

INFORMATION SHEETS: 1.0

WOMEN'S ACCESS TO FEDERAL POLITICAL OFFICE IN CANADA

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Convener: The National Association of Women and the Law

Sponsors: The Law Commission of Canada

All Party Women's Association

Status of Women Canada

Elections Canada

Centre for Research on Women and Politics (Ottawa University)

DIVERGENT HISTORIES OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN POLITICS

MASS POLITICS: The Right to Vote

The Scandinavian Example

The first three countries where women received the right to vote and the right to stand for elections simultaneously were Finland (1906), Denmark and Iceland (both 1915).

The Canadian Experience

Female relatives of the Canadian military gained the right to vote in 1918, allowing sisters and mothers to vote in an election that centred around the conscription debate. Canadian women, to the exclusion of Aboriginal women, gained the right to vote federally by 1919.

The Person's Case

Despite having secured our right to vote, in 1929, five Canadian women had to take the government to court to claim the right to hold political office. In what has become known as the "Persons Case", five women appealed all the way to the Supreme Court of Canada for the right to be considered for appointment to the Senate. Our highest Canadian court declared that women were not "persons" in the intentions of the law. Having not completely severed our ties from the motherland, the "Famous Five" women then appealed to the Privy Council in Britain, which pronounced that women were indeed persons and could be named to the Senate of Canada.

*Although studies show that women and men participate in **mass politics** fairly equally, the absence of women in **elite politics** suggests another variable. Political Scientist, Pippa Norris outlines three factors that impede women's equal participation in politics: cultural, socio-economic, and political influences.*

ELITE POLITICS: The Right to be Decision-Makers for the Country

The Scandinavian Example

In 1999, Sweden became the first country to have more female ministers than male ones in its government. In 2001, 11 out of 20 ministers were women. The posts were distributed as follows: Deputy Prime Minister; Minister for Democratic Issues, Public Administration and Consumer Policies; Minister for Development Cooperation, Migration and Asylum Policy; Minister for Foreign Affairs; Minister for Social Security; Minister for Schools and Adult Education; Minister for Agriculture, Food and Fisheries; Minister for Gender Equality Affairs; Minister for Culture; and two deputy ministers for Industry, Employment and Commerce.

The Canadian Experience

In 2003, the Liberal Cabinet has 10 women and 28 men. The women's portfolios are as follows: Heritage, Health, Treasury Board, HRDC, Labour, Citizenship/Immigration, Leader of the Government in the Senate, International Cooperation, Secretary of State for Children, Secretary of State for Multiculturalism and the Status of Women. When (former) Liberal Women's Caucus Chair, Carolyn Bennett spoke out about the lack of women in Cabinet following Prime Minister Chrétien's Cabinet shuffle, in an attempt to silence her, the Prime Minister singled her out at the Liberal Party Caucus meeting and chastised her in front of her peers.

WOMEN'S ACCESS TO ELECTED OFFICE IN CANADA'S PARLIAMENT

Women's Representation in the Canadian Parliament

Women in Canada won the right to vote in federal elections in 1918. In 1921, Agnes MacPhail was elected as the first female Member of Parliament to the House of Commons.

From 1921 onward, women's representation in the House of Commons significantly increased to a maximum a 21% of total seats in 1997, but has stagnated since then. In the most recent federal election (2000), women's representation fell slightly. In Canada, women's representation has never achieved a critical mass which, according to the United Nations, is 30%.

Women in the House of Commons

Years # cand. # of elected % of Total

Years	# cand.	# of elected	% of Total
1921		1	
1962		5	
1980		16	
1988	302	39	12.9
1993	476	53	17.6
1997	408	62	15.2
2000	373	62	20.6

Canada's electoral system under scrutiny

In 1991, the *Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing* released its extensive study on Canada's electoral system. The Commission found that women's **under-representation** was a significant problem, and that **women are the most under-represented segment of Canadian society**. To address this imbalance, the Commission recommended the following measures:

- Re-writing Elections Act in gender neutral language (**done**)
- Spending limits on nomin. campaigns (**not done**)
- Permitting nomination donations to count as tax credits (**not done**)
- Making child care expenses an allowable tax deduction (**done**)
- Reimbursing parties who run more women (**not done**)

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 significant measure of political power.

Janine Brodie, 1991

Barriers to the Election of Women

- First Past the Post electoral system
- Raising funds for party's nomination process and election campaign
- Obtaining the party's nomination
- Persistently negative media representation
- Anti-feminist political culture
- Reconciling family and party obligations

Canada's Electoral System

First Past the Post (FPTP) or Single Member District Systems

Members of Parliament are chosen in single member plurality (SMP) districts in which the candidate with the largest number of votes in that constituency wins. Parties choose one candidate to run for election in each riding. SMP systems like Canada's fail to produce representation which reflects the diversity of the Canadian mosaic as it distorts the votes cast for each party and discourages most parties to run "winnable" candidates.

WHO IS REPRESENTED IN THE CANADIAN HOUSE OF COMMONS?

CHART: See <InfoSheets1.1_WhoinCdnHouse.doc>