



Women's Political Action Forum

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Good afternoon. I'm pleased to be among you, representing Equal Voice. Thank you Kelly and Janet and your committee for bringing us all together here in Edmonton to promote women in Canadian politics.

My speech has been presented by everyone who has spoken before me! But repetition is good, so I'll go ahead and have this conversation with you.

I add before I continue, that mentorship is critical for women interested in entering politics. I wouldn't be where I am if it weren't for the mentors in my life.

My formal education was completed in 1999, but my life education continues as I am with you now. I am a true life-long learner, as Betty has said in her introduction.

I'm pinching myself as I stand in front of you, not totally believing that I'm here. You all know why you are here and have your own stories about your political activism. I have been agitating for many years at the injustices in the world and have spoken out to friends about my conviction that if more women were involved in politics at the decision-making levels, we would have a more peaceful world. I've been called idealistic, a Pollyanna, even a fool. Since my consciousness was awakened in the late '70s and early '80s to the true injustices women suffer, I have continued to be keenly interested in the role women play (or don't play) in politics, if they're allowed into the game at all. It wasn't until I read an article about Equal Voice early in 2002, that I realized the time had come for me to become more active in what was happening on the Canadian scene. I logged on to www.equalvoice.ca the address noted in the article and was drawn into reading more, joining the organization, and eventually communicating by email with Dr. Rosemary Speirs, Chair of Equal Voice. It was quite astounding to have my emails answered and to be welcomed to the organization by Rosemary, as I am living and working in Calgary, many miles from the action in the eastern regions of the country. I joined as a member at a distance, mostly to be included in the information network that was gaining momentum.

I am a nurse educator/researcher and am no stranger to political challenges. Nurses have been activists for eons. I have raised two children on my own, furthered my own education, and sought ways to broaden my knowledge about power bases, equity, and social justice for women. I am astounded that we have crossed into the 21st Century and are still struggling to achieve many of the rights that should have been ours decades ago. We are still under-represented in our legislatures and parliament; we are still fighting for the right to make decisions about our own bodies; we are still fighting for a health care system that remains accessible and affordable (I have serious concerns about our health care system); we are still fighting for the retention of a high quality education system that prepares our youth to be the citizens of tomorrow, and for safe and affordable child care; we are still fighting for the freedom to love and be with the person of our own choice without discrimination and penalty; and we are still fighting for recognition as decision-makers, policy developers, legislators and partners in government in an environment that has not welcomed women.)

Through Equal Voice, I have become more informed and optimistic about women being better represented in governments in Canada. Women are actually doing something to change the status quo in our governments at all levels and here I am, with an opportunity to be in the middle of the action! Back in 1984, a group of politically active Toronto women met and formed the Committee for '94, to begin the push toward populating half of the House of Commons with women. They met with political leaders, wrote letters and briefs, and held press conferences among other activities, sadly withdrawing after ten years, when the number of women in the House amounted to only 20%. Many of the same members of this



group of women rallied in 2000 to form Equal Voice, an organization of over 300 women, men, (many politically active), professionals, students and other concerned Canadians, setting the goal of '104 in 2004.' One hundred and four women in the House of Commons is a far cry from true proportional representation, but it's a step in the right direction. One hundred and four women – not half but one third of the House membership. Is that too much to ask?

I logged onto the federal government website as I was preparing this paper and clicked on the link "women in the House of Commons." The running notice at the bottom of the screen informed me, "Waiting for reply"...I waited, then read over and over and over for what seemed like eons, "waiting, waiting, waiting, waiting..." You get the picture. Do you think that this is an omen? Or is it a subtle hint to us that the federal government is not getting our message! I'm tired of waiting.

Let's look for a moment at the political map of Alberta. In a province of 2,975,000 people and growing (this figure is taken from the 2001 census), with a sitting legislature of 83 at the moment, only 16 MLAs are women. Five of those women are ministers in the Klein cabinet. Do the math. Are we represented equitably in our provincial legislature? No.

We are only slightly better represented in the House of Commons. I counted heads on the website and came up with 63 women in our federal parliament. Again, do the math – 63 out of 301 seats filled by women. That's barely over 20% representation by women. Only eleven women are ministers in the present cabinet of Paul Martin.

So, what is Equal Voice all about? Equal Voice is a multipartisan national group advocating for the election of more women, particularly now, on the eve of a federal election. Equal Voice is pressing for change – change in the way our country is run. We're pressing for a major change in this election in the number of women in parliament.

As I have said, right now there are 63 women in the House of Commons, or 21% of the members. We've set a modest goal of 104 women, or a third of the House, after the next election. That's still not half, but getting even 41 more women will be a major challenge. We are fighting a huge incumbency factor of male MPs whose hearts may be in the right place, but who aren't prepared to step aside when it comes to their own seats. We think that with one-third of the Commons, women MPs would form a critical mass whose voices could no longer be ignored.

Today, we are still governed by men. They make up nearly 80 percent of the Commons, of most of our provincial legislatures, and of our municipal councils. Yet women make up over half of Canada's population! I don't believe that men can speak for the female half of the population, simply because our life experiences are different. Cuts to our health, education and social programs hit women harder than men. Women generally have smaller incomes. Women carry most of the burden of childcare. Women are the caregivers of elderly parents and children. Women form the fastest growing segment of our aging population and are more likely to live out their later years in poverty. Social and health care programs and policies are mainly designed and directed by men, but have higher impact on women when they are inappropriate or inadequate. It is my contention that more women's voices and political clout will strengthen our social and health care programs, to the benefit of everyone. This feminization of the political landscape would result in a "kinder, gentler Canada." Thank you Rosemary for reminding me of this.

The disproportionate representation we are mired in can only be changed if the electoral system is changed. Women are at a huge disadvantage when it comes to entering and succeeding in the political arena. They face their first and biggest barriers at the entry point of politics – the process of getting nominated. Fighting a nomination battle can prove prohibitively expensive for women, who normally have smaller incomes than men. As well, women have to get past the entrenched male networks in politics, which already may have set aside a given riding for a male candidate considered to have paid his dues. Leveling the playing field requires a change in attitudes and changes in electoral law, such as the election financing reforms introduced by former prime minister Jean Chretien that will strictly limit nomination and election spending, at least at the federal level. We'd like to see similar strict limits on all forms of election spending, including at the nomination level, in the provinces as well.

In the longer term, Equal Voice is also fighting for a change in our electoral system itself, to introduce



proportional representation. Equal Voice member Marilou McPhedran, a prominent feminist lawyer, and Rosemary Speirs presented a position paper to the Law Commission of Canada in the Spring of 2003 recommending equality-based electoral reform to reduce the existing democratic deficit in our federal system. They stressed the difficulties women face getting elected under our first-past-the-post electoral system. Our system leaves the choice of candidates up to local riding associations whose members too often still assume the best candidate is a male professional with a family. McPhedran and Speirs pointed out that most modern democracies (except England and the United States) use electoral systems based on proportional representation.

Proportional representation takes many different forms, but is generally designed to better reflect the face of the population – in which women are more than half. Countries around the world are outstripping Canada in the number of women elected to political office. With only a fifth of our parliament comprised with women, we now rank 36th among the countries of the world. The stacked deck gets worse when women bid themselves out of the game. But it is understandable that so many women look at the male club in charge in Canada and hesitate to become involved in political life.

Equal Voice proposes that the biggest obstacle is the stance of political parties themselves. The leadership in political parties proclaims its determination to elect more women – as Prime Minister Paul Martin has vowed for this election – but the years go by and we still have the same old male status quo in politics.

Surveys show that Canadian voters are ready to vote for women, but the political parties themselves must have the will to make this happen. They must change their traditional practices and stop placing all their support on men running for re-election without challenge. They must encourage and support women to run in ridings where they can win.

A major example of non-support is the situation of Sheila Copps. She is not receiving any support from the prime minister – the first of the first ministers, the leader of our country, the leader of Ms. Copps' party, is not even supporting her re-election. And this is not a woman who is new to politics. This is a woman who has served as a senior cabinet member in the Liberal government, who has represented her Hamilton riding loyally for years. How rude and disrespectful that she is being left in limbo. Maybe the biggest bonus that might come out of this fiasco is that Ms. Copps is being courted by the NDP! Jack Layton is out front in stating that proportional representation is the way to go in making certain that women are better represented.

Is it any wonder why more women don't aspire to public office when we see how they are portrayed in the media? When we see critics and commentators doing a number on women such as Sheila Copps and now on Belinda Stronach, how can we wish that life on any woman? I would venture a guess that to be known as the "it girl" in 2004 is not Ms. Stronach's greatest reward for standing up to be counted. To be demeaned, scorned, and made fun of cannot be the finest aspiration for one who is putting herself on the line for her country. Women in the political forum are described by their hair, their makeup (or lack of it), their clothing, their shoes, their jewellery, and now by the male company they keep.

We would be shortsighted to forget the treatment meted out to former prime minister Kim Campbell. Am I encouraging any of you to run in the next election? Women who have strong credentials, who make a commitment to creating and maintaining a just society, who are interested in serving not out of self-interest, but out of a firm conviction that they can make a difference, should be welcomed to the political scene. Instead, they are devalued, belittled, and insulted. We can make a difference. You believe that too or you wouldn't be here. We can agitate for change in our communities, in our schools, in our workplaces, in our homes.

We of Equal Voice, our numbers growing by the day, encourage you to think very seriously about standing up and demanding change.

Change that can begin to happen with the "committee of one." With you. Write your MP, write the PM and the leaders of the major political parties. Tell them that you would like to be represented in your government. Tell them that 20% is not good enough. Tell them that true justice and democracy can be served by proportional representation, by women being recruited and put in place to run and win in political office. If we are to achieve any kind of consultative and collaborative process within our public policy and social program



planning sectors in government, we must have more women in place to ensure that happens. If we are to have guardians of our health care system and educational system, we must situate more women in political office.

Write letters to the newspapers. Send e-mails to your friends. Encourage women whom you know to be strong and principled to run for office. Reach out and find ways that you might support a woman to run in your area. Go to meetings. Keep up to date on political activities. The very fact that we are here and that we are demonstrating a commitment by being together suggests that we can form the critical mass to bring about change.

The strength and tenacity of our leaders give us direction. The women in each group contributing to this forum, the women in local, provincial and federal political activities along with the strength in numbers that we provide, serve as a continuation in the groundswell of change. Let this powerful tidal swell carry us as we join together to alter the view from the visitor's gallery in the House of Commons, at the provincial and local legislatures, and in the city and town council halls, by adding more women. One hundred and four in 2004 is not too much to ask. I think it's too little actually, but it's sure a lot better than what we've got.

Recently, Equal Voice spearheaded an initiative called The ConneXion, a network of 43 groups and individuals across the country who are attempting to work together to put the spotlight on the under-representation of women. ConneXion has representation from all provinces and territories, with people from diverse backgrounds – business, labour, Aboriginal and multicultural groups, all with the same goal. Both Equal Voice and ConneXion operate in our two official languages. Following the strategies of Equal Voice, ConneXion members lobby intensely to get the attention of politicians. Letters have just been sent on January 26 to prime minister Martin, to leader of the Bloc Quebecois, Gilles Duceppe, and to NDP leader, Jack Layton, calling on them to intervene in the nomination process for their parties underway for the Spring election – intervention that will ensure that women are encouraged to run for office and to support them in the running. As well, the ConneXion letters reminded the leaders about Canada's abysmal standing compared to other world governments in the number of women parliamentarians.

This is what Equal Voice is about. Networking, supporting, encouraging, reporting, lobbying, and above all, reminding everyone that women deserve equal representation in our governments. Remember that shampoo commercial, "I told a friend, and she told a friend, and she told a friend...? Let's all tell a friend! E-mail, phone, write, advertise in the paper, hold a political rally.... There are endless ideas within this room that need to be shared!

Let this forum set the tone and provide you with the energy to act now – carry the message "104 in 2004." We need 41 more women elected this year than were elected in the last election to begin the true democratic process of debate in the House of Commons, debate on issues that are of vast importance to over half our population. Women's issues are everyone's issues. That means that issues brought by women to our legislators for debate are of importance to everyone.

Now is the time for us to demand change, not after an election when political promises are forgotten. Send a message to Prime Minister Martin. Send messages to the leaders of the other parties and demand that they see justice done for over 51% of the Canadian population.
Thank you.