



**Statement on electing women
Senator Grant Mitchell, April 17, 2007**

This afternoon, representatives from every national party committed to the election of more women to parliament after the next election.

The pledge was part of the Canada challenge by Equal Voice, a national multipartisan non-profit organization dedicated to the goal of electing more women at all levels of government across Canada.

Each party will develop strategies that work best for them - Stephane Dion has pledged to have at least one third women candidates nominated for the next election.

Currently, the Other Place has only 21% female representation, a number that places Canada at 47th in the world, behind Uganda, Turkmenistan and Vietnam among others. In fact, during the 2006 election, Canada's number of elected women decreased.

And the situation is no different at other levels of government. All of the provincial premiers and all of the big-city mayors across Canada are men. This under-representation weakens the legitimacy of our democratic institutions.

Twenty-five years ago today the Canadian Charter of Rights was signed. Canadian women have made significant gains since that time. And yet with 52% of the population, women are still overwhelmingly under-represented in our democratic and public life.

Some will say that women who want to run for office in Canada are completely free to do so, and that it is unfair or undemocratic to recruit women specifically. This would be true if it were a level playing field. However, women face different attitudes, societal expectations, media coverage, family and social responsibilities and often have different access to the money and power networks within political parties. The power of incumbency also works against women - it is easier for a current MP to get re-elected and fewer of them are women.

Statistics show that where women are on the ballot, Canadians will vote for women and men in equal numbers. The number of women elected is in direct proportion to the number of women nominated by political parties. The greatest barrier to women's participation in politics is often getting the party nomination and not the election campaign itself.

That is why Equal Voice – in addition to learning tools such as the online campaign school called “getting to the gate” – has launched the Canada challenge directly to political parties, the gatekeepers to the political process.

The United Nations says that a threshold of 30 percent female legislators are necessary in order to achieve the critical mass necessary to ensure that public policy reflects the needs of women.

90% of Canadians want more women elected. What is necessary is political will. Parties need proactive recruiting and support for women candidates in winnable ridings. Young women need role models in elected office and mentors. We as parliamentarians can use our influence in both roles.

In my own experience as a party leader, I found that often the best way to get women to run for office was simply to ask. And to ensure that women are recruited into ridings where the party stands a strong chance of winning.

During the next election campaign, Equal Voice will be tracking the number of women nominated and elected by each political party. Let's all do our part to pledge to increase the number of women in the Other Place next time.