



“The Role of Women in the Political Arena”

Remarks by the Hon. Flora MacDonald, To the Canadian Club of Toronto and Equal Voice Royal York Hotel, Toronto



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It's more than thirty years since I was first invited to speak to the Canadian Club of Toronto and I've been back on a number of occasions since then. Thank you for your invitation to join you once again. As for Equal Voice, a highly motivated and effective organization, I heartily endorse their goals, something I've been working for for far longer than my first visit to the Canadian Club – for almost eighty years I would think.

Women's active participation in political life, whether in the community, nationally, or internationally, is a subject that has intrigued me for many years. Growing up in Cape Breton where the great majority of people at that time took an active interest in elections and their outcomes, (normally 90% of those eligible to vote did so) it didn't take me long to catch the fever. As a young girl I would accompany my father to political meetings.

This was especially true when a national or provincial leader of a party came to enlighten us. My father saw those gatherings as an integral part of our education. It was important for us to learn whether an area as remote as Cape Breton was then considered to be, would fit into any national or provincial vision. And it didn't matter which party the leader represented – we went to hear them all. It was enough that they came.

Much later, after a three-year stint of hitch-hiking and working across Canada, then Europe and even parts of North Africa, I decided to make Ottawa my destination so that I could apply for a job with the Department of External Affairs. I felt they could use all the intelligence I had accumulated. Since I was early for my interview I used the time to wander around downtown Ottawa to become acquainted with my new surroundings. In doing so, I passed the little old headquarters of the Progressive Conservative Party of Canada. I went in to tell them there was another Progressive Conservative in town and they were so surprised that they ended up offering me a job.

On the spur of the moment I took it and spent the next ten years becoming totally involved in political activities and elections, from one end of the country to the other. Later still, while working at Queen's University, I was asked by Ann Francis (Florence Bird) Chairperson of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, to rewrite an earlier version of a chapter in her Report on the Political Participation of Women. In my research on this important issue I began to understand more clearly the historical context in which women struggled to be players in the political arena.

As part of the 19th century struggle of the masses to attain social justice and equality, women took up the cudgels in their own interest to demand “female emancipation”. For the first time, they organized for purposes other than works of charity.

Fragmented at first, the feminist movement reached its peak in the early years of the 20th century when the cry for women's rights focused on a single dominant issue – the franchise.

Scarcely 80 years have passed since the protracted, often bitter and cruel, openly militant battle for women's suffrage raged across several continents. The story of those days is relegated to the history books, and universal suffrage, largely taken for granted by modern western society, is enshrined as one of the basic democratic rights.

It is, however, a relatively new concept. In ancient Athens, where democracy originated, slaves, people living outside the walls, and women could not vote. In the United States, although the Declaration of Independence decreed that all men



are born free and equal, Black men did not get the vote until 1870, and women had to wait another 50 years. In Canada, from the earliest days, an unusually high percentage of men were able to vote. It was not until relatively recently – 1940 – that women achieved the franchise in all parts of Canada except, that is, for aboriginal people. It was the Government of Prime Minister John Diefenbaker, in 1958 that affirmed the right of native people to vote.

The Canadian movement for women's rights was influenced by ideas that largely originated in France, Britain and the United States.

Many of those movements became stridently militant, including such efforts as damage to property, refusal to register in the census, arrests and hunger strikes. The Canadian suffragists were not particularly militant. Education and persuasion were their weapons. Campaigns to get women the vote were underway in the 1880's and were carried on in all provinces by small groups of able, articulate women. Although the Canadian feminists were active in all parts of English-speaking Canada, working at first through Women's Institutes and temperance unions, women in the western provinces were the first to win the provincial franchise.

Manitoba gave women the vote in 1916, and the other provinces, with the exception of Quebec, soon followed Manitoba's lead.

At the national level a wartime electoral act in 1917 gave the federal franchise to some 50,000 women who were either members of the armed forces or who had close relatives in the armed forces. An act passed in 1918 gave all women over 21 the right to vote in federal elections.

The story concerning the right of women to sit in the Senate of Canada is perhaps better known thanks to the untiring efforts of five Alberta women who today are honoured by a monument on the lawns of Parliament: Emily Murphy, Nellie McClung, Henrietta Muir Edwards, Louise McKinney and Irene Parlby.

Section 24 of the British North America Act, in 1867, stated that any qualified "person" can be summoned to the Senate, but in 1927 there was some uncertainty as to whether women could be classified as "persons". Governments, when pressed to appoint a woman to the Senate, took refuge behind the ambiguity of the Act. In 1927 the five Alberta women presented a petition to the federal government asking that the Supreme Court of Canada be required to provide an interpretation of the word "persons". This was done, and on April 24, 1928, the Supreme Court of Canada handed down their ruling:

"persons" did not include women. Undeterred, the Alberta women appealed the decision to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in England and on October 18th, 1929, Lord Sankey ruled that "--- the word "persons" in Section 24 of the BNA Act included members both of the male and female sex--- And that women are eligible to be summoned to and become members of the Senate of Canada." Many women in Canada still celebrate October 18th –Persons Day—as a tribute to those redoubtable women who refused to be deterred. The euphoria emanating from that victory failed to have any ongoing impact although women were elated by the election of Agnes Macphail from Bruce County, Ont. to the House of Commons in 1921. So what then is the record of the next 50 years? It can be summed up very quickly. In 1921, one woman, Agnes Macphail, became the first woman to sit in the Canadian Parliament. Fifty years later, in 1971, Grace MacInnis of the NDP was the only woman in the House of Commons out of 264 members. In those 50 years (1921-1971) in a total of 134 provincial and federal elections, 6,845 people were elected. On these, 67 were women – just under 1% of the total. In that same fifty-year period, only two women became Ministers, Rt. Hon. Ellen Fairclough and Hon. Judy LaMarsh.

When it came to rewriting the chapter on the Political Participation of Women for the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, I included a recommendation arising out of a month-long visit I made to India in 1969. Following India's achievement of independence on August 15, 1947, Prime Minister Nehru was conscious of the role women had played under Gandhi's leadership in the long struggle for independence. Women took part in marches, they were beaten and many ended up in jail. But they persevered. Their presence and their activities added greatly to the campaign for independence.



The role played by women in that struggle made an indelible impact on Nehru and he wanted to see that they had the opportunity to make a similar contribution to the work of the Lok Sabha or Parliament of India. He encouraged his Congress Party to enlist women as candidates in the first election of an independent India and although some women entered the lists, none were successful in being elected. So Nehru created what were called women's constituencies and appointed women who had earlier run as candidates and done reasonably well, to the 20 or so women's constituencies to sit as members of the Lok Sabha. His goal was to persuade both the general public and the male members of Parliament that women had a place as Members of Parliament. For the country's first few general elections that system continued - until the number of women elected in their own right surpassed the number of designated women's constituencies, at which time the practice was abolished.

This method of ensuring that women were represented on a temporary basis to Parliament seemed to me to have merit. As a result I recommended to the Royal Commission that Canada's Parliament should have a period of "reverse discrimination" to counter the centuries of overt discrimination against women in decision-making roles in the political arena. I may say that it was the one recommendation that was dropped from my re-writing efforts. This would be a dreary recital if I left it at that. But things have improved somewhat since that 1921-1971 50-year period. In 1972 five women were elected to Parliament, three of whom were to hold cabinet positions: Rt. Hon. Jeanne Sauve as Minister of Communications and later Canada's first female Governor-General; Hon. Monique Bégin, Minister of National Health and Welfare; and myself as Canada's first Foreign Minister. Not bad out of a class of five women.

Since that time, more women have served in important cabinet positions. In 1984, a breakthrough was achieved when Prime Minister Brian Mulroney appointed six women to cabinet positions. Prime Minister Martin topped that number with nine women serving in cabinet at one time.

One of the major obstacles to the election of women in Canada back in the 1970's was the difficulty faced by many candidates, but by women candidates in particular, of being able to raise sufficient funding to run a successful election campaign. Although none of the five newly-elected women M.P.s in 1972 were members of the House Committee on Elections and Procedures, each of us played an active role in our caucuses in seeking to have limits put on the amount of money that could be spent by a candidate during the official period of the election campaign.

A very complicated spending formula, based on the population in each constituency, was eventually determined. Once that system was in place, I made sure that the most trusted member of my campaign team was appointed as the financial officer. That person held my life, or at least my political future, in his or her hands. Inspections of each candidate's expenditures were carried out by Elections Canada officials as well as by officials of one's political party opponents. If it could be shown that a candidate had exceeded the amount mandated as that constituency's expenditure limit, the penalty was to lose one's seat. In Kingston and the Islands we were always very frugal in our spending. The great mistake made at that time was failing to apply the same rigorous limits to the amount of potential candidate could spend in competing for the constituency nomination for his or her party. In



recent years there has been growing criticism about the way in which constituency nomination meetings have been conducted, how they are funded, and whether or not all those who vote have the right to do so.

This of course is a party responsibility, but if the political parties do not take steps to see that constituency nominations are run under strict rules of procedure and spending, and that transparency of financial transactions becomes mandatory, public cynicism about the process will continue to grow to the detriment of political parties.

As a newly – elected Member of Parliament in the early 1970's I ran into a number of situations that I trust would no longer occur given the changes in societal attitudes. As the only woman in the Official Opposition at the time, my workload was augmented by my personal efforts to encourage women in all parts of the country to become candidates in future elections.

Much later, as Canada's first female Foreign Minister, I accompanied Prime Minister Joe Clark to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Lusaka, Zambia. He was the first Canadian Prime Minister to make an official visit to the continent of Africa and we stopped at several other African countries during that trip. Our first stop was in

Cameroon where a huge crowd waited to greet us at the airport. Speeches were to be made but before those official ceremonies, Mr. Clark and I were to be escorted to a room to meet the President and Foreign Minister of Cameroon. On the way in, The Canadian Ambassador stopped me and said: "Would you mind waiting in the other room with the women?" I made a mental note that his next posting should be Patagonia!

But what has happened to women's presence in the Canadian House of Commons since the early 1970's? Over the years, the representation of women has grown considerably though still a long way off from 50% representation. Women's representation did manage to reach 23% in the early 1990's. However, a plateau seems to have been reached in the last three general elections – with a slight downward trend in each of them. The current percentage of women M.P.s following the election on January 23rd, 2006 is just under 21% -- 64 out of a total of 308 Members.

Gender imbalance, and not just fiscal imbalance, should be a priority for political parties. Gender imbalance is not something that can be corrected by government edict.

There are some who support a change in the method of voting from the 'first past the post system' to that of proportional representation as the most assured way to increase the presence of women in legislative bodies. But whatever system is utilized, each has its drawbacks. When I look at the record of countries utilizing the p.r. system – Italy comes to mind – I'm not sure that the resulting instability of numerous parties unable to form coalitions is the way to go. No, to my mind the onus should rest on political parties to carry out a reform of the way in which candidates are selected. Consider the results from our most recent federal election.



Of the members selected to the House under the NDP banner, 41% are women; for the Bloc, 33% are women; for the Liberals, 20%; and for the Conservatives, 11%. Those totals very much reflect the numbers of women who were chosen as candidates for each of the parties. Only the New Democratic Party has a requirement that women and people of colour must be included for consideration as a choice for the party's nomination.

I strongly believe that parties which do not introduce such requirements will begin to lose their standing and their support as representatives of an increasingly diverse, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural Canadian society. Canadians pride themselves on playing leadership roles on the world scene. But where do we stand in the global ranking of women in the political arena? Following the recent federal election, Canada has dropped to 45th position just behind Latvia among 187 world countries on the basis of the number of women in their national parliaments. The rankings, done by the Inter-Parliamentary Union, put the U.K. in 51st place and USA in 68th. Rwanda holds the first place, in large measure due to the genocide in that country which claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of men.

I want to mention one election in particular in a country where I have been working for some years. That country is Afghanistan which I first tried to enter in 1998 but without the proper entry visa – the Taliban government was not welcoming foreign female visitors. I did return properly documented in 2000 and have been returning at least once a year ever since.

As you are all aware, Afghanistan recently held elections for their national and 34 provincial legislative bodies – all on the same day I might underline. The sheer magnitude of the logistics required to handle these 35 simultaneous elections and getting the ballot boxes and voting papers to 38,000 polling stations across a rugged country was mind-boggling.

Of the 5,800 candidates for the Wolesi Jirga (the equivalent of our House of Commons) 582 were women. The Afghan constitution guarantees that “from each province at least two female delegates shall have membership in the Wolesi Jirga” thereby guaranteeing women 68 seats (27%) in the 249 member national assembly.

Afghan women accounted for 43% of the voter turnout in defiance of the many terrorist threats from the Taliban and Al Qaeda insurgents. When the election results were finally tabulated, the tally showed that a surprisingly large number of women had won seats in their own right, not needing the quota provisions of the Constitution. And this in Afghanistan's first election in many years where women have been allowed to stand as candidates.

Canada still has a long way to go to overcome the gender imbalance. But that imbalance also exists even, or perhaps especially, in the world's most prestigious bodies. Just prior to International Women's Day (March 8th) a coalition of international women's organizations castigated both UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and the 191 member states for paying “lip service” to the cause of gender parity in the world



body. Their letter stated: "We are disappointed and frankly outraged that gender equality and strengthening the women's machineries within the UN system are barely noted, and are not addressed as a central part of the UN's reform agenda."

Earlier this month, the second highest ranking job in the world body, that of Deputy Secretary General of the United Nations after being held for some years by Canadian Louise Frechette, was filled by a man. To compensate, I think it only fitting when Kofi Annan retires as Secretary General of the United Nations later this year, his position should be filled by a woman. And I can think of many women who would qualify. It is evident to me, and I hope to each one of you, that the role of women in the political arena needs greatly to be improved. And not just from the point of view of numbers, but because of the contribution in ideas, empathy, tolerance, that 52% of the world's population can and must be entitled to make. Lacking that contribution, we all suffer. I also strongly believe that the presence of a much larger contingent of women would make the Canadian House of Commons, and particularly Question Period, a much more disciplined and respected body. Agnes Macphail threw down the gauntlet to us all in 1921, the Alberta five advanced the cause in 1929, and Laura Sabia who challenged Prime Minister Pearson to set up the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in 1968 set the stage for the Woman's Movement which determined the advances made by women in the 1970's and '80's. Women have in the past, and will again, mobilize to take the next leap Forward. And if not by evolution, then by revolution.