

Running for a Better World – Barbara MacDonald

Build it and they will come goes a common adage. Hold a women's campaign school and they will come as well. This was the case when a series of women's campaign schools were held throughout Nova Scotia organized by the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities' Women and Local Government Committee in anticipation of the forthcoming municipal elections in October. Generously funded by Status of Women Canada, Service Nova Scotia and Municipal Relations, the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities, the Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women and the Association of Municipal Administrators Nova Scotia, the schools attracted close to one hundred participants. The objective of the campaign schools was to have at least 30 per cent of all candidates running in the October 2008 municipal elections to be women. This is in keeping with the United Nations target of one-third women elected representatives to achieve gender impact on elected representation.

I attended the first campaign school in Sydney held at the Marconi Campus of the Nova Scotia Community College on a cold, damp Saturday morning typical of Cape Breton spring. An old 'politico' at heart, I have been involved in provincial and federal politics as a canvasser and campaign manager. My only involvement in municipal politics has been as a citizen attending Cape Breton Regional Municipality council meetings to support such community endeavors as funding for the YMCA. As a voter, I always exercise my franchise to vote in all three levels of government elections. Sadly, far too few people exercise their most basic of democratic freedoms. I have long recognized as municipal politics as the 'front line' of politics of the people. This lesson was learned early in life, as my father was a life long politician as a provincial leader of the CCF. In his retirement he was the county councillor for District 18 Cape Breton County, as it was known prior to amalgamation. A family dinner was not complete in our home without my father answering several telephone calls from his constituents.

Drawn by a combination of curiosity and not knowing what I want to be when I grow up, I had registered for the campaign school when it was first advertised. I wanted to see who the women were in my community that would be interested in running for municipal office, what skills would be taught and if I myself would be moved to run for office. Upon entering the room I saw a few familiar faces as would happen in any small community. As the room filled to capacity, the energy was palpable and the laughter abundant. A round of introductions by each woman quickly led me to the conclusion that this group of women could run the world much less an election campaign! The collective skill set and life experience of the women was truly impressive. The group was comprised of women entrepreneurs, professional women, retirees and many who cited a lifetime of volunteer work in their community in addition to being a full time worker in the home raising their family. Whether working inside or outside of the home, commitment to community and humanity as volunteers was a trait shared by all who spoke.

Duly impressed by the format, resource persons, participants and the energy in the room, I approached Lyle Goldberg, Policy Analyst with the UNSM and suggested he should capture this event and the forthcoming campaign schools across the province in an article for publication. Thus began my journey as a scribe who had the privilege of attending all the campaign schools. Following Sydney the schools were held in Yarmouth, Dartmouth and Stellarton respectively. Within this article I will attempt to describe this experience as an observer and report on the

commonalities and differences I observed and share some of the essence and energy of the campaign schools.

“I want to make a difference” was the resounding theme I heard during all the workshops. Women of all ages expressed a desire to make a change in the world to make it a better place. That is not, however, to be misinterpreted as a grandiose vision of changing the world overnight on a global scale. Extreme pragmatists, the campaign school participants saw involvement in municipal politics as an opportunity to make changes in the very immediate, day to day issues experienced by real people in real communities—theirs. Motivation for attending the campaign schools was also very specific such as getting detailed information about the process of becoming a candidate, what they would have to know as a candidate, to some who saw it as the possible push they needed to actually declare themselves and mount a campaign.

The well planned and designed content of the school involved a format containing volumes of information delivered by local expert women holding municipal offices as well as municipal staff people. Critical to the opening of each session were welcoming remarks by women holding elected positions. These women Mayors and Councillors made manifest the ambitions of the women in the room. Not only could it be done, indeed some of these women had been holding their council seats for fifteen years or longer. An elder stateswoman in Yarmouth was not re-offering after twenty-nine years on council. They later shared their experiences during a section called – “What it’s like to be a Councilor/How to run a Successful Municipal Election Campaign.” The women were held in rapt attention as the stories unfolded of the individual women’s experiences about how they decided to run, what happened next, how they campaigned and what their experience on council was like.

The mornings were spent covering Municipal Government 101 and Perspectives of a Returning Officer: 2008 Municipal Election. Truly the nuts and bolts of what every candidate needs to know before running for office, the information was conveyed by women Chief Administrative Officers and Returning Officers from the various municipalities where the schools were being hosted. The conclusion drawn by many participants was that knowledge of the Municipal Government Act would be critical and the binders containing the information presented an enormous aid that they could take away for consumption. An important point was raised during these presentations that is crucial for any woman considering running for public office. One doesn’t have to know everything before becoming a candidate! If that were the case, the slates of candidates would be woefully empty. The entire process is a steep learning curve but not one that needs to be completed in order to run for office. The campaign schools were a huge start on that learning curve but the experience of being an elected representative is a continuous learning process as stated by the most seasoned elected officials who acted as resource persons.

The role of elected official demands the ability to be a team player and the ability to communicate. The former often depends on one’s public and interpersonal communication skills and style. Clear communication of one’s message always helps reduce potential conflict. To this end, the afternoon sessions were spent on “Communicating Your Message: Verbal and Non-Verbal Communication Strategies.” Facilitated by Dr. Judy Rolls from Cape Breton University, a published author and professor, Judy brought great insight to the realm of communication being far more than merely uttering words. Using great humour to exemplify the complexities of

human communication, this session was highly engaging and interactive. The impact of gender on communication was the lens through which Judy presented her material. A mock door knocking exercise was instructive as well as hilarious as women who had conducted campaigns role-played a household member, while brave volunteers from the audience knocked on the invisible door. The real life receptions, drawn from personal experience of the elected women, gave the potential candidates a taste of what they may encounter when they knock on the door of a total stranger. Specific strategies were shared on issues such as asking someone for their vote. Most strategies had a common denominator—do what you are comfortable doing.

Of great interest to this observer was the difference in dynamics between the urban workshops in Sydney and Dartmouth and the rural workshops in Pictou and Yarmouth. The skill set, competencies and experience of the women in the rooms in all four places was exceptional as already noted. The dynamic was notably different in that the urban women were more assertive in their presentation style, most notably in Dartmouth. Perhaps the presence of more young women and women already experienced in running a campaign accounts for this difference.

Practical differences and considerations were discussed in running rural and urban campaigns. Rural politicians and potential candidates alike spoke of knowing vast numbers of their constituents and equally important—knowing where to find them to campaign en masse. Church suppers and other community events allowed ready access to clusters of voters at no cost save admission. Seen and be seen was also an imperative given by those with experience. This did not, however, replace door knocking. A small inexpensive pamphlet or card with the candidates contact information, signed with the date, time of call and a short personal message was an essential tool for both the urban and rural candidate. Repeatedly, elected women told of constituents saying to them “you are the only one who has bothered to come and see me”—not always a guaranteed vote but a good indicator. Signage was not considered necessary in a rural campaign but needed more in the urban campaign. Using all your networks to produce your campaign materials and reduce costs was the mantra of the schools. Find someone who can do desktop publishing and paint signs in their garage for your campaign materials. Women know how to do a lot with very little and demonstrated this as they spoke of campaign budgets typically well under \$800.

Negative campaigning, a common practice in Canada, has no place in municipal campaigns according to many of the resource persons who spoke at all the schools. Being critical of one’s opponent is not advisable. Especially in rural communities where everyone seemingly knows everyone (or at least their cousin) and critical comments can come back to haunt you in the future. Chances are you will be misquoted but the comments attributed to you anyway. Instead, it was advised to always take the high ground—no matter how difficult that may be at times. State that you feel you could do a better job as the potential voter’s representative. Stress your accessibility and be prepared to back that up if elected. Take stock of your strengths and be prepared to promote yourself. Women are often not accustomed to self-promotion, often working behind the scenes and downright avoid seeking credit for accomplishments. Know your community and its concerns and be able to state how you would approach an issue. Most importantly, never promise anything that you can’t deliver! Instead say that you will look into the individual’s concern and get back to them—then **GET BACK TO THEM.**

The public is increasingly jaundiced by the political system largely because basic constituency work is not done well. Telephone calls often go unreturned; letters unanswered and people feel powerless and their voices not heard.

Often the role of the municipal councillor is that of information broker and not always an agent of change. Numerous instances of this were conveyed by the resource persons who commented on the lack of knowledge the public has on what is a federal, provincial or municipal responsibility. Few people know that Public Works, Transportation, Planning and Development, Public Protection, Parks and Recreation and Environmental/Public Health are some of the categories of service of municipal government. Heating costs and the wait time for surgery are not. The councillor hears all at the doorstep or in the grocery store and practices Political Science 100 by teaching the difference in the three levels of government and which level is responsible for a particular issue or complaint.

Women participants were also advised to develop ‘a tough skin’ to use a colloquial expression. In other words, don’t take it personally whatever ‘it’ happens to be. This could be on the doorstep while campaigning or in council chambers when elected. Women with vast experience on council told war stories from times when sexism was far more rampant, or at least blatant. Respect yourself and demand the same respect you would accord anyone else. Women are slowly changing the political culture in which they work and will change it even more as our numbers increase. Women were characterized as being more collaborative, diplomatic and desiring of consensus. “We have a different way of thinking (than men) and both are needed,” stated one participant.

The rewards of being a councillor are often found in helping people and knowing you made a difference in their lives. Tangible rewards such as a park, walking path, increased recreation programs in your community or stopping something like pesticide use are examples. Larger scale examples included clearing the innumerable bylaw hurdles to attract new business to communities increasing employment opportunities and the tax base. The financial rewards are not the main motivation for anyone seeking office. With the exception of the Halifax Regional Municipality and Cape Breton Regional Municipality, which have the tax and population base to support well salaried positions, most councillors are not in it for the money. Town and rural council remuneration can range from \$9000-\$18,000 for untold hours of work and availability. Putting oneself in the public eye by offering or holding an elected position also comes with a cost that can’t be calculated in dollars.

The women councillors and mayors spoke of their municipal careers as richly rewarding—something one has to experience to really understand. For any downside discussed in the workshops there were innumerable upsides accompanied by very personal and moving stories of people whom they had helped. Why else would women have run for office time and time again? They motivated and inspired the participants; they made us laugh and, in some poignant cases, they made us cry. Most of all they were living testimony that it could be done. “A leap of faith” and “having a fire in your belly for it” were two colourful ways to describe what the women in the room must do to make the decision to run for office.

Municipal government is up close and personal and not for everyone. People's day-to-day lives are affected in innumerable and often undetected ways by all three levels of government. But municipal government involvement appeals to many, as it is more immediate and visceral. The women who attended the campaign schools love their communities and they care about the people in them. They were contemplating running, had already declared, decided to declare following the workshop or would become otherwise involved. They were hungry for information and examples and received both in ample supply throughout the course of the day. Support and encouragement was both given and received, new friendships made and dreams moved closer to reality by the end of the day.

"I don't have to have my picture on the front page of the paper saying 'look what I did' – if I know I am making a difference for the common good!" is a most apt summary of the women's municipal government campaign schools.

Run women run!

Note: Barbara MacDonald is an adult education consultant and freelance writer who has resided for the past eight years in her native Cape Breton Island following twenty years in Ontario.