

Barriers to Why are we so far from gender



Illustration by Joel Jackson

“Well, it’s no fun being the only woman on the front benches of the opposition, and I’m very aware that many women, perhaps most women, who might currently be considering running for political office would find the minister’s comments sexist, distasteful, juvenile, and a deliberate attempt to trivialize my role as an equal member of this House.”

SO SAID LIBERAL MLA LAURIE BLAKEMAN DURING LEGISLATIVE debate in May 2004 after being called a “water witch” by Environment Minister Lorne Taylor. Her words were prophetic. Just six months later, the number of women who ran for and won seats in the Alberta legislature reached a 15-year low. Only 13 women were elected in November 2004, comprising a mere 16 per cent of the legislators. This is well down from the high of 27 per cent in 1997 and far from gender parity. If this trend holds, women could disappear from the legislature within three elections.

What is going on? After all, Alberta women have always shown plenty of gumption and never been shy about demanding their fair share of the roles and responsibilities essential to building the province. Proud and plucky women line the pages of Alberta’s history. From the Famous Five, who fought for and won legal personhood for all Canadian women in 1929, to the trio of female ranchers selected by beef producers in 2001 to symbolize the Alberta cattle industry, Alberta women have not hesitated to saddle their ambitions and gallop off in pursuit of gender equality. In fact, Alberta women were public-spirited citizens well before most of them won the right to vote in 1916. They led the suffrage movement to secure the vote and played an integral role in the Non-Partisan League and its successor, the United Farmers of Alberta. Women in this province sought the first available opportunity—the provincial election of 1917—to share political decision-making power with men. Two of them, Louise McKinney and Roberta MacAdams, won seats in the legislature. When the United Farmers formed the Alberta government in 1921, Famous Five member Irene Parlby became the first woman in the province to serve in cabinet, making her the second woman cabinet minister anywhere in the British Empire. Female suffragist Nellie McClung also won the approval of Alberta voters in 1921.

Given this remarkable head start, it is surprising that, rather than leading, Alberta is now trailing most provinces when it comes to electing women. The downward slide that began with the 2001 election and continued with the 2004 contest seems

Women parity in our legislature?

by Linda Trimble and Jane Arscott

anomalous for a province that boasts so many “firsts” for women. Women’s representation at the provincial level is now the same in 2005 as it was in the late 1980s. The electoral project that more than doubled the number of female MLAs between 1986 and 1997 has fizzled.

This is not just an Alberta phenomenon. The electoral glass ceiling persists for women across the country. Most know of the limits on women in the business world; women employees tend to top out in middle management and represent only 11 per cent of senior management positions. A similar barrier is in place for women political aspirants. The continued underrepresentation of women in Canada’s Parliament and legislatures and the scarcity of women party leaders provide ample evidence of progress stalled at token levels.

There are no female first ministers in 2005 and soon there will be only two women party leaders in all of Canada. Women hold just over 20 per cent of the seats in all of Canada’s legislatures, a number that has not budged in two years despite a new crop of representatives elected across 11 jurisdictions. Assurances made in 1991 by the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing, that women’s share of the elected positions would soon surpass 20 per cent and take off from there, now ring hollow. Sure, women did attain 20 per cent of the seats in the House of Commons in 1997. But they have been stuck at that level ever since. It seems Canadian women are on an electoral teeter-totter with gains in one legislature matched by losses in another. While Quebec became the first jurisdiction in Canada to achieve 30 per cent representation by women, women began losing ground across the prairie provinces and in the territories.

Even if the ceiling for women seems set at 20 to 25 per cent for the foreseeable future, what explains the fact that Alberta is now trailing other Canadian jurisdictions? With 16 per cent female legislators, the province that once topped the charts for electing women is now well behind the middle of the pack.

Outsiders might implicate this province’s “redneck” reputation. Birthplace of the anti-feminist group Alberta Federation of Women United for Families, champion of the bootstrap model of upward mobility, protector of the traditional family and the patriarchal moral order, present-day Alberta appears to provide infertile soil for women’s electoral growth. Indeed, promoting the status of women was erased from the Klein government’s “to do” list in the mid-1990s when the Advisory Council on Women’s Issues and the Women’s Secretariat were dismantled. When the premier proclaimed Alberta women capable of speaking for

themselves without any financial or organizational help, Alberta women’s groups said their voices were loud and clear but the government had long since stopped listening. In the face of such recalcitrance, feminist organizations like the Alberta Status of Women Action Committee simply gave up.

New Democrat activist Shannon Phillips believes left-leaning women’s political ambitions are stifled by the Conservative party’s electoral and ideological hold on the province. She says it’s hard to convince progressive women to run, because any opposition to the Tory monolith is met with ire and derision. However, Alberta’s present-day reputation for shrinking from anything labeled feminist doesn’t fully explain the recent ebb in women’s electoral fortunes. The regime most closely associated with “redneckism” played a key role in electing record numbers of women. The 10 per cent hurdle was jumped in 1986, and Ralph Klein’s electoral “miracle on the prairies” in 1993 foreshadowed a leap to almost 20 per cent of the seats in the legislative assembly. In fact, the high-water mark for women in the legislature was reached with Klein’s second mandate in 1997 when women captured 22 seats. That women comprised over a quarter of the MLAs from 1997 to 2001 was due in part to the willingness of the Klein Conservatives to enlist like-minded female candidates for safe seats in Calgary and rural ridings. Moreover, the premier did not hesitate to appoint women to high-profile cabinet posts in finance and agriculture, jobs traditionally reserved for men.

Alberta briefly cracked the electoral glass ceiling because the competing political parties, through accident or design, welcomed women as candidates in more than 20 per cent of the province’s ridings in the mid- to late 1990s. Then the numbers stagnated or dropped. In the 2004 election, the Liberals and NDP fielded the same number of female candidates as they did in 2001. The Conservatives offered fewer. Even more alarmingly, the tradition of running women in lost-cause ridings was revived. They were to wave the party flag but had no reasonable hope of being elected.

The steep slide in the number of female legislators in 2004 was given its biggest push by the retirement of four Conservative MLAs who, to a woman, were replaced by male candidates, all victorious. Another Tory, Mary O’Neill, was defeated. The lone new female Conservative candidate challenged popular former NDP leader, Raj Pannu in Edmonton and she didn’t stand a chance. The Conservative party did not think it sufficiently important to nominate women in safe seats and as a result elected only 10 female MLAs, down from 15 in 2001. Electoral turnover

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often benefits women because, as party electoral fortunes shift, some of the marginal seats women contest become winning seats. Yet the Conservative losses in 2004 produced meagre gains in women’s representation on the opposition benches. While the Liberals reclaimed lost ground in Edmonton and found a toe-hold in Calgary and Lethbridge, only two of their nine new seats are held by women. The New Democrats doubled their ranks to four MLAs but feature an all-male caucus. None of the five ridings targeted by the NDP as winnable in 2005 selected a woman to carry the party banner. The newly minted Alliance party nominated a mere 11 female candidates, none of whom were successful. As a result, only three of the 21 opposition MLAs are women, and only one, veteran Liberal Laurie Blakeman, has legislative experience.

Skeptics might question whether parties are really to blame. Could it be that women just aren’t interested in the job? Laurie Blakeman chaired her party’s recruitment committee in 2004. Keen to see women’s ranks increase, she had no trouble identifying women who are eminently qualified to serve as candidates. But most said no, even when Blakeman resorted to “begging.” In Alberta, recruitment is particularly challenging for the opposition Liberals and New Democrats. The prospect of raising campaign funds, putting together a winning team and running flat out for 28 days of an election campaign with little chance of winning is off-putting, to say the least. When grim prospects are coupled with the loss of privacy and the invasive media exposure that accompany a political bid, women are understandably reluctant to put their names forward. According to Conservative party executives Gloria Wilkinson and Drew Hutton, the “in-your-face” approach of press and public deters potential PC candidates, too.

Women need more convincing than men do, even when the seat may be winnable. Alberta NDP communications officer Shannon Phillips, who sought candidates for the federal election, says women will “say no 15 times before they say yes.” They aren’t being indecisive; they just do not see themselves, or people like them, in elected office. Women who are in fact solid candidate material need to be persuaded that their skills in the workforce, home and community organizations are transferable to political life. Efforts to recruit female candidates must consider and combat the reasons for women’s reluctance to say “yes.”

The involvement of party leaders is, according to activists in Alberta’s opposition NDP and Liberal parties, key to recruiting women. Laurie Blakeman points to former Liberal chief Grant Mitchell’s record, noting that women comprised half of the party’s caucus after the 1997 election. Mitchell’s approach was to start early and persist, championing the need for more women, pushing

party insiders to scour their ridings for potential candidates, and—most importantly—convincing women to take the leap. Leaders new to the job lack the luxury of time. Liberal Kevin Taft and New Democrat Brian Mason were at a disadvantage in the 2004 contest, having led their parties for only a few months before the writ was dropped. Both parties realize they lost opportunities as a result. New Democrat activist Melanee Thomas believes constituency organizations need plenty of lead time to raise the profile of the party and lay the groundwork for female aspirants, because women who are thinking of making a bid for the legislature look very seriously at their chances of winning.

Laurie Blakeman, charged with conscripting candidates for the Liberals, has already started plotting the party’s strategy to find women, with full support from Taft. The NDP, perpetually out in front when it comes to featuring women party officials and candidates, isn’t satisfied that women comprised almost 30 per cent of its recruits in 2004. The party’s all-male electoral outcome prompted NDP leader Brian Mason to strike a committee of five party activists, including Thomas, to investigate ways of both securing women for winnable ridings and creating winnable ridings for superb female candidates.

On the other hand, the party with the greatest potential to get more women elected insists there is nothing the party leadership can do to ensure that more women run. Alberta Conservatives see affirmative action as a violation of the grass-roots selection processes conducted by riding associations. According to PC party executive director and former MLA Drew Hutton, candidate recruitment must be gender neutral, local, “natural” and evolutionary. Hutton says women will “step up” if and when political life suits their career paths.

THERE’S ANOTHER REASON WOMEN ARE SAYING NO TO electoral politics, and even the best recruitment strategies might not be able to counter it. Politics at this level is seen as dirty, nasty and downright destructive. Assertive, confident politically minded women who enjoy spirited discussions about important issues see legislative politics as hostile to women and to their preferred approach to getting the job done. Gloria Wilkinson, policy vice-president for the PCs, and co-founder of Winning Women, an organization that teaches political skills and encourages women’s political candidacy, believes women are increasingly discouraged by the resistance of legislative politics to the “win-win solutions” women favour over the “win-lose” tactics of the “male-created system.” According to former Liberal MLA Linda Sloan, the intensely personalized nature of legislative discussion contributes to a “demoralizing atmosphere of us versus them.” She’s now serving as a city councillor in Edmonton,

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where she finds the environment refreshingly co-operative and much more focused on the issues of concern to citizens. Sloan certainly doesn't miss the disrespectful conduct and gender-specific rudeness leveled at female legislators. Laurie Blakeman says the "special abuse reserved for women" is designed to hurt. She should know; she's been physically attacked, hectoring about her weight, clothing and attitude, on top of being called a "witch" by a government minister. MLAs endure levels of sexism and gender-based harassment that would blatantly violate the rules in any other workplace, so it's no surprise that many of the women who happily run campaigns, develop policy and devise electoral strategies refuse to take the next step and put their names on the lawn signs.

Until they do, the atmosphere in the legislature won't likely improve. That the presence of more women promotes a more collegial and respectful working environment is supported by plenty of academic and anecdotal evidence. The double bind is clear: when elected in token numbers, female representatives are subject to what Laurie Blakeman calls a "beer hall atmosphere," complete with jeering and hooting. Such behaviour puts off the very women who have the potential to change the tone of legislative debate.

Electing women has more than a symbolic impact, though the presence of women in positions of power certainly disrupts the notion of politics as a man's game. Female legislators say they make a difference by raising issues that would otherwise be overlooked or neglected. Such issues include the need for day care in rural areas, problems with spousal maintenance enforcement, the differential impact of public sector job cuts on women (especially teachers and nurses), the feminization of poverty, the impact of increased emphasis on volunteerism (demands on women to do unpaid work), the need for language training for immigrant women, and many others. The fewer women elected, the lower the likelihood of women's concerns getting discussed when policy is being made. Recent sittings of the legislature have had little to say about women's contribution to the life of the province or their differential policy needs.

What can be done to improve women's representation in the Alberta legislature? Political parties must continue their efforts to recruit women, despite the odds. But even the best-intentioned party organizations need the help, support and prodding of non-partisan women's organizations dedicated to achieving gender parity in elected office. Edmonton YWCA's One Woman One Vote initiative has been encouraging women to become involved in all stages of the political process, from voicing opinions, to joining groups and parties, to voting and running for office. The project has been very busy over the past two years, co-ordinating

workshops that introduce female political aspirants to women in office, organizing women's political action forums, and hosting breakfast gatherings for municipal candidates. Janet Buckmaster, co-ordinator of the program, plans to create an Alberta chapter of Equal Voice Canada, a national organization promoting equality in political representation for women. One Woman One Vote has also joined the chorus of groups promoting electoral reform as part of the solution to women's continued under-representation in Canada's Parliament and legislatures.

Voices for electoral change are getting louder in Alberta, and include Fair Vote Alberta, the opposition Liberals and the New Democrats as well as the One Woman One Vote project. Governments across Canada are giving serious consideration to junking the first-past-the-post electoral system in favour of an approach that produces fairer, more proportional results, engages people in the act of voting and allows parties to make concerted efforts to elect more women, aboriginal people and ethno-racial minorities. The governments of Quebec and New Brunswick are proposing dramatic changes and even the federal government has said it wants to rethink the way elections work. British Columbia put the people at the heart of the initiative by creating a citizens assembly, in which women played an equal role, to study the issue. A May 2005 referendum allowed B.C. voters to decide whether or not to accept the assembly's proposal for a single-transferable-vote system. Electoral reform discussions are, at their core, about the meaning and importance of democratic participation and political representation. The Alberta government's reluctance to even initiate such a conversation is puzzling. More than half of Alberta voters are so disengaged from politics they don't even bother to cast a ballot.

It has been 88 years since the first Alberta women won their places in the Legislative Assembly. That women are still so far from parity at Alberta's centenary is a concern. But with a concerted effort on the part of a new generation of feisty women, the downward slide for women can be reversed. After all, proponents of gender parity in political life have public opinion on their side. Ninety per cent of Canadians think electing more women will improve the political system, according to a survey released by the Centre for Research and Information on Canada last fall. Among six potential reforms to improve the quality of democracy in Canada, including proportional representation and referendums, electing more women topped the list.

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