



MOM NEVER TOLD US HOUSE WORK WOULD BE LIKE THIS

by JAN BROWN

Politics has been an unfavourable environment for women. Women must challenge tradition, hidden barriers and social biases to pursue a political career. What is needed for women to succeed in public life where power, influence and aggression dominate? Can women dare to play the game using similar tactics and responses and get away with it? Canadian politics and its gender agenda is about the feminine pursuit of equality within a subtly prejudiced network.





Barbara Frum noted in 1971 that “there are 56 whooping cranes in Canada, and one female politician.” Trail blazers such as Flora MacDonald, Audrey McLaughlin, Kim Campbell and Sheila Copps have challenged gender notions about the ways in which power is negotiated in the political realm. However, that realm remains masculine terrain. The modest gains in women’s participation rates since Ms. Frum’s observations hover around a lowly 18 - 21 per cent.



These minimal changes should not fool us into believing that the increased numbers of female MPs indicate an emerging acceptance of women in politics. Old prejudices of what constitutes “women’s work” have yet to be discarded. The political sphere has yet to be considered a woman’s sphere, as a proper place for a woman. For example, women still face subtle criticisms because a public life is not yet considered to be compatible with family life. Questions such as “how can you leave your family?” or “who is taking care of the home front?” remain constant reminders that society still has specific role definitions for women.



We do not change things with the throw of a switch. There is no simple procedure to establish oneself in an environment outside of what is considered normal for women. Assumptions about parenting and the responsibilities of men and women in the workplace and at home reflect long-established social

norms. A narrow sphere of expectations exists, rarely challenged, limiting women's aspirations to the domain of hearth and home. Women mirror the images of their mothers. Their world is domestic not politic. So no wonder society continues to define the feminine persona on the basis of motherhood statements rather than on the inner drive or competency of a particular woman.

The stereotype, sustained by patriarchy, pictures women as servants, nurturers and motherly organizers who often give way to their emotions. How could they ever be competent participants in the game of politics where the rules are tough and ill-defined and the predominantly male players (the guys) are mutually and securely bonded as a group.

Politics then represents an overwhelming challenge for women. Not only are they struggling to rid themselves of a stereotypical social role, but they also have to re-establish themselves in a new environment, one that is quite foreign from the world in which they were socialized as children. In earlier times women were denied access to public office, giving rise to the strong prejudice that attempts to shut women out of political involvement. But why has there been so little change within this belief system?

Quite simply women have not yet learned the fundamental law of political economy; exchange is based on the value the merchandise has to the buyer, not the seller. We

are told that aptitudes and skills developed in one setting will be useful in another. This means little in politics when such naïveté can place women at a disadvantage to successfully compete. Women back off from aggressive behaviour because there is a tendency to be labelled as "bitches." Women are neither experienced nor very skillful at using the particular form of power expected in a political environment, which is quite simply "power over"—getting your own way. Power is predicated on the historical rule of kings and the long-established relationships with the male power brokers of the ruling class. The male tradition dies hard. Women tend to compromise in deal making so their challenge will be to overcome their unpreparedness in developing a full-blown pursuit in traditionally male territory.

I remember working extremely hard as the critic to the Canadian Heritage Ministry. I was in full pursuit of Michel Dupuis who was the minister responsible for the department in those early months of the 35th Parliament. I used my wits and a good dose of humour to manage a difficult file. I felt compassion for the minister who wasn't particularly good on his feet in the House of Commons but whose intellect I respected. I recall an accidental meeting in a hallway with Minister Dupuis after a particularly fractious Question Period. He was clearly frustrated and asked "why are you doing this to me?" I replied

"because it's my job." However, I must confess that after this encounter I didn't enjoy our sparring because he was internalizing our debates and his feelings were hurt. Politics creates an unnatural and combative setting that does not support positive relationships.

Our political system is currently a rather one-sided structure. Because political power is negotiated on adversarial and combative terrain, there is little room left for alternative means of governance such as power-sharing and consensus building. Women may bring with them a different kind of imagination, judgement and reason but male traditions still determine the major political players. If you were asked to name the 10 most successful people you know, doubtless the list would include a disproportionate number of males. We have come to expect men to succeed, and women, well, not to be in the top 10. Even when they are, we tend to question why.

Ultimately we are left with the mirage of Kim Campbell, the fading of Audrey McLaughlin and the radar blip that is Alexa McDonough. The political spotlight caused all three to wilt, maybe in part, because people expected them to wilt. Power and influence have yet to cross gender lines. Women need a different kind of savvy, an approach to call their own so that new strategies will ensure their voice is heard.

My own experience with this dilemma is what I now call "The Friday girl and the Monday girl." It



cutting cake in Quebec



with Bobbie Sparrow



with husband Tony

didn't take very long to realize that my academic skills were of little relevance to anyone in Parliament except perhaps to me. So I decided to use some strategies that I had learned as an academic. One of those strategies was to take on all of those jobs that no one else had time for or wanted. This was a conscious decision that meant working in Ottawa on Fridays and Mondays. I spent most of the first 18 months in this mode; taking duty days when colleagues were home in their constituencies being available when the press needed a comment (and those were typically slow news days so I had lots of opportunities); attending functions in the East when the Party needed a representative. It was hard work but it is the strategy I used to build my reputation. Although no one has ever identified how I became well known, it was but a simple visibility strategy learned while completing my Master of Communications Studies.

On a curious note the Ottawa media extend a certain amount of good will to elected women. Journalists are powerful opinion leaders and well understand the exchange system on Parliament Hill. If they take an interest in you and include you in their stories they can increase your value with the broader constituency of Canadians. This can happen in spite of the authoritarian hierarchies that are inherent in the caucus structure. Rest assured this process works in reverse with the media; when you have lost your lustre so you have lost your political capital.

There was a sense after the 1993 federal election, given the increased numbers of women MPs (18 per cent), that Parliament might emerge as more consensus-driven, more collegial, less confrontational. While 18 per cent does demonstrate that women can move into territory long held by males, it does not of itself constitute a threshold for change. Senator Pat Carney has indicated that a female representation of 25 per cent at the federal level would be a "critical mass" of influence. The game of politics is brokering; it is deal-making in the hallway. To change the political climate women are going to have to make themselves effective as consensus builders in a place where power and gamesmanship determine the rules.

Women should move away from the established power style of coercion and consider how to use their own sense of political empowerment within the model of brokerage politics that is based on their own world view. Alberta MPs Deborah Grey and Anne McLellan have added their own sharpened images to that model. Validation of the feminine in the political domain would open up new paradigms of leadership, including joint problem-solving that emphasizes win/win rather than lose/lose situations. None of this is to suggest that we should turn the tables and privilege the feminine over the masculine. Rather, it is simply meant to signal the advantages gained by

moving to a less androgenic, more holistic approach to politics.

My own experience with this phenomenon is best represented by a story that will link me forever with Lucien Bouchard. I was fascinated with the partisan groupings in the House of Commons and this resulted in a broad mix of personal friendships. I believed, as did others, that positive communication and mutual respect would result in cohesive relationships that were beyond partisan politics. My friendship with Lucien Bouchard while he led the Bloc Québécois grew out of my curiosity regarding the ideological basis for his passionate arguments. When he fell ill with flesh-eating disease my personal concern for him and his wife and children led me to place the yellow rose on his desk in the House of Commons. I have never regretted that action because it was simply my expression of human concern for another. It was a person to person gesture that transcended political beliefs but some saw it otherwise and misinterpreted the spirit in which it was given. How sad. But I do know that my value as a politician increased beyond the borders of my constituency in Alberta. Even today I still hear from Quebeckers who remember the yellow rose.

So where do we go from here? What is heartening is that the guideposts followed in the past are starting to show signs of weathering. Greater numbers of 30-something women are working out-

side of the home; parenting responsibilities are now shared by both parents; more equitable ratios of women are in training settings traditionally held by males; baby boomers are greying; and overall expectations for 20-something women have changed. These young women are significantly different from previous generations when lack of mobility and role division greatly influenced how we lived and worked. They have a wide array of options and consequently may choose never to marry, may choose never to have children and indeed expect to be treated as equals.

Now is *not* the time for women to avoid the effort required to achieve meaningful political involvement. The heat can be intense and sometimes we are tempted to get out. However, we will never see meaningful change unless we are prepared to confront tokenism.

Perhaps politics is not for the itchy mind that demands new adventures in rapid succession. Public service in reality is based on strategy, tedium and a great deal of patience. Of course avoidance is the easier path but I keep waiting for others to follow. Let us never say we failed because we did not try.

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Photographs courtesy of the author.