

Liberal Party of Canada Renewal Commission
Notes from Task Force on Women Meeting
May 27, 2006 in Edmonton

Present: The Hon. Anne McLellan, Debby Carlson, Shirley Barg (Equal Voice & YWCA One Woman, One Vote), Bette Gray (YWCA One Woman, One Vote), Josephine Pallard (Changing Together – Centre for Immigrant Women), Suzanne Lacroix (Status of Women Canada), Dr. Jane Hewes (Early Child Care Program, Grant MacEwan College), Ella Henry (Youth representative), Marg Day (educator, activist, senior), Maureen Towns, Shenaz Jeraj (VP- National Ismaili Council), Rishma Devraj (National Ismaili Council), Hafsa Goma (Council of African Canadians), Susan Kennedy, Jacqueline Foord (Chief of Staff, Official Opposition of Alberta), Laurie Blakeman (MLA – Edmonton Centre), Celeste Nicholson, Tamara Kozloska, Mary Amerasinghe.

While this meeting was sponsored and organized by the Edmonton Women's Liberal Policy Association, it was meant to be a non-partisan session with women and organizations in the community. Here are some of the thoughts that were expressed during the exchange:

- The lack of women in leadership roles is a challenge in North American culture. Women are invaluable community volunteers, social activists and play a vital role in our families.
- As caregivers, we do not see ourselves as leaders. We need to be asked 15 times to run for public office before we agree.
- Women hit the glass ceiling in corporate boardrooms as well. The “Old Boys Club” is alive and well. Women need to run in “winnable” ridings, not as token candidates. We must do a better job in preparing our society to realize the gender gap and take action to ensure women are fully participating at all levels. Our society needs to start educating our youth at the earliest age possible. We need to mentor them within the party and between parties. We need more social supports for women to run and to govern.
- YWCA submission identified nine social and systemic barriers to gender balance in politics:
 1. Current design of the electoral system. Electoral Reform required.
 2. The nature of political work is masculine.
 3. Travel logistics difficult when candidate is primary caregiver.
 4. Women undervalue themselves. We need to be asked.
 5. Lack of political will at the party level.
 6. Unequal access to economic clout.
 7. Biased criteria at the nomination process.
 8. Access to media is more difficult.
 9. Lack of women at the Cabinet level means less pressure to look at gender issues.

- Immigrant women are professional, well educated and very competent. They are very committed to the grassroots problems of their families and their community, and tend to get involved in local politics first.
- Economic barriers marginalize immigrant women. Their educational and professional credentials are not recognized. Accreditation of foreign degrees needs to be expedited. These women are de-skilled and lack the affirmation to gain confidence in their new homes. They also experience discrimination and racism in society and in the workplace. Many experience social isolation.
- Of concern to immigrant women are issues of human trafficking, the sex trade and mail order brides.
- Childcare is an urgent policy issue and in the forefront of public policy. Women's lack of access to affordable, quality child care acts as a barrier to women getting involved in politics and living up to their full potential in society. Access to child care is worse now than in the past. The first priority for a woman is her family.
- Women need to know that they can take a leave of absence to run, and their job will be waiting for them if they lose. In the home of two working parents, the woman has very little free time to get involved in politics.
- Youth vote has increased from 25% to 38%, but that is still too low. Young women need to get involved earlier than voting day. They should be represented at the policy decision level. Change the structure of the party to make it more youth friendly.
- Educate young women and raise their awareness and confidence to become engaged. Set up mentoring programs for youth and women. Get them involved in politics before they reach the voting age.
- Political parties must listen carefully to the issues that matter to youth—global poverty, the environment, education, and tuition hikes and student debt.
- We know that more women than men vote within the Liberal Party. We should try to better understand women's voting patterns.
- A fundamental point is that women hold the family and community together. There is little time or energy to think about running for political office. Women are concerned with quality of life issues that affect everyone.
- “Do women support women”? Women need to be more like men. Women are often softened and side-tracked off the issues that matter to us. We are

maneuvered out of being aggressive. We must be insistent and unladylike in our persistence.

- Once women have achieved economic self-sufficiency, it will be easier for them to assume their equal place in society, particularly in political leadership.
- To elect more women, we need a strategy of pro-active inclusion in the political process. Maintain contact with the multicultural community, not just when you need their vote at election time, but include them at all levels of the party organization. Invite them to special celebrations, ask them to join the constituency association, etc. Identify their support and encourage them to get politically engaged with any party or issue. Many women of colour fear they will be judged on their appearance. Their voice and their message should be enough. Make an effort to reach out to one another.
- The Alberta Advantage does not exist for low-income people, street kids, and Aboriginals.
- Need for democratic reform –the parliamentary system itself acts as a significant barrier against getting women elected. The present system is adversarial. As women, we can make changes easier at the community level. We must look at economic and social issues. Progress on these issues will encourage more women to run.
- Donate to women candidates. Identify leadership opportunities for marginalized women. Ask women to chair meetings, so they can learn about leadership. Speak out when we experience sexism in the workplace, even if it is within your own caucus. Use the House of Commons rules and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms to protect your right to speak out against discrimination, harassment, and injustice. Raise your sons and daughters to be feminists. Be “part of the problem”. Get organized. Support one another. Get things changed.
- Women need some kind of financial security for their family when they are finished serving or when they lose.
- Recommends the Government appoint a Minister of Women’s Affairs.
- Issues like pay equity, pension equality, and benefits for “stay at home” women need more attention.

Some of the recommendations that came out of that discussion were as follows:

1. Leadership courses at the junior high and high school level can be very successful at engaging young people and have young women receive leadership training.
2. Our daughters and girls need to be nurtured and socialized to become leaders.

3. Proportional Representation will elect more women. Affirmative action is needed.
4. Mentorship is essential. Retrofit the WISEST Program for leadership/politics.
5. Raise and educate our sons on women's issues.