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# Political Recruiting and Women in the Political Process

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by Hon. Eleni Bakopanos, PC, MP

*This article argues that women continue to face serious obstacles to full participation in public life. The author suggests that women bring a different character to the policy making process and they should be encouraged to enter politics in greater numbers.*



When a woman makes the decision to run for political office, she is opting to take, in the words of American poet Robert Frost, “the road less travelled.” The biggest barrier that women face is overcoming self doubt. We have to make the decision to take that path and be prepared for the long hike and the many sacrifices we will have to make along the way in order to serve our country. Thankfully

there are footprints to follow and a few travellers to offer directions.

For women to attain full equality I believe that there must be equality in all spheres of society: social, economic, legal, cultural and political. Any society that continues to exclude 50 per cent of its population is not only putting its democracy in jeopardy but is also seriously compromising its development. In fact there is a direct correlation between the gender gap and economic

growth. Countries with a smaller gap have less poverty, lower child malnutrition rates, lower infant mortality rates and have a faster economic growth.

A 2000 study of the Inter-Parliamentary Union revealed that the increased participation of women has resulted in a change in political behaviour – women adopt a more constructive and less adversarial style. Another study, by the World Bank concluded that women contribute to good governance and that “where the influence of women in public life is higher the level of corruption is lower”.

The low proportion of women among economic and political decision-makers at the local, national, regional and international levels is the result of numerous barriers that need to be addressed through positive measures. Governments, trans-national and national corporations, the mass media, banks, academic and scientific institutions, and regional and international organisations, including those in the United Nations system, do not make full use of women’s talents as top-level managers, policy makers, diplomats and negotiators.

Even the Nobel Prize since its creation in 1901 has had very few women recipients: In science and medicine out of 400 prizes only 11 have been awarded to women and 8 have been shared. In literature only 9 have been awarded to women, in economics none, and in peace only 10 per cent.

In politics, as in the corporate world or academia, the barriers that women face are systemic and structural. The bottom line for women’s entry into politics is economic equality. It takes money to make a nomination bid

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– and most women simply do not have access to the networks that provide financing for candidates.

Women must realize that gender is no longer a liability at the ballot box. We are a minority in our representation only. We constitute half of the world's population. The women of the new era, are intelligent, educated, often with more than one degree, multilingual, and are capable of entering politics with professional experiences that span careers in different domains. Although many women are involved in politics, few ever run for office. The question is: How can they be encouraged to change their historical role in politics from the backroom to the front lines when the traditional image that has been painted of women is in a supportive role?

The 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing delivered the Beijing Parliamentary Declaration to address the imbalance in the participation of men and women in political life based on the following vision of democracy: The concept of democracy will only assume true and dynamic significance when political policies and national legislation are decided upon jointly by men and women with equitable regard for the interests and aptitudes of both halves of the population.

Eight years after Beijing, statistics indicate that the world average of women Members in the lower Houses of national Parliaments is still a mere 15.5 per cent. It is generally acknowledged that the "critical mass" for women in parliament is a minimum of 30 per cent, the point at which we can have a real impact.

While the number of women in Canada's political institutions has risen over the past 20 years, they still remain in the minority. In Canada, gains have only been made in the proportion of women appointed by governments to agencies, boards and commissions. Women hold 31 per cent of these positions and they head 14 per cent of Canada's missions abroad.

If we look at the number of women Parliamentarians around the world, we realise that Canada is ahead of most nations in gender representation. In a world list of 181 nations compiled by the Inter-Parliamentary Union as of October 20th, 2003, Canada placed 37th at 20.6 per cent female Parliamentary representation in the lower house and 32.4 per cent in the Senate.

The ranking on the world list of some countries with a long democratic tradition will certainly come as a surprise. For instance, Commonwealth countries such as the United Kingdom placed 50th with 17.9 per cent female representation and India placed 88th at 8.8 per cent. Australia, however, is 25th at 25.3 per cent. Other countries such as the United States of America is tied for 60th place with Andorra at 14.3 per cent, France is tied with Slovenia in 66th place with 12.2 per cent, and my native

Greece (the birthplace of democracy) is in 89th place with 8.7 per cent.

The countries with the highest percentage of women parliamentarians are the following: Rwanda with 48.8 per cent, Sweden, with 45.3 per cent, Denmark with 38 per cent, and Finland 37.5 per cent.

With both houses combined, the Nordic countries, again lead the way in female representation with 39.7 per cent. The remaining regions including Europe, Asia and the Americas range between 13 and 18 per cent on average. A significant drop in numbers is evident in the Arab States where female representation is only at 5.7 per cent.

We need to compare the type of electoral system that is utilized by countries with a critical mass of women over 30 per cent. Among the countries with over 30 per cent female representation, nine out of the fourteen have a proportional representative system of some kind. The majority of these countries are Nordic, and only two, Mozambique and New Zealand are members of the Commonwealth.

Turning to the opposite end of the spectrum, of the 34 countries listed in which women comprise less than 5 per cent of the Members of Parliament in their country—a number that severely compromises their ability to effect change—25 of the above mentioned countries use the plurality system – majority electoral systems. Of the 13 Commonwealth countries that fall into this category, 10 use the first-past-the-post. Canada uses the first-past-the-post system as well. The majority of countries with less than 5 per cent female representation in Parliament come from the African, Pacific and Arab regions of the world where in many cases the religious and cultural factors pose very significant barriers to women entering public life.

A mixed-member proportional system, a form of Proportional Representative modelled on Germany's electoral system, is used in countries like New Zealand. In the 1996 New Zealand elections, 15.4 per cent of women were elected by first-past-the-post system in the single number districts as compared with 45.5 per cent elected by Proportional Representative via party lists.

The potentially more democratic nature of the Proportional Representative system lies at the heart of success for women. Thus, a party list can be crafted to reflect society in terms of its gender and ethnic balance, as election is all but guaranteed for candidates at the top of a closed list.

By contrast, the ability of political parties to provide a balanced ticket is much harder with single member electoral districts like in Canada where men and women must compete directly with each other to get chosen as

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candidates and predicting who is likely to get elected is much more difficult.

In theory, the Proportional Representative systems have the capacity to create a parliament that accurately reflects the composition of society. Statistics do reveal a strong association between electoral system and percentage of women at the very upper and lower end of the range with Proportional Representative systems appearing to favour the election of women. However, statistics also show no such relationship exists between electoral system and the number of women elected to parliament when the range of women is between 5 per cent and 29.9 per cent. In this range 55 countries adopted a plurality-majority system and 55 a Proportional Representative system.

***Men dominate the major political parties throughout the world. Until men are prepared to share power with women and change party structures and rules to support women, women will continue to remain as marginal players in the world of politics.***

The upcoming federal elections will be an exciting time in Canadian politics, for numerous reasons. The Liberal Party of Canada has a new leader, Paul Martin, who has made several commitments to changing the way things work in Ottawa and in the context of this discussion, has made a commitment to increasing female candidates in the next elections.

Since political parties are in the business of winning elections, evidence that women candidates are more likely to achieve that goal provides compelling support for arguments in favour of increasing the number of women.

The issue of affirmative action measures, particularly quotas, has been a controversial one in many countries. While ideological arguments may be advanced against such action, the evidence is that they have been successful when the political will exists to implement them and where women are already well organised and have a degree of power to bring pressure to bear on political parties. They are also most likely to be accepted in countries with a culture that supports the concept of equal opportunity for women in a wide range of fields and have government programmes to achieve such goals. The best example of the case of quotas is in the Nordic countries.

Concepts and practices of affirmative action require for some new understanding of equality. Removing for-

mal barriers was considered sufficient. A more recent concept of equality is gaining currency in a range of fields, including women's affairs: the notion of equality of result. Real opportunity does not exist just because formal barriers are removed. Quotas and other forms of positive measures are a means towards equality of result under such circumstances and place the responsibility on institutions rather than entirely on women.

The Inter-Parliamentary Union Plan of Action endorses affirmative action only as an interim measure to address the current dramatic imbalance between men and women and it recommends that they should be abolished once gender equality has been achieved. The Plan also recommends that quotas should not target women but rather be gender neutral, as occurs in Sweden where neither men nor women can constitute less than 40 per cent or more than 60 per cent of Members of Parliament.

Within my party, the Liberal Party of Canada, we have a Women's Caucus that includes 67 female Members of Parliament and Senators. We meet weekly to discuss a broad range of issues related to women. The Caucus works within the parliamentary process to bring important women's issues to the attention of the government. Women parliamentarians have also come together from across party lines to support policies that advance the well being of women and their families on issues relating to among others, child care and maternity leave. Canadian women are now entitled to one year paid maternity leave. The Women's Caucus also concurs on trade issues, stating that "trade policies should ensure gender equality and equity and people-centred sustainable development" and contending "all WTO agreements and policies should be bound by international human rights standards..."

One of the papers issued by the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women entitled, "Missing Persons: Women in Canadian Federal Politics", states: "There are no magic solutions to the problem of low female representation: if women want to get elected they have to learn the rules of the game and be prepared for a great deal of hard work and a good measure of personal sacrifice, as many have done in the past and as, it is hoped many more will do in the future."

In North America as with many European countries, we also have to consider the additional barriers to access the political process for women of ethnic origin like myself, who are often perceived as homemakers, especially by the first generation immigrants.

As a woman politician of Hellenic origin I have had to deal with many stereotypes that still exist in our community. The first question that people asked me at events in the Hellenic community was - "Where is your husband?"

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Where are your kids?" Instead of asking me about the government's most recent initiatives as would be the case with a male politician. If this was my experience in an open and cosmopolitan city like Montreal, I can only imagine what it is like for women seeking political office in the third world nations.

Canada's strength - culturally, socially and economically - lies in the fact that we are one of the most diverse countries in the world. Some 43 per cent of our population claims ethnic roots from outside Canada's three founding cultures - the Aboriginal peoples, Britain, and France.

Even within my Party's caucus, there are numerous parliamentarians of a different origin, such as Italian, In-

dian, Chinese, Croatian, to name a few. Most speak a language other than one of Canada's official languages thus allowing us to communicate in the language of our host country when representing our government abroad.

Canada's multiculturalism policy, enunciated in 1971, has also helped encourage women to pursue non-conventional careers by breaking down barriers such as racism and promoting institutional advances.

Gender sensitizing our parliaments is all about making them more credible, relevant and democratic. It should be the objective of men and women parliamentarians alike.