has explained to me that in your consensus-style political system, you don't have to fight battles for the party nomination in your riding. Anyone can just get the 25 signatures, and pay their \$200, and be a candidate. But I think you'll still find our school very useful with its step-by-step guide to deciding whether to run, and how to overcome obstacles on the way to political office. Just go on the Equal Voice website, and click on Getting to the Gate. I'll leave some of these postcards with the Internet address.

I think it is so important that women conquer their hesitations—and, like me, try to get over their fear of public speaking—and step forward to put their names up for nomination for elected office. Why is very simple. Our life experiences, and often our needs, are different from men's. I imagine it is as true up here as it is in a southern city like Toronto: women still bear the burden of childcare, of eldercare, of care for the sick, and women generally have less money than men. So, no matter what their political viewpoint, women are just naturally more interested in publicly run childcare, homecare, schools, hospitals, and income support.

When I said this recently to a Calgary radio host, he asked "you mean women are all left-wingers". Of course, I don't mean that. Women simply support to what is in their self-interest. The polls have long shown what the experts call a "gender gap" on social issues.

There's a gender gap too on what to do about it. A poll taken during the 2000 federal election showed that 56 per cent of women believe having more women MPs is the best way to protect women's interests, while only 36 per cent of men agreed. Loosely interpreted, I'd say that most men think men can speak for women, and most women don't agree.



Maybe it is because women don't feel that they are welcome in politics, that so few of us pay enough attention to it. One of the things we learn from surveys of who reads or listens to the news, is that men are better at keeping up with world events. That gives ammunition to those who say women aren't as interested in politics. One controversial analyst for the Washington Post said last month that because they are often ignorant of the issues, women are "irrational voters". Women need to take a few free moments—I know, I know, what woman ever has a "free moment"? —but this is important, take a few moments to catch up on what is going on.

Be aware that women have more credibility speaking on family, community and social service issues—and luckily we have credibility too on the number one issue today—the environment. So emphasize your strengths. I think your two current two women MLAs do that. Sandy Lee is a lawyer with a lot of backroom political experience whose strength is as a social advocate. From looking at Jane Groenewegen's bio, her strengths are her business background, and her understanding of economic issues. Women politicians need this side too: some of you need to be able to talk about taxes, and about businesses and industries, and their concerns. It is called "speaking with authority", and really important for women to learn.

Before flying here, I went on line and read up a bit in the Yellowknifer and the CBC Online News. I found an article which noted that the Northwest Territories have the lowest percentage of women MLAs in Canada—10.5 per cent. That sounds like northern attitudes are behind the rest of Canada, but in fact, all rural areas across Canada have this problem. Rural areas lag way behind the cities when it comes to electing women.

I've just been reading a study by a political scientist named Louise Carbert who interviewed 126 rural women leaders in the Atlantic Provinces to find out why more rural women don't run for political office. The women didn't talk about their husbands' opposition or the burden of rearing children, or the reasons you might expect. Many of them talked about burnout. They were already shouldering a huge burden of volunteer work in their communities. "I just wish for a change someone would look after me," one said. Sound familiar at all?

The CBC report also noted that in the NWT about twice the percentage of many women stand for election as the per cent that actually make it. When you see that pattern, you know there is a problem with voters' attitudes to electing women. It suggests there is still hesitancy here about women in public office.

So I think you are going to have to go on leading discussions like this one in your communities, and in the media, about what women can bring to public office. I realize that in the Northwest Territories Assembly, government is consensual and candidates run as individuals, not for political parties. In some ways I can see that might be an advantage for women, who are said to prefer consensus to confrontation. But the absence of parties makes it harder to focus a campaign for more elected women. In the rest of Canada, we bring outside pressure on party leaders to intervene personally to ensure a strong female contingency at election time. Here you have a public awareness job, creating an atmosphere in which voters will be more receptive to women as politicians.

Luckily, women politicians are generally perceived as being more honest, less embroiled in backroom intrigue. That outsider image can be a plus. Let me end this by quoting a true Canadian "elder". Doris Anderson, long the leader of the women's movement, and still engaged at 85 years old. Doris sometimes speaks for Equal Voice. She said recently:

"In the past, females were thought to be weak little creatures incapable of coping with lofty subjects like math or science—or even to be trusted with the vote. Today girls are surpassing males in school and university at many levels. A glance at the headlines of any paper tells you that men—not women—are the cause of most of the mayhem, crime and fraud.

"Isn't it time this clever, capable and possibly more honest sex took on a bigger share in running things? "

Thank you.