



# Rosemary Speirs' Speech

## Rosemary Speirs - Chair of Equal Voice on March 2/04 to the Ontario Legislative Interns at Queen's Park

When I started here at the Ontario Legislature in 1968, before you were born, John Roberts was premier and on the verge of declaring Ontario's entry into the national health insurance plan now known as medicare. I was one of the first women in the Press Gallery, and worked here on and off for two decades—with several years out working as a labor reporter—and always fascinated by the power struggle of Ontario politics.

I was also involved at this time with the Committee for 94, a women in politics group which aimed for half the House of Commons in 1994. For three years, the committee sponsored an Ontario internship for a mature woman interested in a political career. We thought the Internship a great preparation for public life, and I hope you do too.

Why was I, a journalist, agitating for the election of more women? The answer, if you ever climb into the Press Gallery to look down on the floor, will be obvious. From that perspective it is a sea of men—more so then but still true today—a sea of men making decisions which equally effect women. I went to Ottawa in 1989 to be the Star's bureau chief there, and write the national political column, and spent another 10 years gazing at a sea of men in the House of Commons.

Now, I've nothing against men. I have a terrific 23-year-old son studying political science at Carleton, and I see few signs of sexism among he and his friends, which gives me some hope. That said, I don't believe men can make decisions for women.

Our life experiences are different. Women still bear the burden of poverty, of birth control, child care, care of the sick and elderly, and the programs and laws governing such huge aspects of their lives are designed by Canadian legislatures that are 80 per cent male. Women, if elected in greater numbers, would I believe, vote in their self interest, which would mean stronger social programs.

Let me remind you of some of the pictures in the headline news in recent months: Paul Martin meeting with the 10 premiers and three territorial leaders on health care—every one of those leaders a man. Paul Martin meeting with the mayors of Canada's nine largest cities—every one a man. I was at a meeting at the University of Ottawa where Elaine Hemond, chair of Groupe femmes et politique, held up the photos and asked "What is wrong with this picture?"

There are 63 women in the House of Commons today—21 per cent—and the chances of improvement in this year's election appear slim. Of the legislature's, Quebec's breakthrough to 30 per cent women last year is an exception. In the other nine provinces, including Ontario, women still bump against that old glass ceiling of about one-fifth. Fewer than 10 per cent of Canada's mayors are women—and perhaps 23 per cent of city councilors.

The worrisome part for me is that tracking done by Alberta political scientists Linda Trimbell and Jane Arscott shows the situation is getting worse. Despite women's gains in labor market participation, and in education—the number of women standing for nomination and being elected has started to drop. The most recent legislative elections saw the numbers of elected women decline, particularly in the prairie provinces.

Fewer women are being chosen as party leaders. There are only three women serving as party leaders across Canada now. Can you name them? (Elizabeth Weir is still NDP leader in New Brunswick, Carole James is the new NDP leader in B.C., and Pat Duncan is Opposition leader in the Yukon.)



Now at your age, you may be assuming this is a problem that will go away when your generation comes into power. But the evidence points in the other direction. Look at the work of political scientist Lisa Young on youth participation in Canadian politics.

In the 2000 election, 75 per cent of young people under age 25 didn't bother to vote. Under age 30, fewer than 5 per cent participate in Canadian political parties., and it is worse among young women than young men.

So for the future, the pool of women who might take part in political life is getting smaller. Young people and especially young women are tuning out. They don't even bother to read newspapers, and that bodes ill for my cause.

Which brings me to Equal Voice. Two years ago, a number of us who'd been involved in the old Committee for 94 decided to try again. We adopted what we thought had been the strengths of the committee—so we are multipartisan, deliberately building our membership among politically active women, and some men—elected politicians and backroomers at all levels of government.

To illustrate: Caroline Bennett, the federal Liberal cabinet minister, is a strong Equal Voice supporter: and so is Anita Neville, the Winnipeg MP who is head of the Liberal Women's caucus. Frances Lankin, former NDP cabinet minister here, and Olivia Chow, the Toronto city councilor who is another strong New Democrat. And Janet Ecker, a former Ontario Tory cabinet minister, and Lida Preyma, a Magna International executive who is nominated as a candidate for the New Conservative party. We think this multipartisan makeup gives us clout with the political parties.

And that is what Equal Voice does—we lobby political party leaders to nominate more women, and we try to bring public attention to the under-representation of women.. Right now our focus is on the federal election—and so on Paul Martin, Jack Layton, Gilles Duceppe and the Conservative leadership candidates.

We've been peppering them with letters, and pamphleting their party meetings. Our campaign is for one third of Parliament—which means enough women candidates must be nominated to win an additional 40 seats in the Commons. Even that modest goal looks out of reach today.

But whatever happens in the election, Equal Voice won't go away. In the words of that grand old feminist leader Doris Anderson, we're going to keep on "pushing the rock up the hill."