

National Association of
Women and the Law



Association nationale
Femmes et Droit

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The Context for a National Roundtable on Women and Politics in 2003

National Association of Women and the Law

**March 2003
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** With excerpts from the NAWL Brief to the Association for Women in Development Conference in October 2002, co-authored by Nancy Peckford.*

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ABOUT THIS INITIATIVE

The Goal of a National Women's Roundtable

The goal of the National Roundtable on Women and Politics 2003 is to consult with diverse women on the possible means of strengthening women's roles as empowered voters, agents of change, and political decision-makers. We are particularly interested in exploring the contributing factors that have led many young feminist activists to turn away from formal political processes, rather than pursue politics as a solution to women's inequality. We know that vast numbers of women are opting to channel their energy into the NGO community, women's organizations, and other informal and often non-hierarchical methods of political mobilizing. Many of the most disillusioned are of diverse backgrounds experiencing exclusion based on multiple oppressions such as age (affecting both young and elderly women), gender, ethnicity, visible minority status, linguistic community, and socio-economic status. Systemic discrimination thrives in our democratic institutions through the rules of the game, and the informal and highly decentralized gatekeeping processes of political parties. The net result is that Canadian diversity is not represented in the actors who constitute our national legislature, and marginalized groups have little to no influence in shaping the policy preferences that are pursued by the Canadian government in the name of the population. Through this Roundtable, we aim to identify ways in which the rules, processes, political parties, and institutions themselves might be improved such that women leaders of all ages, and other marginalized groups may begin to see these institutions as a meaningful and effective outlet in which to invest their time, energy, and wonderfully diverse talents.

Women and Political Representation

NAWL is only one of many organizations looking for an enhanced role for women, and an increase in the political representation of diverse communities within Canadian society. Over the past two years, many governmental and civil society groups have been reflecting on the level of political engagement by Canadian citizens. With consistently disappointing numbers of women, and other non-dominant constituencies being elected, the possibility for feelings of marginalization, disempowerment and lack of social solidarity cannot be ignored. The theme of the past Metropolis Canada conference in March 2002 was Canadian women's political participation and lessons for research on newcomers' and minority political

participation.. As the rate of voter turnout continues to decrease, organizations such as Equal Voices, le Collectif: Féminisme et démocratie, Femmes Politique et Démocratie, Fair Vote Canada, and the Mouvement pour une démocratie nouvelle have been mobilizing, and movements in provinces across the country including Quebec, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, B.C., and Ontario are being generated to create a dialogue on improving our democratic institutions and the rules which have often perpetuated the exclusion of important communities within the Canadian population. As this critical national debate unfolds, the voices of the diversity of Canadian women must be included. With the National Roundtable on Women and Politics 2003, we hope we can share information with each other, gain important insights together in order to empower our own members and women in local communities to enter the debates and claim women's space in any renewal of our democratic processes.

We also expect that the Roundtable will give us an opportunity to address the reality that (remove: the realm of) politics continues to be marked by significant under-representation of women. As a consequence, gender issues continue to be marginalized and excluded from the policy agenda.

In the last decade, purposeful attempts have been made in different countries around the world to bring qualified women to power and to promote women's issues in the political agenda. The introduction of quotas for women in elected office, organized and larger-scale election campaigns, gender education, and vast lobbying efforts have been pursued by various women's movements worldwide.¹ Problems, however, persist. In Canada, as a result of the stagnation, and even a slight decline in the representation of women in our federal legislature over the past decade, the assumption that the number of women in politics will *steadily and naturally* increase, as they have done in other professions, is no longer convincing.

¹ As per discussions in October 2002 at the Association for Women in Development Conference entitled, "Re-inventing Globalization". Representing the National Association of Women and the Law, Jackie Steele and Nancy Peckford presented on the situation for women in Canada at Workshop #400: **Advancing Women's Political Participation: Challenges, Successes, and Lessons Learned**, as well as hosted an all-day poster presentation on the topic of Canadian women's political participation in comparative context which highlighted the mediocre performance of Canada relative to other developed and developing countries worldwide.

With this document, we wish to situate the emerging discussions on democratic reform in the context of several factors. We will examine two striking examples of why women's political leadership must be increased in order to ensure women's equality rights. We will then frame the three themes of the national dialogue that we have identified. As such, we begin with the obstacles to women's participation, which have led to women's experiences of misrepresentation or non-representation in formal political institutions. Thereafter, we will highlight the connections between the under-representation of women's experiences in formal politics and the selection of public policy choices that consistently threaten women's equality, and deny women full citizenship. Finally, we will situate some of the ongoing discussions within women's organizations that seek to formulate alternative political processes and structures that would enhance the voice of women from diverse communities in formal politics.

THE CONTEXT

Despite the rhetoric of the 'declining state', and claims that the governance process and public policy choices have become unilaterally dominated by the clout of multinational corporations and international financial institutions, it is important to recognize that states have proactively chosen, through voluntary accession to international trade and investment agreements, to limit their own ability to act on behalf and in the interests of the population as a whole. Nonetheless, national legislatures remain the primary seat of power in any country, and must be expected to act in the interests of its residents in all of their diversity. Within the past two decades of neo-liberal dominance, the Canadian women's movement, and other equality-seeking groups such as that of ethnic or cultural minorities have seen the federal government consciously move (remove: shift) away from its post-war leadership role as a promoter of the common good through welfare policies that promised at least a minimum quality of life. The last decade has had particularly devastating effects on Aboriginal women as the effects of colonialism and racism against Aboriginal peoples has been compounded by the financial retreat of the Canadian state. The presence of these human rights abuses in 21st century Canadian society has drawn serious critiques at the international level², and has

² See the Review by the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women of Canada 5th Report.

proven to be lethal for many Aboriginal women, as evidenced in the case of the ‘Stolen Sisters’ in BC. Indeed, in the last ten years the Canadian government has purposefully re-oriented its mandate away from an understanding of equality that embraces the full diversity of Canadians citizens, and that fully recognizes the right of Aboriginal peoples to self-government. Rather, it has moved towards a strategy of passively facilitating market economies, even when in conflict with the hard-won rights and liberties of its citizens, and particularly the rights of those groups that are seen as not presenting a significant threat to the governing party’s electoral success.

The State's Disengagement from Women

In the post-war era, the federal government engaged in pan-Canadian nation building with a form of social liberalism³ that included the notion of collective responsibility to be expressed and guaranteed by the state in the form of social rights.⁴ During this period of increased social spending in Canada, white, middle class women enjoyed varying levels of success in demanding engagement with the state, although this was seldom the case for women of diverse racial and socio-economic backgrounds. Governments became increasingly sensitive to the need to consult women and other marginalized constituencies in order that their policy solutions be seen as legitimate, and in order to constructively counter systemic discrimination which found expression in the social, economic and political exclusion of women and other disadvantaged groups.

With the rise of Margaret Thatcher in Britain, Ronald Reagan in the United States, and Brian Mulroney in Canada, the neo-liberal agenda developed with speed to drive the downsizing of publicly funded services and place the deficit at the centre of political debates. The past two decades have seen the federal government undertake a process of dismantling the institutional structures which it had created to facilitate and promote women’s voices in public policy-making processes only a decade earlier. The “Women’s State”, which was comprised of three institutions: the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women (CACSW), the Women’s Program, and Status of Women, had been initiated as early as 1974

³ Siim, *Gender and Citizenship*, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, 2000, p. 25

⁴ Jane and Phillips, “Regime Shift: New Citizenship Practices in Canada”, *International Journal of Canadian Studies*, 14 Fall 1996

in order to increase women's access and input into government policy.⁵ However, having become critical of the government's shift towards a neo-liberal agenda, these bodies were each gradually abandoned with the CACSW being officially dismantled in 1995. Begun by the Conservative government in the late 1980s and accelerated by the Liberal government throughout the 1990s, the movement away from Canadian citizenship that was committed to social justice and inclusion towards that espousing the values of efficiency, competition and consumerism, has come to represent an attack on the very foundation of the post-war citizenship with which Canadian women and members of historically disadvantaged groups have come to identify.⁶ Indeed, the sustained interest of social justice advocates in maintaining a strong welfare state has necessarily become ideologically at odds with the state's market-driven political framework.

The trend across industrialized countries suggests that citizens are turning away from formal electoral politics, and are questioning the very relevance of politics at all. Some blame catchall parties, which offer very simplistic and homogenous perspectives of the country, while others note the shift in values towards new forms of more meaningful citizenship engagement such as working for NGOs or grassroots organizations. Ironically, in order to explain the low levels of female parliamentarians, women are both viewed by politicians, and actively portrayed by the state and the media as being less interested or equipped for politics, or as having disengaged with the political sphere over the past decade. In fact, we would argue that the state has implemented a proactive strategy of disengaging from women, closing off women's points of access to the government, and removing key funding from women's organizations under the guise of formal equality. These actions have not only hampered Canadian women's ability to see their needs and specificities reflected in important public policy decisions, but moreover, in a decade marked by the feminization of poverty, the government nonetheless expects women to compete on a par with corporate-led interests if they want their demands to be respected within the political sphere. It is not surprising in this context, that women and other under-represented groups in Canadian society should choose to invest their energy and time in other areas such as social movements, and the NGO

⁵ Jane Jenson and Susan Phillips, "Regime Shift: New Citizenship Practices in Canada", *International Journal of Canadian Studies*, 14 Fall 1996

⁶ Abu-Laban and Gabriel, *Selling Diversity*, Broadview Press, Toronto, 2002, p. 45

community, where they perceive themselves as having more ability to contribute, and effect change.

EXAMPLE 1: The World March of Women 2000

Most feminists across Canada are familiar with the World March of Women 2000 to End Poverty and Violence Against Women, which was conceived and spearheaded by the Fédération des femmes du Québec. This movement generated women's mobilizing efforts in 164 countries worldwide. In Canada, one stark example of the dismissal of women's efforts to participate in public policy is the National Lobby Campaign of the Canadian Committee of the World March of Women. This committee coordinated the development of a national policy agenda that identified no less than 68 demands directed to the federal government to improve the lives of the diversity of women from a wide range of communities.⁷ These demands constituted a national policy agenda to end poverty and violence against women, and represented the realities of diverse communities of women in Canada, including that of Aboriginal women, women with disabilities, francophone women, immigrant and refugee women of colour, black women and lesbians, to name just a few. Despite the activities of women in over two hundred communities in Canada, the intensive lobby effort led by NAWL on behalf of the Canadian Women's March Committee, as well as the mobilization of 30 000 women who marched to Canada's national Parliament on October 15th, 2000, our demands to broaden Canada's social safety net, and for increased funding for women's organizing were unmet by Canada's elected policymakers. This lack of response from Canadian politicians represents a grave unwillingness by our political leaders to uphold women's equality rights, particularly the rights of women from marginalized communities. In light of Canadian politicians' dismissal of the complexities of women's oppression, it is vital that women and women's organizations continue to seriously reflect upon the legitimacy of Canadian political institutions, and put forth practical reforms that could be pursued to strengthen women's roles as political decision-makers within and outside the Canadian Parliament.

EXAMPLE 2: The Liberal Women's Caucus

⁷ Canadian Women's March Committee (2000). *It's Time for Change: 68 Demands to the Federal Government to End Poverty and Violence Against Women*. Toronto: Canadian Women's March Committee.

Many progressive women from within and outside Parliament believe that without a critical mass of elected women, feminist women and policies will continue to be subsumed by political structures and policy agendas that do not favour women's equality. Legislative assemblies in Scandinavian countries have demonstrated that meaningful shifts in policy are not likely to occur until women are represented well above the twenty percent mark.⁸ Within the Canadian political system where a majority government has the absolute power to design and implement the policy goals of its choice, it is vital to have a critical mass of feminists within the governing party in particular. As of their election in 1993, the elected women of the Liberal Party of Canada have joined to form the Liberal Women's Caucus to provide input to the Liberal Caucus, as well as to Ministers on issues of particular interest to women's equality. In recent years, this Caucus has developed an explicitly feminist identity, and has begun to function as an internal watchdog that monitors the impact of proposed legislation on women, and lobbies key players within Cabinet and the Party Caucus to ensure that the concerns of women are reflected in the government's legislation.⁹ However, a study of the Liberal Women's Caucus activities over the past nine years suggests that flagship issues such as childcare, health care, or other costly public programs that significantly raise women's status, were intuitively understood by the members of the Caucus as not being open for discussion within the current platform. Moreover, it seems that much of the women's energy was spent trying to minimize the damage caused by the Party's neo-liberal agenda and repeated downsizing of social programs to reduce the deficit. While the Liberal Women's Caucus has been successful in gaining status within the Party as the voice of the feminist majority, and has been allowed to represent feminist views within the formal party structures, many women in the Liberal Party still fail to see the systemic barriers to women that exist in politics, and moreover, many female Liberal MPs did not see the need for the Women's Caucus, and/or simply preferred to ally themselves with their male colleagues.¹⁰

WOMEN AND POLITICAL PARTIES

⁸ Bystydzienski, *Women in Electoral Politics: Lessons from Norway*, Westport, Praeger, 1995

⁹ Steele, *The Liberal Women's Caucus*, *The Canadian Parliamentary Review*, Summer 2002

¹⁰ Steele, *An Effective Player in the Parliamentary Process: The Liberal Women's Caucus 1993-2000*, <http://www.iog.ca/publications/alfhaes2002.pdf>

Given Canada's federal composition, political parties tend to be highly decentralized, and provide the opportunity for riding associations to be captured by local elites who will look to advance their own social networks throughout the political system. While it is impossible to measure precisely how many members there are in political parties at any one time, studies have shown that fewer than two per cent of voters belonged to any of the five major federal parties in the Spring of 2000, and among members, women tend to be numerically under-represented as compared to their male counterparts.¹¹ Compounding this, and not surprisingly, the membership of the five parties is generally unrepresentative of the Canadian electorate in terms of age, gender, income and education. According to Young and Cross:

“This lack of coherence between party members and the electorate has two important consequences: first, to the extent that the composition of a party's membership is inconsistent with that of the party's electorate, the perception that parties are elitist or out of touch mounts. This initiates a vicious circle, in which unrepresentativeness fuels cynicism about parties, which discourages individuals from joining parties, thereby exacerbating the original lack of representativeness. Second, the credibility of parties as democratic institutions that can generate policy alternatives is lessened when the party members developing policy are demographically distinct from the electorate at large.”¹²

With respect to women's perception of politics as a relatively male and inaccessible forum, Bashevkin's research in the early 1990s demonstrated that Putnam's law (“the higher the fewer”) does indeed apply to Canadian parties, with women comprising as many as 70% of riding association secretaries, but only 46% of convention delegates, 35% of party executive members, 20% of campaign managers and an even lower proportion of candidates, legislators or party leaders.¹³ Research regarding women's candidacies has found that women are more likely to contest a party nomination if they are invited to do so, as opposed to initiating their

¹¹ Cross and Young, *Contours of Membership in Canadian Political Parties*, pending publishing in *Party Politics*

¹² *ibid* Cross and Young

¹³ Bashevkin, *Toeing the Lines: Women and Party Politics in English Canada*, 2nd edition, Oxford University Press, Toronto, 1993, p. 67

candidacy unsolicited.¹⁴ Once women are members of political parties, women are almost as likely to seek a nomination as men, which suggests that the crucial difference is that men are more numerous among party members. The persistent numeric under-representation of women in Canadian legislatures could perhaps be solved by more aggressive recruitment of women into party membership¹⁵. While this is perhaps one easy solution to generate a critical mass of women within political party memberships, we cannot ignore the very real factors that prevent women and other equality-seeking groups from identifying with political parties. A transformation of the political culture of parties is key if under-represented groups are to see the value of investing their time in organizations that have too often served as partisan campaign machines that are relevant once every four years, and provide little opportunity for sustained and meaningful dialogue on public policy concerns. Research reflects the traditional understanding of patterns of recruitment into Canadian parties wherein individuals are mobilized through social networks to join the party during contested nomination and leadership contests, however, beyond this, relatively little is known regarding individuals' reasons for joining political parties in Canada.¹⁶ Seemingly, for more women than men, this is not an endeavour that is seen as worthy of their time given the possibilities of grassroots and non-governmental activism, and community-based initiatives that generate a higher sense of political efficacy. More importantly, the limited reasons for joining political parties hints at their largely perfunctory and superficial role in validating political leaders, and providing legitimacy to an electoral process that consistently fails to produce democratic results, nor the equitable representation of all Canadians.

¹⁴ Erickson, "Entry to the Commons: Parties, Recruitment and the Election of Women in 1993" in Manon Tremblay and Caroline Andrew (eds) Women and Political Representation in Canada, University of Ottawa Press, Ottawa, 1998

¹⁵ Young and Cross, (Forthcoming in Manon Tremblay and Linda Trimble (eds), Women and Electoral Politics in Canada, Oxford University Press, 2003

¹⁶ *ibid*

WOMEN PARLIAMENTARIANS

Women's Limited Access to Parliament

Although there are currently more women in the Canadian House of Commons than fifteen years ago, this has not translated into the adoption of more progressive policies to improve women's lives. In the year 2003, women are perhaps more visible in the House of Commons, constituting 20.9% of all MPs¹⁷, however, the socio-economic status of the majority of women across the country has actually deteriorated in the last decade.¹⁸ Contrary to the praise for women's prominent roles as Parliamentary Committee Chairs, Opposition Critics and Ministers, some have argued that the recruitment of high profile women by the dominant political parties has in fact helped to conceal the gravity of some key policy choices and their impacts upon women.¹⁹ In their Handbook entitled, Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers, International IDEA has documented a similar tactic used in other countries where token "controllable" women are selected at the same time as parties claim to promote women's participation. Indeed, examinations of the influence of feminist MPs upon the national legislative agenda in Canada has revealed the severe limitations of the Canadian parliamentary system.²⁰ Party discipline and the rigid party structure innate to the current Parliamentary system sharply curtail an elected representative's ability to do more than represent her/his party's platforms, or their region of origin.²¹ The promotion of other outside interests, particularly those of a feminist nature, receives limited attention or credibility in most political parties²², especially when the majority of Parliamentarians continue to be white, male, and middle class, and moreover, are ideologically devoted to a neo-liberal ideology. The presence of ethnoracial minorities in the 36th Parliament of Canada has shown that in the 1997 federal election, only 18.6% of MPs had minority ethnic origins, representing a mere increase of 1.5% in their presence in the House of Commons since the

¹⁷ Canadian Parliamentary website, accessed December 15, 2002

<http://www.parl.gc.ca/information/about/people/key/StandingsWomen.asp?Language=E&Source=hoc>

¹⁸ Day and Brodsky, *Women and the Equality Deficit: The Impact of Restructuring Canada's Social Programs*, Policy Research, Status of Women Canada, Status of Women, March 1998

¹⁹ Young, "Fulfilling the Mandate of Difference: Women in the Canadian House of Commons", in Arscott, J. and Trimble, L. (Eds): In the Presence of Women: Representation in Canadian Governments, Toronto, Harcourt Brace & Company Canada, 1997

²⁰ Young, *Feminists and Party Politics*, Vancouver, UBC Press, 2000

²¹ Maillé, "Political Representation and Women in Quebec", ed., Arscott and Trimble, In the presence of women: representation in Canadian governments, Harcourt Brace & Company Canada, Toronto, 1997

²² Skjeie, "The Rhetoric of Difference: On Women's Inclusion into Political Elites", *Politics & Society*, 19, 2001, p. 238

last election.²³ Moreover, a mere 6.3% of the seats in the House of Commons were held by visible minorities despite the fact that they represented more than 11.2% of the population according to the 1996 Census.²⁴ On the provincial level, in 1999, the Saskatchewan legislature saw only 3% Aboriginals despite their composing 11.4% of the provincial population.²⁵ Not only are minority or marginalized groups excluded in the recruitment processes, those who manage to gain access to the system have to be significantly more qualified to earn the confidence of the party gatekeepers. This occurs to the extent that women are generally more accomplished than men, and similarly, visible minority women have higher credentials than both visible minority males, and women of majority backgrounds.²⁶ Given the highly decentralized and arbitrary use of power by political parties and local riding associations across the country, it is difficult to assert that political parties intentionally work to systematically discriminate against those who stray from the image of the governing “elite”, such as women, Aboriginals, or visible minorities. The net result, however, is that political parties consistently failed to make efforts to purposively address the under-representation of these groups within the party structures since the tabling of the recommendations of the *Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing* as early as 1991. This denotes not only a lack of political will among elites to practice inclusive and democratic governance, but moreover, it hints at a general lack of understanding by those in power as to the right of traditionally disadvantaged groups to share equally in political power. Finally, it highlights an alarming lack of accountability towards these demographics despite repeated decisions by the Supreme Court of Canada regarding their substantive equality rights under Section 15 of the Charter of Rights and Freedom. As Janine Brodie has observed, “the process of liberal-democratic recruitment, left un-regulated, tends to favour the representation of the socially advantaged. The less powerful need politics to redress their inequality, but their inequality prevents them from achieving a significant measure of political power.”²⁷

²³ Black, “Ethnoracial Minorities in the Canadian House of Commons: The Case of the 36th Parliament”, *Canadian-Ethnic-Studies*. 32:2, 2000, p. 108

²⁴ Statistics Canada. 1998. "The Daily." <http://www.statcan.ca:80/Daily/English/980217/d980217.htm> , Accessed January 28, 2003

²⁵ Voyageur and Green, “From Many Peoples, Strength: Demographics and Democracy in Saskatchewan’s 1999 ‘Harvest Election’ ”, in *Saskatchewan Politics: Into the Twenty-First Century*, Canadian Plains Research Center, University of Regina, 1999, p. 339-342

²⁶ Black, *Entering the political elite in Canada: the case of minority women as parliamentary candidates and MPs*, *The Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, volume 37, no. 2, May 2000, p. 143-66

²⁷ Broody, *Women and the Electoral Process in Canada*, Ottawa, Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing, 1991

Proactive Measures that Increase the Presence of Women in Parliaments

Although there is no consensus on a ‘magic’ number of women needed in politics, Shabbir Cheema of the United Nations Development and Governance Division has identified thirty percent as constituting critical mass for women.²⁸ In the Canadian context, in order for women to make a significant contribution and be able to shape the ideological and economic agenda of the government, 30% women would need to be active both within the governing party, and in Cabinet. Due to the presence of political parties in the opposition, it would be similarly important to have a minimum of 30% women within each of the parties represented, which would reflect more realistically the range of perspectives that women in a diverse country such as Canada might hold. Indeed, this would contribute to an overall rate of participation ranging between 30~40% for Parliament, and would facilitate the effective representation of women’s voices to ensure socially inclusive public policy. While many political scientists and other commentators have long assumed that women’s representation would naturally continue to increase in parallel to women’s numbers in professional careers and other traditionally male-dominated arenas, the experience of the last Canadian election in 2000 demonstrated that women’s numbers in elected office have stagnated. Given the token commitment and inconsistent efforts of current political parties to support a systematic policy of inclusion of a significant number of diverse and feminist women, it is far from obvious that women’s representation will increase significantly in the near or even distant future. In its survey of women’s participation in legislatures around the world, the *International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance* (IDEA) found that until systematic efforts are made to re-structure electoral systems so as to intentionally increase women’s political participation, critical mass is seldom achieved.²⁹ In fact they document the introduction of quotas in the social democratic parties and in left-leaning parties of Scandinavia during the 1970s and 1980s, when most centre and right wing parties considered quotas "un-liberal" and rejected them. Today, women constitute 40 per cent of the members of parliament in Sweden, 34 per cent in Finland, 38 per cent in Norway, 34 per cent in Denmark and 25 per cent in Iceland. Interestingly, there is no constitutional clause or law that demands a high

²⁸ Cheema, United Nations Development Programme: Management, Development and Governance Division, Speech given at the *Meeting on Women and Political Participation: 21st Century Challenges*, New Delhi, India, March 1999, <http://magnet.undp.org/Docs/Gender/Speechsc.doc.html>, accessed November 19th, 2002

²⁹ Dalherup, “Using Quotas to Increase Women’s Participation”, *Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers*, <http://www.idea.int/women/parl/ch4a.htm>, accessed November 26th, 2002

representation of women in Scandinavia, and for the most part, the increases can be attributed to sustained pressure on the part of women's groups within parties, as well as the women's movement in general, which has led to an understanding among political elites of the obvious fact that women have the right to share in political power and national decision-making. In comparative experience, the following factors have been associated with increased representation of women: the introduction of elements of proportional representation into majoritarian electoral systems. While the results tend to be more favourable, significant changes in the gender balance of legislatures tends to take place where proportional representation is combined with proactive measures that may be legislated, or originate in the party's programs, and are specifically designed to increase the number of female candidates. Countries within the European Union have moved towards legislation that requires parties to implement gender parity when they create their national list of candidates, however, the most recent elections in France demonstrated significant degrees of resistance among political elites, such that some political parties preferred to pay hefty fines, rather than field equal numbers of men and women.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

(Re)-Envisioning Parliamentary Democracy in Canada

The National Association of Women and the Law seriously questions the basic claim of democratic representation made by dominant groups in Canadian society. As we contemplate the lack of access of the women who mobilized across the country for the World March of Women, we are worried by the systematic ways in which the state has proactively disengaged from women, and has shut down the ability of feminist and diverse voices to be represented within the public policy discussions. In addition, the low level of influence of feminist-identifying women within the governing Liberal Party has illuminated the challenges of upholding feminist commitments, finding government support for feminist public policy, and ensuring that all legislation is crafted with a meaningful analysis and appreciation of its impact upon diverse constituencies of women and men. It is indeed worrisome if women who are both outside and inside the formal political structures are unable to represent the needs of women, and protect women's equality rights. Without fundamental improvements to the current political structures, it is not unreasonable to expect that the status of women in Canada will increasingly come under

attack as the neo-liberal agenda advances the privatization of social programs, and downloads the costs of the community onto the backs of Canadian women.

As has been accomplished by women's movements in numerous other countries from Norway to France, from India to Argentina, and from Namibia to Uganda, it is our hope that during the upcoming roundtable, national women's organizations will come together to conceive of alternative rules of governance that would invite the representation of Canadian diversity. Moreover, they would ensure that women are able to participate equally in politics, and would create a meaningful space for the realization of feminist political leadership that embraces racial, ethnic, Aboriginal and socio-economic diversity throughout our political institutions and in public policy choices. If our government hopes to continue to promote an image of gender equality, multicultural harmony, and (post-colonial) non-colonial democratic governance on the international scene, steps must be taken to learn from the examples of numerous developed and developing countries worldwide who have far surpassed the achievements in Canada, and whose advancements call into question the credibility and the legitimacy of Canada's supposed leadership in gender equality.

Women's organizations across the country need to send a clear message of what women deserve, and of our intention to hold all current and future governments accountable in the face of Canadian diversity and the numeric majority who are female. We hope to consider both short-term goals vis-à-vis the leadership races of the governing and opposition parties, as well as mid-range goals such as reform to the current electoral system. However, in order to reverse the devastating effects of widespread disengagement, apathy, and the rejection of formal political processes, the extent to which Canadian democracy has stagnated in its elitism, must be addressed. Ultimately, it is our hope that this Roundtable may contribute to a fundamental re-imagining of our democratic processes and institutions, such that Canadian women and men of diverse perspectives may begin once again to see relevance in a wide range of political participation that advances the Canadian *Charter* commitments to substantive equality and the inclusion of historically disadvantaged Canadians.

THEMES OF THE ROUNDTABLE

In order to fully document the many obstacles that face women wishing to engage in politics, our first theme will deal with women's limited access to the formal political sphere, and their diverse experiences of exclusion, under-representation and non-representation due to the interplay of system-wide perspectives such as patriarchy, colonialism, and racism. We wish to identify the ways in which women are prevented from seeing ourselves reflected in the very makeup of our political institutions. We will then look at the effects of different electoral systems, and the proactive measures that are being used around the world, such that we may identify the alternatives to the current rules of the electoral game. Thirdly, we wish to build the theoretical and concrete links between the political representation of women and the substantive implementation of women's equality rights through public policy. Finally, we wish to conclude the Roundtable with an engaging discussion and debate of the structures that would be necessary to realize two key advances: 1) that women be supported and respected as informed and empowered political leaders who have a role in deciding the countries policy priorities, and 2) that Canadian women's movements be engaged in a meaningful relationship with the state such that they may effectively hold the government accountable for the gendered impacts of its public policy choices.

~ **ROUNDTABLE ON** **WOMEN AND POLITICS 2003** ~
AGENDA OF MARCH 22/23 (Centre Block 112N)

SATURDAY

8:30 ~ 09:45 **TOUR DE TABLE**

- Facilitators: **Andrée Côté**

9:45 ~ 10:45 **PANEL 1: Obstacles: Colonialism, Patriarchy and Racism**

- Facilitator: **Jackie Steele**

Q: What stops many of us from choosing electoral and party politics?

- **Joyce Green**, University of Regina
- **Elisabeth Gidengil**, McGill University
- **Diane Lamoureux**, Université Laval
- **Dolly Williams**, Feminists for Just and Equitable Public Policy (FEMJEPP)

10:45 ~ 11:25 **DISCUSSION**

11:25 ~ 11:45 ~ *HEALTH BREAK* ~

11:45 ~ 12:30 **ALL-PARTY WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION**

- Facilitator: **Bonnie Diamond**

Q: How do women Parliamentarians work for women?

Q: What changes are needed to make women's voices heard?

- **Diane Bourgeois**, MP for Terrebonne/Blainville (BQ)
- **Marlene Catterall**, MP for Ottawa West/Nepean (LIB)
- **Alexa McDonough**, MP for Halifax (NDP)

12:30 ~ 13:30 ~ *LUNCH* ~

13:30 ~ 14:30 **PANEL 2: Equal political representation as a fundamental right**
○ Facilitator: **Nancy Peckford**

Q: What's the parity debate all about?

- **Jackie Steele**, National Association of Women and the Law / Masters candidate, Legal Studies (Carleton University)
- **Manon Tremblay**, Centre for the Study of Women and Politics, University of Ottawa
- **Sandrine Dauphin**, Université de Paris

14:30 ~ 15:30 **DISCUSSION OF THE RULES OF THE GAME (In groups)**
○ Facilitators: **Jackie Steele, Nancy Peckford, Caroline Andrew, Elisabeth Gidengil**

15:30 ~ 15:50 ~ *HEALTH BREAK* ~

15:50 ~ 16:50 **PANEL 3: Women's participation, representation and feminist voice**
○ Facilitators: **Dolly Williams**

Q: Does women's participation and representation enhance the substantive equality of Canadian women and men?

- **Radha Jhappan**, Carleton University
- **Caroline Andrew**, University of Ottawa
- **Carol Wall**, Canadian Labour Congress
- **Brenda O'Neill**, University of Manitoba

16:50 ~ 17:20 **DISCUSSION OF THE THEORETICAL LINKS**

17:20 ~ 17:30 **CLOSE OF DAY 1 OF THE ROUNDTABLE**

19:00 ~ 21:30 **PUBLIC FORUM (147, Fauteux Pavillion, University of Ottawa)**

“Women as Political Agents: Linking Different Forms of Political Participation”

- **Judy Rebick**, Journalist / Social Justice Chair - Ryerson
 - **Alexa Conradi**, D’abord solidaires
 - **Fay Blaney**, Aboriginal Women’s Action Network
 - **Diane Lamoureux**, Université Laval
-

SUNDAY

9:00 ~ 9:30 Report from the Rapporteur on Saturday’s discussions

9:30 ~ 10:30 **PANEL 4: Moving forward: Strategies for the Women’s Movement**

- Facilitator: **Elisabeth Gidengil**

Q: How can women advance their political rights?

- **Mercédez Roberge**, Collectif: Féminisme et démocratie
- **Joyce Green**, University of Regina
- **Fay Blaney**, Aboriginal Women’s Action Network
- **Judy Rebick**, Journalist / Ryerson University

10:30 ~ 11:30 **MODERATED DEBATE**

- Facilitator: **Caroline Andrew**

11:30 ~ 12:30 ~ *LUNCH* ~

12:30 ~ 13:45 **BUILDING A CONSENSUS**

- Facilitator: **Caroline Andrew**

13:45 ~ 14:00 **CLOSING REMARKS**

LIST OF INVITEES

Canadian Committee for the World March of Women

Canadian Abortion Rights Action League
Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies
Canadian Association of Sexual Assault Centres
Canadian Federation of Students
Canadian Federation of University Women
Canadian Labour Congress
Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women
Child Care Advocacy Assoc. of Canada
Congress of Black Women
Disabled Women's Network
Fédération des femmes de Quebec
Fédération nationale des femmes canadiennes-françaises
Le Réseau national d'action education femmes
Métis National Council of Women
Native Women's Assoc. of Canada
National Action Committee on the Status of Women
National Anti-Poverty Organization
National Association of Women and the Law
National Council of Women in Canada
National Organization of Immigrant & Visible Minority Women of Canada
Pauktuutit
Women's Inter-Church Council of Canada
YWCA of Canada

Other Groups Mobilizing on the Issue

Collectif: Féminisme et démocratie (Quebec)
Equal Voice (National: based in Toronto)
Feminists for Just and Equitable Public Policy (Halifax)
Femmes, Politique et Démocratie (Provincial: based in Quebec City)
Table féministe francophone de concertation provinciale de l'Ontario (Ontario)
Every Vote Counts (P.E.I.)

ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Andrée Côté, Director of Legislation and Law Reform for NAWL
Bonnie Diamond, Executive Director of NAWL
Caroline Andrew, Dean of Social Sciences, Ottawa University
Elisabeth Gidengil, Professor of Political Science, McGill University
Dolly Williams, FEMJEPP
Jackie Steele, Roundtable Coordinator, Masters candidate in Legal Studies (Carleton)
Joyce Green, Professor of Political Science, University of Regina
Judy Rebick, Social Justice Chair at Ryerson University / Journalist
Lisa Young, Professor of Political Science, University of Calgary
Nancy Peckford, Masters candidate in Women's Studies (Memorial)
Yasmeen Abu-Laban, Professor of Political Science, University of Alberta

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Status of Women Canada
The Centre for the Study of Women and Politics

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