Awaiting the Watershed: Women in Canada's Parliament

by Matthew K. Godwin

The Canadian House of Commons in 2009 included sixty-nine female Members of Parliament, (roughly 22% of the seats). Canada is ranked next to Mauritania in 48th place for the number of women in its national assembly in a Inter-Parliamentary Union study. Some countries have proven that states can raise the number of female legislators virtually overnight. This process of rapidly increasing female representation in only one election has been described as a "watershed". This paper will discuss the possibility of implementing viable policies to create a gender watershed in Canada. It discusses the philosophical and ethical questions related to women's representation, explores various determinants of women's election to office as put forward in the literature, and finally argues that if certain conditions hold a gender watershed is possible in Canada.

A watershed will almost certainly come in the form of a gender quota, which still raises ethical issues in Canada. For this reason, it is necessary to explore the issue of women's representation more broadly going back to the writings of one of the most influential thinkers about parliamentary government.

The Ethics and Philosophy of Representation

Writing in the second half of the 19th century, John Stuart Mill was a reformist who argued forcefully in his *Subjection of Women* for women to possess full and equal rights, and that it was their subjection to men that robbed the Britain of his day from growing into a more enlightened society. However, it is his treatise, *Considerations on Representative Government,* that better makes the argument that a truly democratic system must reflect the society and the electors that comprise it. Firstly, he accepts the Burkian argument that democratic systems must evolve slowly, but he adds that they must also change to be legitimate. He suggests that a legitimate government must be supported by the people symbolically, not simply through the act of voting. Truly representative governments must involve a conglomeration of all the best and most persuasive ideas. Finally, Mill argues that the interests of citizens may only be effectively represented if those citizens are represented in Parliament themselves.

Similar to arguments by Thomas Paine, Mill suggests that governments are the product of social circumstances at the time of the election. Those who win, and form government, do so because authority is vested in them by the electors and neither politicians nor philosophers, as he puts it, can alter this decision. However, he supplements this statement by offering that once this power is conferred through the granting of authority, alterations to the system may take place. Government, furthermore, is a creation of people, and thus it may be changed by people. It should never be a stagnant, moribund entity that can never be changed by the will of those who form it.

Mill argues that there are three pillars that support a government and the system by which it is formed. The first pillar is acceptance. People must accept the government and the authority that it represents if it is to be considered legitimate. A more modern concept that follows from Mill's belief that acceptance is fundamental to a strong government, is the concept of symbolic representation. For women to show support for a government or system, there is an argument that they must be represented effectively and equitably. Support for a

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government is contingent upon how many women are represented. In order to ensure that women support the system that elects their government, there must be a significant presence of female representatives.

Feminist scholars have often argued that women bring a unique perspective to public policy that is different from that that can be brought by a man. Pelletier and Tremblay's research suggests that having more female representatives infuses public policy with a perspective that enhances policy legitimacy because the legislative body is more representative of society as a whole.[1] Mill would concur with this perspective. He argues that the congruence of perspectives and ideas from all areas of society are essential to a democratic institution and that,

> The first element of good government, therefore, being the virtue and intelligence of the human beings composing the community, the most important form of excellence which any government can possess is to promote the virtue and intelligence of the government themselves."

Without an adequate representation of women in Parliament the full measure of society cannot be said to be reflected in public policy.[2]

Mill borrows from the ideas of David Hume, and calls into question the ability of Members of Parliament to make decisions for members of the populace who are poorly represented among their ranks. Mill uses the example of working-class labourers. On issues such as strikes, the Members will almost always side with the masters in the strike, rather than the workers, as labourers are poorly represented in the Parliament. It is the Members' inability to identify with underrepresented individuals that degrades Parliament's ability to empathize and thusly create public policies which are reflective of society. This concept of professional distance can also be applied to the issue of women in Parliament. In an assembly where so few women are represented, there is the possibility that Parliament will not be able to empathize effectively and make decisions with their best interests in mind.

Mill would argue that gender quotas are necessary because more women will make Parliament and its policies more legitimate. Canadians should not be afraid to change their system, as the absence of women is detrimental to public policy.

Socioeconomic, Political and Electoral Obstacles to Female Representation

Many scholars suggest there continues to be major barriers facing women who seek elected office. These can be grouped into three general areas: socio-economic determinants, political determinants and electoral determinants.

The most obvious socio-economic determinant is the role of women as the primary caregiver and child rearer. Many women have successfully combined political careers with family responsibilities but it is a tremendously difficult task and, not surprisingly, deters many women from entering politics during their child bearing years.

One possible way to mitigate this reality is by making Parliament more family-friendly. In Tasmania, for example, parliamentary sessions may no longer sit beyond 6pm in the evening as the government determined that this is not a family-friendly practice.[3]

Women in Canada are having far less children than they have had previously, and new electoral financing laws have created a more level playing field with respect to the resources required to win a nomination or a general campaign.[4] So while familial obligations may place certain constraints on women's aspirations for elected office, it should not be considered a serious or discriminatory impediment.

Other social indicators, such as university education and labour-force participation have been cited as important indicators for women's participation in electoral politics.[5] With respect to education, women are more likely to be interested in politics as their level of education rises. They are more likely to believe that their engagement in politics can have an effect on policy outcomes. While this correlation may hold, women's levels of education can hardly be considered a barrier to participation in Canada. According to Statistics Canada, 2,064,690 women have attained a university certificate, diploma or degree at a bachelor's level or above, compared with 1,921,060 men. With respect to labour-force participation, the 2006 Canadian Census data also reveals that the gap between women and men is relatively small, with men representing 9,020,595 of labour-force participants, and women representing 8,125,540 of labour-force participants. Of course, these labour-force statistics may not tell the whole story. Women may be less likely to attain the requisite leadership positions in professions that often lead to political careers, like law, business and academia. However, the research reveals that women are catching up to men in these areas as well, in what is known as the "pipeline" theory.

There are also some Political Determinants to Female Representation The media perception of female politicians, the traditional conception of leadership, and the

decline of the feminist movement are all germane variables that may or may not be impeding the election of more women to the Canadian House of Commons.

Bashevkin suggests that part of the explanation for women politicians' failure to attain prominent leadership roles and, more to the point, the lack of supply of women candidates, comes from societal perceptions of what constitutes leadership.[6] Traditional perceptions of leadership are shaped around an individual's ability to command, rather than to compromise. Visions of military leaders exhibiting "strength" and an unwillingness to compromise do no mesh with the perception that women are builders of consensus, who take a softer approach to leadership and problem-solving.

Interviews with female MPs suggest that women politicians do bring a more diplomatic style of leadership to the House of Commons that may improve its functionality. However, this quality is failing to help women meet the standards society continues to measure leadership by. Former two-time Liberal Party leadership candidate and long-time MP Sheila Copps alluded to these societal expectations in a recent article when speaking to the broader topic of women's roles in political and public life:

> How genteel we Canadian women are. Just like our burka-loving sisters in Afghanistan, we are expected to carry out our work quietly in the shadows, because that is our place in politics and in life. Heaven forbid we should be noticed, feted or written about.[7]

Bashevkin cites the media as a forum in which the above "inadequacies" of women's ability to lead are both complicated and exacerbated. For instance, female politicians are much more likely to be referenced in the media by their first names. For example: 'Alexa' for Alexa McDonough, former leader of the NDP, 'Belinda' for Belinda Stronach and Liberal Minister, former Conservative Party leadership contender, and the ubiquitous 'Hillary Clinton', the recent Democratic presidential candidate and present Secretary of State. This practice serves to belittle women's professional capacity as serious politicians. Further to this, both Sawer and Bashevkin deride the media for focusing an inordinate amount of attention on the appearance and sex lives of female politicians. Male politicians involved in sex scandals often seem unscathed by their unprofessional conduct. Conversely, women politicians whose sex lives become a matter of public attention are viewed far more critically by the media for their behaviour. Images of female leadership through the media seem skewed at best and sexist at worst. This may indeed suggest a serious determinant that negatively correlates with the election of female politicians.

More importantly however, while the voices of individual women are being analyzed over and over for being too shrill or too masculine, the collective voices of women, through the feminist movement, seem to have waned immensely in recent decades.

The South African feminist movement is an exceptional example of female political mobilization. National women's groups capitalized on the window of opportunity presented by the end of apartheid and the open discussions on constitutional and democratic reforms. Highly organized feminist groups, represented by the Women's National Coalition, exerted the pressure necessary to ensure that women's issues were prominent in the creation of South Africa's new constitution and democratic processes. They pushed for proportional representation and large multi-member districts that often favour women in elections. As a result, the first free election in South Africa also marked that country's gender watershed, returning 26% women to the elected assembly. This was a change of 23% from the pre-apartheid period.[8]

Canada's feminist movement however, has been in decline since the early nineties. The National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC) had been formed in response to the 1967 Royal Commission on the Status of Women. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s it was a powerful voice for women's equality, particularly during the constitutional deliberations of the early 1980s. The women's movement helped to foster cooperation between female MPs from various parties, and Canada experienced a highpoint of feminist influence. Since then however, division and internal fighting has marred the influence of the Canadian women's movement. The rise of the Conservative Party, which has stripped the Status of Women office of much of its financial resources and removed the word 'equality' from its mandate, has made the feminist movement even more ineffective.

The Harper Government, which had the lowest number of female candidates and representatives of all parties at eleven percent in the last election, has implemented policies that may make women less likely to seek office. The Child Tax Benefit, for example, encourages women to stay in the home, making it more difficult for them to build political capital, whereas the building of a national childcare strategy would allow for more mothers to take part in the political process and at an earlier stage in life. An unwillingness to put in place internal mechanisms to encourage more female

candidates has also served to undermine attempts at promoting women's participation at the electoral level.

Turning now to electoral determinants of women's political representation, gender quotas have often been analyzed in the literature through the prism of electoral systems and their effectiveness in getting more women elected. There is almost unanimous agreement among scholars who argue that countries espousing forms of proportional representation are far more likely to elect more women to their assemblies. Single Member Proportionality systems, or First Past the Post (FPTP) systems such as Canada's, are less likely to have as many female representatives in their assembly.

A primary reason for this is "contagion", which is the tendency for parties to be pressured to adopt a certain policy by virtue of other parties adopting that policy first. Matland compares Norway and Canada to measure the presence of contagion in a proportional representation system and a system espousing FPTP in relation to gender balance policies.[9] At the macro level (macrocontagion), Norway's parties have largely all adopted gender quotas after the Labour Party did so. As a result, Norway has been a world leader in the number of women representatives in its assembly. The ability for the public to compare candidate lists, and to determine whether they are gender-balanced or not, allowed for relatively rapid macrocontagion. This has resulted in one of the most gender-balanced systems in the world. With respect to Canada however, where candidates are chosen by riding associations at the local level, the effect of either macrocontagion or microcontagion (contagion at the district level), is far more muted.

As Matland argues however, contagion does exist. In 1993, when the NDP adopted a gender quota of 50%, the Liberal Party followed suit with a 25% quota. There have been some major gains at the party level. The NDP, for example, had 41% women in its caucus of twenty-nine MPs following the 2006 election. However, policies thus far have not returned the watershed results that have been seen in other jurisdictions, largely because the NDP returns so few MPs as compared to the larger parties.

Female candidates both benefit and are hindered by Canada's volatile FPTP system. Canadian women do benefit from the extraordinarily high rate of representative turnover for a FPTP system. This volatility has been even more dramatic in recent years, given the continuation of minority governments. Incumbency, which generally favours male candidates, is less an issue in Canada than it is in the United States, for example, where representatives of both the House of Representatives and the Senate often remain in their seats for long periods of time. Given that men were far more likely to be elected than women decades ago, the affect of having those same male candidates in office time and again presents a significant stumbling block for women who may have otherwise been contenders for those seats.

Mexico, which is a recent success story as a country electing dramatically more women, has taken direct action in limiting the influence that incumbency has on the election of men. It is one of the only countries in the world that prevents sitting representatives from seeking re-election following their term in office.[10]

Canada's FPTP system is far less generous, according to the literature, in its selection of candidates for elected office. Women are almost as likely as men to be elected as a representative in a non-incumbent riding. The challenge for women then, is their selection through the various parties' riding associations as the nominated candidate. Apart from the many variables discussed above which factor into the decision of a woman to run or not, there are structural challenges presented by candidate selection that continue to place significant barriers on the election of women.

Firstly, research suggests that women are less likely to be selected for candidacy as riding association members are considered to be more conservative in both right of centre and centrist parties. Particularly in Ireland and the United Kingdom, the former has returned a truly disconcerting number of women to its assembly despite espousing a variation of proportional representation. Whether this is a product of ideology, or of parties not willing to risk the nomination of a woman, women are at a candidate disadvantage depending on the conservative nature of the riding associations.

Secondly, Canada's FPTP system does not allow for multi-member districts. That is, there is only one possible winner in any one riding. District magnitude is an important determinant in the election of women to legislatures. With one of the few exceptions being Ireland, countries that have multi-member districts are much more likely to have a high female to male candidate ratio. In Matland's comparative analysis of Canada and Norway, he notes that the multi-member districts in Norway's system of proportional representation contribute to the election of female candidates as parties are encouraged to balance their tickets with at least a male and female candidate.

This idea of ticket-balancing is not foreign to Canadian political scientists. During dialogues for the new territory of Nunavut's representative government,

there was a provision that the system would involve the election of both a female and a male candidate for each seat.[11] Although the proposal was defeated in referenda, the concept is an interesting one and has led to further discussion around the potential for ticket-balancing in FPTP systems.

Political determinants of women's representation, such as the media and leadership expectations, are clearly playing a larger role in the election of more women to the House of Commons than are socioeconomic determinants like labour-force participation and degree of education. However, the greatest stumbling block for achieving Canada's watershed of electing significantly more women would seem to be its electoral system. Canada's FPTP system, particularly at the candidate level, is where women face the greatest challenge and where they are placed at an undue disadvantage.

Given that women are placed at a structural disadvantage by virtue of Canada's FPTP system, it is justifiable to implement gender quotas in Canada. The goal of this policy response would be to make the election of women fairer through inherently changing the way Members are chosen at the candidate level where women are experiencing an unfair disadvantage. Further to this, as it is clear that waiting for women to gradually obtain more seats is detrimentally affecting public policy, precipitating a watershed through gender quotas is both justified and desirable.

Creating a Gender Watershed in Canada

Both the United Kingdom and Mexico have recently experienced gender watersheds as a result of electoral changes.

Mexico's watershed took place following the 2003 election. The Chamber of Deputies went from having sixteen percent female representation to twenty-five percent in one election. Historically, female representation had increased by about four percent per decade under the undemocratic rule of the PRI. Despite being a mixed-member proportionality system, few women were benefiting from the closed-list proportional representation races, and far fewer at the district level FPTP races. As in Canada, much of the blame for this lay in the process of candidate selection, which had favoured men over women. After the gender quota law was passed in 2002, women had to be placed in winnable positions on party lists. One of every three seats must now be filled by a woman for the first nine places on each list of forty. The quota legislation is sound, unlike those in France; women must be placed in winnable positions and not on the bottom of the lists or simply as alternates. While women continue to face challenges in elections through the Mexican Chamber's FPTP system, women are making strides as a result of mandatory gender quotas during candidate selection for the proportional representation races.

The United Kingdom provides an even more relevant case for predicting a gender watershed in Canada. It possesses a FPTP electoral system that is almost identical to Canada's, even down to the candidate selection process, which is largely decentralized to the constituency level. The 1997 election of the Labour Party under the leadership of Tony Blair, was historic because it doubled female representation in the British House of Commons from sixty MPs to exactly one hundred and twenty of 646 seats. The watershed was brought about by an internal policy change in the Labour Party as it related to the selection of candidates. For the first time, the central party employed "All-Women-Shortlists" (AWS) in 50 percent of all vacant Labour-held seats and 50 percent of all winnable seats.[12] Despite a legal challenge on the basis that the policy is discriminatory, the practice remains in place. The centrist Liberal Democrats had nine women out of fifty-nine MPs before the 2010 recent election. The opposition Conservative Party had only eighteen female MPs out of 193, after the 2005 election.

It was the policy of one party in the United Kingdom's FPTP post system that effectively brought about the gender watershed in 1997. While a legislated gender quota has not been passed by the United Kingdom's House of Commons, the internal gender-balancing policies of the Labour Party have made all the difference. This will serve as a useful example for the analysis of Canada.

In Canada, the NDP has implemented gender-balance policies that go beyond softer approaches, such as training and financing female candidates, to the establishment of hard targets. Soon after, the Liberal Party adopted similar policies to promote the selection of female candidates at the riding level. In the 2008 federal election, 37% of Liberal candidates were female, which does represent a significant 11% increase from the 2006 election. In the 2008 election however, only 77 Liberal MPs were returned to the House of Commons, 24% of which were women.

While the NDP continues to have more female candidates, the source of the gender watershed will not come from the NDP, as they often have far fewer winnable ridings than either the Tories or the Liberals. The Conservatives, while they have a large number of

winnable ridings, have expressed little interest in the adoption of gender balance policies.

The gender watershed will most likely happen at the candidate selection level with the Liberal Party. This possibility is likely if two conditions hold. Firstly, the Liberal Party's gender balance policies must be viable and genuine. As with the Labour Party in the U.K. and in Mexico, a certain number of winnable ridings must be presented with either a dedicated all-women-shortlist, or ridings must be forced to undertake a rigourous candidate search that specifically targets women, with a quota of winnable ridings selected. Liberal Party officials could enforce the quota by reducing funding to target riding associations who do not elect a female candidate and, conversely, increase funding to riding associations that do elect a woman in a winnable riding. Secondly, the Liberal Party must elect more MPs. The 1997 watershed in Britain happened both as a result of the Labour Party's gender balance policies, but also because that election was a landslide for the party. While this point is far more unpredictable, the Liberal Party may at least implement the policy suggested in the first point which, if the Liberal Party wins a large majority, could precipitate Canada's watershed. The Party could have as its goal to select candidates in enough winnable ridings to propel the Canadian House of Commons to the sought after 30% target.

Conclusion

The representation of women in Canada's House of Commons continues to lag behind many industrial and post-industrial countries. While female representation has grown gradually with labour-force participation and educational attainment, scholars are unconvinced that the natural rate of growth is acceptable and, 'waiting it out' is having a negative impact on policies that would otherwise benefit from more female voices.

Artificially increasing the representation of women does allow for a genuine debate about what constitutes democratic practices. While there is little evidence to suggest that discrimination based on gender continues to be a challenge to women's election generally, the research argues convincingly that Canadian women are unfairly disadvantaged at the candidate selection level. Whether it is by virtue of a biased media, unrealistic leadership expectations or conservative riding association members unwilling to risk a woman candidate, Canadian women are facing undemocratic barriers at the candidate selection level.

These barriers are precluding what should be higher numbers of women representatives in the House of Commons. However, as has been shown by Mexico, the United Kingdom and other countries, dramatic improvements can be made. Whether increasing the number of women results in a more legitimate assembly or improves public policy, Canada can achieve greater numbers of women legislators if the will to do so is strong enough, and if political fortune prevails.

Notes

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