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# The First Outreach Program of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians

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by Charlotte L'Écuyer, MNA

*The Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (the CWP) is a network that provides the opportunity for its Members to share experiences, discuss topics of interest and seek solutions to the special problems faced by the female minority in Parliaments. The CWP-Canadian Region was established in 2006 and is comprised of women parliamentarians from across Canada. In May 2007, the CWP conducted its first Outreach Program.*



The purpose of the CWP Outreach Program is to increase women's representation in all levels of government. Discussions served to enhance awareness of the roles of parliamentarians and the election process. As Chair of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians - Canada, I led a delegation of CWP members to the

first Outreach Program held in Yellowknife from May 1-4, 2007. Other participants included the Honourable Carolyn Bolivar-Getson, MLA, Nova Scotia, Nancy Heppner, MLA, Saskatchewan, Judy Junor, MLA, Saskatchewan, Jane Groenewegen, MLA, and Sandy Lee, MLA, Northwest Territories.

During the program, the delegation met with members of following institutions and organizations:

- École Allain St. Cyr
- St. Patrick High School
- Youth Parliament of the Northwest Territories
- Sir John Franklin High School

- Centre for Northern Families
- Status of Women Council
- YWCA
- Native Women's Association

The delegation also had the opportunity to discuss the CWP outreach program and the importance of women's representation in politics with:

- the Commissioner of the Northwest Territories, Anthony W. J. Whitford
- the Speaker of the NWT Legislature, Paul Delorey
- the Minister Responsible for the Status of Women, Charles Dent

In addition to its numerous meetings, the delegation participated in the Youth Parliament Program at the Legislative Assembly.

There was significant discussion on the political landscape in Canada and internationally, the political situation in the Northwest Territories, barriers that exist for women who wish to enter politics and the importance of engagement in politics and public service as well as, the role and objectives of the CWP-Canada Region. The aims and objectives of the CWP include:

- to provide opportunities for strategic discussion and development for future and present parliamentarians;
- to increase female representation in our Parliaments;

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*Charlotte L'Écuyer is the Liberal Member for Pontiac at the Quebec National Assembly. She is also Chair of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians, Canadian Region.*



**The CWP Outreach Delegation during its program in Yellowknife**

- to foster closer relationships between women parliamentarians in all Branches of the Region;
- to foster relations with other countries having close parliamentary ties with the Region; and
- to discuss, strategize and act on gender-related issues in Canada and internationally

The CWP members provided an overview of the activities of the CWP both internationally and within Canada. The position of Canada with regards to female representation and the records of the various legislatures were explored.

The situation of the Northwest Territories is very unique given the non-party system of its legislature and the small population of the territory. Consensus government limits the nomination barriers that exist in other provinces and territories. Despite the lack of party-based limitations, only two female MLAs sit in the legislature with no cabinet representation. Aboriginal women currently do not hold any seats which must be urgently addressed. In discussions with the Native Women's Association, the role of many community leaders within the aboriginal self-governments rather than the territorial legislature was highlighted. Many NWT women candidates who were unsuccessful last election lost by a very slim margin. There was consensus regarding the importance of encouraging these candidates to run again.

There are many barriers that must be overcome to increase women's representation in politics. Participants questioned whether the numbers were low because women do not get elected or because they do not run. It was agreed that encouraging women to run is the key to increasing representation.

The instability of minority parliaments has an effect on all candidates. The availability and access to winnable ridings was another area of concern. Family friendly hours and childcare could lessen the barriers that exist with regards to family responsibilities. The long travel distances were of concern to many potential candidates.

It was agreed that to equal a critical mass that can make an impact in legislatures, women must hold at least 30% of seats. The importance of diversity within parliaments is crucial. The 30% minimum target has not been met by any legislature in Canada. The CWP delegation encouraged women to engage in all levels of government and stressed the important role of NGOs, grassroots organizations and community groups. The opportunities for community service are vast. The power of an elected official to make a difference was a driving force behind the parliamentarians' decision to enter politics. The importance of having more women in cabinet was agreed upon and Québec's current female cabinet representation of 50% was applauded.

### **Recommendations and Conclusion**

The CWP is committed to increasing women's representation in all levels of government. During the outreach program, many initiatives were developed to reach this goal.

First, the need for Campaign Schools in all regions was identified. There exists a lack of awareness of the opportunities within political process and understanding of the nomination and election process. Many regions have developed very successful campaign schools where winning candidates were trained. The CWP will work in partnership with existing campaign schools and encourage other legislatures and advocacy groups to develop similar programs.

The importance of awareness campaigns on the parliamentary system and political process in schools is key to increasing youth engagement. The CWP will provide feedback on the program to the legislatures to encourage all parliaments to engage in outreach activities.

The CWP encouraged second-time candidates to run again in the upcoming elections and identified and encouraged NGOs and community groups that can provide support to female candidates.

The issue of family-friendly hours will be further explored at the CWP Steering Committee meeting for proposal to the legislatures.

Given the success of the first Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians Outreach Program, the CWP-Canada will continue its outreach activities throughout the country. In 2008, the program will take place in Nova Scotia.