Women in politics: What's the fuss?
Equality means not caring whether an elected representative is male or female or black or gay or Methodist or whatever
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Mopping up after an election campaign brings interesting surprises. For instance, you might be startled to hear Quebec has recently regressed socially. And I don't mean Mario Dumont's Action democratique du Quebec and its relationship (or lack thereof) with cultural minorities. No, ma'am. We're talking about an embarrassing decrease in the number of elected females.

Egad.

Here's how an article on the subject in Thursday's La Presse started: "They were 39 out of 125 MNAs, they are now, after this election, only 32. Women will, henceforth, be less well represented in the National Assembly" - something various women's groups are said to find worrisome. So, of course, these groups want the government to institutionalize what federal Liberal leader Stephane Dion is clumsily trying to do, with what could only be described as no success at all: Force political parties into gender "equality."

What for? According to a press release from six feminist organizations (available, in French, at ffq.qc.ca/communiques/comm-28-03-2007.html), the slightly smaller proportion of elected women is something to be deplored, but it's not clear why. I see that we're not getting closer to having equal numbers of males and females in various elected assemblies. But why am I supposed to care? Why do we "need" women in politics?

According to something called the Inter-Parliamentary Union (ipu.org), Rwanda ranks first in the world with 48.8 per cent women representation in the national legislature, whereas Canada is 48th with 20.8 per cent. The United States, where we all know women are routinely persecuted by a political class bent on systemic gender inequality, is 68th with 16.3 per cent. So, is the theory that we'd be better off if we were governed more like Rwanda?

More broadly (so to speak), is there something about women that makes us particularly attuned to the exigencies of governance? Does gender affect bank rates? Foreign policy? Environmental regulations? If so, why don't female voters prefer female politicians?

And if we're legislating quotas for perspective, then we should also make the proportion of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, etc. representatives match their share of the general population, assuming we even know it. And once we get there, shouldn't we also worry about religious representation?

What about race? Oooh, dear.

To me equality means not caring whether my elected representative is male or female or black or gay or Methodist or whatever. And democracy means letting people elect whomever they think represents their views. I believe enforcing equal representation of women in politics would be wrong, undemocratic, and possibly even counterproductive. I suspect I am not alone.

I just watched the first five episodes of the short-lived 2005-2006 TV series Commander in Chief, with Geena Davis in the role of Mackenzie Allen, the first female U.S. president. It's sort of semi-interesting to see how Hollywood script-writers think President Allen would deal with mega-macho male politicians (Donald Sutherland's character is so evil he's almost funny) doing their darnedest to undermine her authority even at the expense of the country they have sworn to serve. Will she be strong in defence of U.S. interests or will she be too dainty and frail to use force in any way? Gosh, what unbearable suspense.

The show's ratings were terrible, despite reasonably clever writing and decent acting. Viewers, including those of the female persuasion, were just not interested. We all know that female politicians are like their
male counterparts. They have similar goals, and they go about achieving them pretty much the same way.

I'm all for women going into politics. I would object if there were barriers to entry based on gender. But there aren't. If you're a woman thinking about running for office, go for it. Many have done it, some splendidly. Yes, it's difficult - it's especially hard for parents of young children. But electoral politics is a challenge for everybody. Most candidates lose in every riding in every election.

All those years feminists demanded that men treat women as equals. Now women have the same civic rights as men; they can vote, run for office, be appointed senators - heck, they can be head of state, as Her Majesty demonstrates, er, majestically. Why would anybody want legislation to force the election of more women?

If you want to be treated like an equal, behave like one. Get out there and fight like a man. If you can't stand it, either work to change how politics is done or stay where you are. It makes no sense to ask for equality with special help. That's not equality, and it sure ain't democracy.

If we were really socially advanced, we would care about our representatives' ideas, not their gender.

Illustration:

• Photo: JACQUES BOISSINOT, CP / Quebec Family Minister Carole Theberge makes a point on Quebec's daycare system in the National Assembly. She is among the female MNAs who lost their seats in the March 26 election.

EV's Response:

Letter to the Editor of the Montreal Gazette

RE: Women in Politics: What's the fuss?

By Ann Wicks, Executive Director

Equal Voice: Electing More Women in Canada

There are still barriers for women in politics – isn’t this undemocratic? Just ask any of the political veterans who sit on Equal Voice’s advisory board like Kim Campbell, Sheila Copps, or Audrey McLaughlin. Women are 52% of the population in Canada and yet make up only 21% of the House of Commons.

Polling shows that women care about different issues than men. The United Nations says a critical mass of at least 30% women is needed for a legislature to produce public policy reflecting women.

Two Royal Commissions have already documented the need to elect more women and have shown it is more difficult for women to win nomination races than general elections. Political hierarchy is still the biggest roadblock to equality.

Equal Voice tracking shows that once nominated, women are successful at the polls. This indicates that when given the choice, Canadians are more than willing to elect women (in 2006 the Bloc nominated 33% women and elected 30%, the NDP nominated 41% women and elected 35%, the Liberals nominated 25% and elected 21% and the Conservatives nominated 12% and elected 11% women).
This demonstrates that as the gatekeepers to elected office, political parties can be catalysts for change.

The Conference Board of Canada says the lack of CEO commitment impedes women's advancement in the workplace. The same is true for politics. Political leadership is required to provide a level playing field for women in the candidate selection process.

Democracy should be a partnership of all Canadians. A true democracy providing equal opportunity does not allow for a select few to have a monopoly on power. It is in our collective interest to reduce these barriers so we can utilize the talents of 52% of our population.

The old ways don’t work. Canada needs to focus on finding solutions and learning from other countries that have been successful at leveling the playing field for women in politics. If Sweden, Wales and Rwanda can do it – so can Canada.