

# COMMENTARY

## Politics? It's still a man's world

GRETCHEN KELBAUGH  
COMMENTARY

Political talk about riding redistribution and Senate reform leaves me cold. Worse, it leaves women out in the cold, in the hinterlands of fair representation. Equal? Effective? Not for us.

Canada is 51 per cent women. Our Senate is only 38 per cent women, the House of Commons is 25 per cent and New Brunswick's legislature is a token 14.5 per cent. Why do we tolerate a system that's biased toward men?

The bias matters. Studies in Canada, the U.S.A. and U.K. show that men, in general, are more concerned than women with issues of taxation, the economy and foreign policy. Women are more concerned with health care, education and social welfare. But Prime Minister Stephen Harper's budget cuts \$14 million from research needed to form good policies on these last three issues. No surprise, really, after Mr. Harper and his band of merry white men blew the crucial long-form national census out of the water (with unregistered rifles; more women want gun control). Further, more women favour environmental protection, but Environment Canada is cut \$53 million.

With only 17 per cent of Conservative MPs being women, our government favours the priorities of men.

Attempts to elect more women have worked about as well as wiping up dirt with a muddy cloth. Since 1997, the number of women in Parliament has moseyed up from 21 per cent to 25 per cent, and if it wasn't for the NDP surge, it would be much lower (almost 40 per cent NDP caucus is women). At this rate, we'll be fairly represented in a century or two.

One way to increase elected women is to switch our voting system to Proportional Representation (PR), used in most major democracies. Thomas Mulcair, Opposition Leader, endorses this reform. I hope it comes to Canada and the U.K. within 10 years (Scotland and Wales already use PR).

Another solution is quotas. Our voting system is based on quotas already, to protect the regions. Your geographical region, or riding, is assured of fair representation. Why not do the same for gender? Why not ensure that the majority – women – are fairly represented?

Why do some embrace quotas for geography but shun quotas for gender as if it would strangle democracy? To many women, regional issues are far less important than national ones, such as child care, pay equity, violence against women and poverty. Many women want gender representation as much, or more, as regional.

The biggest block to electing more



Myanmar's pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi talks to reporters after a party meeting in front of the National League for Democracy (NLD) party's head office in Yangon on April 20. There are so few women in national politics, globally, that courageous exceptions such as Aung San Suu Kyi stand out. PHOTO: SOE ZEYA TUN/REUTERS

women is getting their names on ballots. Local party elites are biased toward choosing male candidates. It's not a lack of qualified women. In fact, women candidates, on average, are more educated and experienced than male candidates in Canada. Parties must try harder to recruit women.

This bias is not just among men. Society still believes that leadership is gendered masculine. Women are more apt than men to consider themselves unqualified to run for office because of this stereotype. As more women do get elected, typical feminine traits of conciliation and power-sharing will be seen as good leadership qualities.

Many democracies counter sexism and

our regional population.

The same should hold true for women. Parties should choose half female candidates. Half our Senators should be women. Prime Ministers and Premiers should appoint half women to the bench. Nine out of New Brunswick's 10 MPs are now men. They have less in common with me than most women MPs across Canada.

Once the biases are gone, women won't need quota protection.

How else, besides failure of local party elites to put women on the ballot, is our system biased toward men?

First, the pay gap in annual earnings is still about 30 per cent, so more men can afford to run for office. (If the pay gap

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gender stereotypes with quotas. From Germany to Sweden, from Rwanda to most of Latin America, many nations use minimum percentages for women candidates put forward by parties, from 33 per cent to 50 per cent. Canada doesn't, and we're only ranked 40th among democracies for women in Parliament.

The argument that quotas demean women makes no sense. Democracy evolved in England using regional quotas. Does ensuring that Parliament has 10 MPs from New Brunswick demean us? No. In fact, we demand the quota, the right to be represented in proportion to

went the other way, I wonder if politicians would increase and enforce pay equity legislation?)

Second, women have less time to campaign and, if elected, to keep the time-consuming job of MLA, MP or councillor. Even though men do more housework and family care than before, it's still far less than women do. Legislatures must be more family friendly, with onsite daycare, no night sittings and scheduled elections.

On Feb. 16, this paper ran a commentary by Naomi Lakritz, who says that feminism encourages a political woman to be "a shrinking violet in need of concessions

to get where men got to under their own steam." Their own steam? For millennia, men have been able to have families and run the world because of women who washed their woolies, cooked their custard and cared for their kids. Own steam, indeed.

Third, the adversarial nature of politics turns off more women than men. Same with the hierarchical structure (with less than half the votes, so-called 'majority' governments make laws; the Prime Minister and his chosen few call the shots). As more women are elected, politics will embrace consensus-building and power-sharing. Less shouting, more laws passed with broad appeal.

Fourth, the double standard among journalists deters many women. Journalists cover women candidates less but comment more on their appearance, marital status and moral behaviour.

Politics was set up by men for men. But since the last wave of women's rights, there's no reason to tolerate its maleness anymore. We've had 40 years to right the system. It hasn't worked. It's time for gender quotas and proportional representation.

**Filmmaker Gretchen Kelbaugh travelled around New Brunswick, the United States and the United Kingdom to find out why so few women get elected to office. She interviewed four political scientists and Kim Campbell, still the only woman to be a national head of government in North America. The result is an 81-minute educational documentary called Menocracy (www.menocracy.ca)**

## IGGY'S ON SHAKY GROUND



CHANTAL HEBERT  
NATIONAL AFFAIRS

In the month since Thomas Mulcair won the leadership of the NDP, every sovereigntist indicator dropped sharply.

On Tuesday, a CROP poll reported that support for the Bloc Québécois had fallen below 20 per cent.

Over the same period, the Parti Québécois lost six points and only 36 per cent of Quebecers would have been inclined to vote yes in a referendum.

It is hard to credit these changes to any event other than Mr. Mulcair's victory. From a Quebec perspective, it was the only positive federalist development in a pretty glum month:

- Stephen Harper's Conservatives brought down an austerity budget that took hits at popular Quebec icons such as Radio-Canada.

- Quebec took its counterpart to court to preserve the province's gun registry data.

- The federal government announced it was closing a major penal institution in Laval and declined to put up a fight to salvage hundreds of airplane maintenance jobs at Avesco.

- Dissatisfaction with the provincial Liberal government rose to 73 per cent from 70 per cent as a massive student strike brought daily demonstrations to the streets of Montreal.

The CROP figures were published on the very day when former Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff was raising eyebrows for his depiction of Canada as a federation whose solitudes had grown so far apart as to have little incentive to continue living together.

In a BBC interview, Mr. Ignatieff argued that the two referendums battles had left Quebec and the rest of Canada with precious little to say to each other. When asked whether Quebec independence was inevitable, he answered: "I think eventually that's where it goes."

It is possible that Mr. Ignatieff's analysis stems from his own failure to connect with Quebecers in last year's election. His underlying thesis of a massive post-referendum devolution of powers does not hold water. Every province has run its own health and education systems since Confederation and Quebec's immigration powers pre-date the referendum wars.

But Mr. Ignatieff's conclusion also overlooks the fact that another federalist leader had no problems finding common ground with Quebecers last May and that his party has continued to do so in the face of an untimely leadership succession.

Part of Jack Layton's implicit bargain with Quebecers last May was that if they relinquished a protest party that they controlled for the NDP, it – in turn – would do what it took to be a serious contender for federal power.

The post-convention pro-NDP pro-federalist uptick suggests that selecting a ready-for-prime-time leader such as Mr. Mulcair amounted to living up to that bargain.

The day the CROP poll was published was also the day after Alberta voters rejected the isolationist calls of the Wildrose Party to hand an unexpected majority to Tory premier Alison Redford. One of her campaign mantras involved reaching out to the rest of the country. One of her early moves as party leader was a visit to Quebec.

By the numbers, Quebec sovereignty has failed to make a single convert since the closely fought referendum 17 years ago. One in five 1995 Yes supporter has since switched sides.

Mr. Ignatieff has said that his BBC comments were taken out of context. There is no doubt his were the musings of a public intellectual and not those of a recent aspirant to the job of prime minister.

But in either role, it would have been nice if his assertions had been borne out by more actual facts.

Chantal Hebert writes for the Toronto Star.

## The challenge of community governance



JEAN-MARIE NADEAU  
COMMENTARY

On May 14th, we will be voting in a new group of representatives in the sectors of health, education and municipalities. These levels of political power are the ones that are closest to the population, particularly that of municipalities. As for education and health, the sub-regions and sub-districts are so big that the citizen's feeling of belonging and feeling of ownership can be compromised.

Notwithstanding these considerations, our new representatives will face quite a challenge in moving matters and the interests of the citizens they represent in the right direction. Yet, there are already people who claim that our elected representatives will never be competent enough to manage complex issues like education, health, cities and towns.

If we were to follow such logic, it would also mean that the election of our provincial and federal government representatives is a useless exercise, since we would be perpetually electing a bunch of incompetents. It is as if there is a lack of belief in democracy, based on its weaknesses and incongruities. It must be said that, more often than not, citizens get the strange feeling that they are being managed by a bunch of incompetents, which only serves to reinforce those who would

attack democracy.

When someone is elected, regardless of the level, this individual must have the humility to recognize that the power has been invested in him or her by the citizens in order to represent them and make decisions in their name. They are not being granted exclusive, overriding power, even though some elected representatives act as if this were the case. Moreover, following the election, democracy requires that the elected individual represent the entire population, and not just those who voted for him/her. Even though, ultimately, the dreaded spectre of partisanship has reared its head in the past, we would like to think that things have improved over time; but have they?

Not so long ago, Jean Gauvin stated the following in a federal Conservative Party convention in Acadie-Bathurst: "when I represented the riding of Shippagan-les-

the advice of others. What matters more than anything else is that he/she remain connected to those who elected him/her and that judgement and common sense prevail. Those we elect are allowed to make good-faith errors, but they do not have the right to ignore issues or the citizens they represent.

Local government is more concrete, circumscribed and visible. A town or city is managed by dealing with water, sewerage, sanitation, the environment, culture, the industrial park and urban development. When it comes to the areas of education and health, it is more complex. These are also two areas that see the biggest government investments. They are at the heart of the collectivity and involve everyone. And these are the spheres where the power to act is the most ambiguous. A vague tension remains between the provincial govern-

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Îles, I favoured Shippagan-les-Îles. If I am elected member for Acadie-Bathurst, I will favour Acadie-Bathurst." Thankfully, his successor, Paul Robichaud, does not appear to be cut from the same cloth; on several occasions he has taken positions in favour of the Acadian Peninsula. However, the Tony Clements and Ghislain Paradis of the world still remain within the realm of contemporary politics.

Our elected representatives do not need to know everything. They are asked to take the measures and dispositions required in order to govern in a manner that is as informed and enlightened as possible. This means that the elected representatives must, as required, turn to

ment that allocates funds and a school district or health authority that, in practice, has few responsibilities and little latitude, contrary to legislation in place governing these bodies. The greatest challenge in health and education over the next four years will be that of rebalancing power between community governance in these areas and the government departments concerned, including the ministers.

This challenge of balancing power is more acutely visible at the levels of Acadian governance in health and education. A review of the Education Act is currently under way, in order to bring it up to date with the provincial government's

duty concerning its constitutional obligations and responsibilities vis-à-vis the minority language community. It is recognized in French Canada that New Brunswick's Education Act is the least appropriate, whereas our status as an officially-bilingual province would have made you think that we were the most forward-looking. As for health, it must be said that, here too, much remains to be done.

Our anglophone friends can be rest assured that the strides to come in the sectors of health and education at the community level will also bring benefits to their own community governance. In reality, both communities find themselves practically powerless in these areas.

In order to achieve all this, we need to place a great deal of emphasis on providing training for our elected representatives. Currently, limited training is available, with a concentration on the mechanics of governance, rather than the scope and vision of this governance. The government and associations involved do their part, but it is not enough. This additional training is even more pertinent when it comes to the Acadian community. Université de Moncton, the government and Acadian organizations need to come together to provide such training. We need to stop reinventing the wheel every time a new board of directors is elected.

A new New Brunswick will see the light of day on May 14th, and we should all be optimistic about the province's prospects for the future. It will not be easy, and the area of municipal affairs and local governance reform will be challenging, but this reform is long overdue.

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