



Speech by Rosemary Speirs - Chair of Equal voice

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Canadian women are advantaged in so many ways-- in economic status, health, and personal liberty. So it may sound strange to hear me talking about us being politically backward compared to women in many other countries. But it is true. The so-called "feminist revolution" got stalled here in the Nineties, and where it really counts—in power at the top—we still have a long way to go.

The Inter-Parliamentary Union ranks countries by the number of women in their national legislatures, and ranks Canada 44th.

With only 64 women in the elected House of Commons—or less than 21 per cent of the seats-- we are way behind not just the Scandinavian countries and some European nations, but behind countries in the middle East, Africa, Central America, Asia.

Five years ago, a number of us veterans of the gender wars got together to talk about the issue of Canadian women's under-representation in politics. We were concerned that the women's movement has stagnated in Canada. But we didn't want to revive the feminist lobbies that used to descend on Parliament Hill to

demand a national child care system or equal pay for women doing equal jobs. This time we wanted INSIDE the corridors of power. We want women elected to office, playing an equal role at the table when social programs are being designed that affect us more.

So, in the spring of 2001—five years ago—we created Equal Voice. We started as a little ginger group, meeting in one another's homes over wine and pizza, sending off news releases to the media about the low levels of women being nominated and challenging political leaders to do better.

WE had two rules: One, our only task was to create an atmosphere in which more women would be elected. And two: we would be multi-partisan, working with women in all major parties. We have won the backing of most elected women and that adds greatly to our clout. And it helps those elected women when we bring pressure on their party leaders from outside.

Another thing that helps tremendously is that women are raising the issue internationally and the United Nations and European Union are calling on member countries to live up to standards for fairer representation. And when Spain elects 33 per cent women, or Afghanistan 27 per cent, we can say why can't we in Canada do that.

But we are up against North American attitudes, coming mainly-- but far from exclusively-- from the political and religious right in the United States, and also in Canada. This is the attitude that is fed up with so-called "social engineering" and "political correctness" and says if women really want into politics, they have only run. Quotas—being used effectively elsewhere—have little chance of acceptance in North America. Affirmative action is out.

In North America the word feminist has somehow been turned into a negative word. It once meant that women could do anything that men could do. But, for some time now in North America, the word feminist has been equated with shrillness and bra-burning, and younger women today make a point of disclaiming. How many times have you heard "I am not a feminist, but".



Last week I learned from the papers that in the U.S. Congressional elections this year Democratic party women are contesting half a dozen of the most competitive seats in the House. That's progress in a Congress with only 15 per cent women. Good for those Democratic women. But, the Republicans reacted by calling the Democrats the "mommy party"—meant to belittle and suggest more elected women would be soft on security.

It is so easy to pull out stereotypes about women, and the sad part is that they have their effect, and women start accepting them too. Political party organizers report they are having great difficulty recruiting women to run in Canadian elections, because women are saying the political world is too rough and dirty for them. Women themselves are opting out.

In Canada, only Jack Layton's fourth place party, the New Democrats, have pulled out the stops to elect women, with the result the NDP caucus in the House is 41 per cent women. But in the two major parties, we in Equal Voice feel strong resistance. Not to our aim of electing more women. Every party agrees in principle on that. But there is resistance to the remedies we suggest, even though we have been so careful not to talk about quotas.

We want parties to adopt voluntary targets for nominating many more women; we ask for electoral financing reform because money is a barrier to many women who might otherwise run, we want fair nominations overseen by the Chief Electoral Officer, we want voting system reform to introduce proportional representation, better reflecting the actual makeup of the population.

Despite the resistance, I am encouraged to think we will win yet. I am encouraged by the growth in Equal Voice itself, which has become a national organization, with provincial chapters, plus a national youth chapter and a new Toronto chapter. Under its new chair Mehreen Raza, the chapter is turning out to be reflection of multi-cultural Toronto.

That is something else Equal Voice's cause owes to women of other countries. We find the young women joining us now tend to come from immigrant backgrounds, often from countries where women have learned hard lessons.

While young Canadian women are often apathetic about politics, regarding it as irrelevant to their lives, and just assuming their generation will enjoy gender equality without fighting for it, women who come from elsewhere have no such illusions. Mehreen Raza, Choice Okoro, Rowena Santos, Charm Darby, Elida Sekulovski, Shirley Ichhkanian, Betsy Kikuchi, Tam Goossen, are some of the members of our Toronto Chapter interested in running some day.

Equal Voice's job is to help clear the way, so these women will find themselves in an atmosphere friendly to their political ambitions.