

An Interview with Canada's First Female Prime Minister: Kim Campbell

It took more than 75 years from the election of the first woman parliamentarian to the date when a woman parliamentarian became prime minister. Kim Campbell, who had brief tenure in the position in 1993, is also the only woman to hold the position so far. In this interview she reflects on her achievement, examines progress women have made since that time, and offers some ideas of what type of work is left to do as Canadians move towards gender equality in politics.

Interview with Rt. Hon. Kim Campbell



CPR: It's been almost 25 years since you served as prime minister, a historic moment for all Canadians, but especially for women parliamentarians. Can you take us back to what you were feeling at that time? And what were your colleagues and Canadians telling you about what this landmark moment meant to them?

KC: As you may remember, it was the end of a tumultuous second mandate for the Mulroney government with the failure of the Meech Lake Accord and the defection of Lucien Bouchard, the failure of the Charlottetown Accord...the implementation of the GST was a big constitutional battle. It was a tumultuous time and the prime minister decided very late in the second mandate that he was not going to continue.

At that time, more than half the caucus gathered around me, and I didn't feel I had an option but to run. Even as far back as when I was Minister of State of Indian Affairs, I would be out travelling the country and people would tell me: "When Mulroney goes, you're going to be our next leader." This was rather awkward as there was no leadership race and I certainly wasn't trying to create one.

When I decided to run for the leadership I knew that we had a fairly difficult challenge. Canadians do alternate their governments, we had been in power for two mandates, and we didn't have an issue to fend off the Reform Party as we had with free trade in '88. We also didn't know what to expect with the Bloc Québécois, though I had colleagues from Quebec who came into caucus saying: "The BQ just nominated a complete unknown to stand against me and they're already running ahead of me." The other thing was that we were all very tired. In the previous 12 months we had gone through a referendum campaign, a leadership campaign, and now we were entering a general election campaign. It was not an optimal time to run.

I suppose what kept us somewhat hopeful was the idea that Canadians may not support a regional party such as Reform (which wasn't running a full slate of candidates outside the West) or the Bloc Québécois (which only ran candidates in Quebec). Also, Gallup published a poll that summer in which I had the highest approval rating of any prime minister in 30 years. That caused a bit of a scare among some Liberals and others who thought, maybe Kim can pull the rabbit out of the hat.

There was also very little time. When I was sworn in on June 25 we were near the tail end of our mandate. As you know, if you don't hold an election within five years of the previous one the constitutional hook comes to pull you off the stage. It was clear I was going to have to call an election early in the fall.

But we weren't yet in election mode. And in terms of being a female candidate, that was also very significant. I think, around the world, people do like women when they are governing. However, campaign mode exaggerates traits that some people are less comfortable seeing in women – being forceful, being argumentative, being adversarial.

My concern was, being a woman, if we lost would that be a giant setback for other women? On the other

hand, there was an enormous amount of excitement in the summer of 1993. People were excited to have a woman prime minister. There was a sense among some people that we had beaten the Americans, that we had gotten there first. I still meet people – especially those who were young women at the time – who say that's what got them interested in politics. But it wasn't only women who were excited. I met a man on the day that I won the leadership who told me, with tears in his eyes, that this day was for his daughter. Parents could now say to their daughters, "you could be prime minister." It wasn't one of those things you'd sit around the dinner table and discuss anymore, like "Will we put a man on the moon?" You do it and then you don't wonder about it anymore. You change the conversation. To be the instrument of that is very rewarding and very exciting.

It was also interesting, running as a woman prime minister, to confront some things that were perplexing. And I was fortunate in my political retirement to have time to take up some of those issues by getting into this whole body of literature of cognitive and social psychology about gender barriers and implicit attitudes and why when people put words in your mouth you don't get the benefit of the doubt.

A Message To My Younger Self

Leela Aheer
MLA for Chestermere-Rocky View (Alberta)

Dear little one:

I am writing you this letter to help prepare you as you grow and find your place in this world. You are so lucky that you have food on the table, a comfortable house to live in and parents who have taught you the value of a dollar, and more importantly, the value of people. You are privileged. Did you know that? You do not want for anything, you are being educated, you live in a country where you can walk outside at night time, and play basketball in your front yard safely. You are a minority where you live, so you need to be kind, compassionate, thoughtful, and tough as nails.

You need to be fierce! Why? Because you are important. People will call you weak because you are kind. They will ask you to stop smiling because it makes them feel uncomfortable. Men will misunderstand that you hug people because you truly love them as family, not because you are seeking a sexual encounter. You will have to stand up for yourself to stay authentic, and more importantly to stand up for others who do not have your grit, or your strength. You will be a voice that will be heard, and that will represent so many who came before you and many who will come afterward.

This will be your path, and I am so proud of you!



People were and are uncomfortable with the idea of a woman prime minister. I think the press were some of the most uncomfortable – the people with the greatest cognitive dissonance – of having someone in a position who doesn't look or sound like anyone who had done it before.

It was interesting to experience this and then to spend time trying to understand it and sharing it with others.

CPR: Had you ever encountered those kinds of things before in your previous runs? I imagine as the first woman prime minister they would be magnified, but the barriers and assumptions you mentioned – were those things you had pick up on before?

KC: Not really. The first time I ran for school board I topped the polls for my party, and the next time out I topped them overall. I was the youngest person to be school board chair, but I wasn't the first woman to be school board chair. That was not something I think people had a gender bias against. And then, when I ran for a seat in the legislature, I was the top vote-getter in a two-member constituency, but the other person who was elected was also a woman. Although there weren't a lot of women in the legislature, I think in the city of Vancouver I didn't feel sexism in the same way. My main competitor in the federal riding was another woman, Johanna den Hertog, the NDP candidate.

When I was in cabinet, I occasionally noticed some pushback from male colleagues. But mostly not. I was the first woman minister of justice. I don't recall instances where people objected to that – there may have been, but I don't recall any. There may have been people who muttered that I only got the job because I was a woman, you always have some people who think that, but I didn't hear that. I was also the first woman defence minister. That was an interesting experience. But I think because the prime minister leads in the election, it is perhaps a greater contrast to be the first woman leader compared to some of the people who had done it in the past. You don't look or sound like anybody who has done that job before.

And as I said, I found the biggest challenge was the Ottawa Press Gallery. The people who cover politics all the time were the worst. Regional journalists were not so much of a problem. They weren't covering politics all the time, but they might want to know my views on rural depopulation, or the Wheat Board, or soft wood lumber. But the Ottawa Press Gallery really feels like they own the politics.

CPR: As the first woman prime minister you did get past these barriers. Yet in the almost 25 years that have passed, Canada has not had another woman prime minister. Why do you think this has been the case? Have we really broken through the barrier?

KC: I don't think we have. I put a dent in it. First of all, you have to become leader of a party that can form government. The Liberals have had several changes of leadership but no woman has really come close to it yet. I mean, they went out of the country to get Michael Ignatieff rather than trying to recruit a woman who might have done it. Justin Trudeau had the advantage of a famous name and an identifiable persona. In the most recent Conservative leadership race none of the women did all that well. I think you have to cultivate it. In fairness, Brian Mulroney gave me an opportunity to shine. I think the reason I had so much caucus support was from the work I'd done as justice minister on difficult issues where I had built good relationships with my colleagues. They trusted me even if they didn't agree with me.

Leaders have to create the farm team and cultivate that next group. We've never had a woman finance

A Message To My Younger Self

Maria Fitzpatrick
MLA for Lethbridge East
(Alberta)

On May 5, 2015 you will be elected to represent Lethbridge East in the NDP Government. You will speak out on domestic violence on Nov 16, 2015. It will be a turning point for women and, for some men. Thousands of affected persons will reach out to you.

All of the obstacles you have encountered will begin to be removed for women, albeit slowly. Demand to be treated with respect, demand to be valued for who you are and what you give back to society. Keep speaking out and fighting for women's equality. This will change the world!



minister. Of course, finance minister is not always the easiest path to the prime ministership because some very tough decisions have to be made, but it does create a certain gravitas. We've had three women foreign affairs ministers now and we've had women ministers of trade and transport. You need those kinds of heavy duty ministries to establish women as powerful and competent ministers. There needs to be a process. If the leader does not make that possible then it's hard for a woman to come totally from the outside and be a contender.

If leadership is gendered masculine, men are assumed to be leaders. Think of a female Kevin O'Leary. Would such a person be taken seriously? This notion that you could fly in from the outside would be very difficult I think. It's disappointing. But I think it demonstrates becoming leader of a governing party is harder than it looks and that women need the experience to show what they can do. Having a gender-balanced cabinet will help. It gives women the opportunity to develop that track record of competence and also to build that network of relationships with their colleagues to establish caucus support.

CPR: Numerous women have served as provincial or territorial premiers. At one point almost half the jurisdictions in Canada, including the three largest provinces, had women parliamentarians at the helm. Some commentators saw this as another breakthrough, yet currently only two of 13 Canadian jurisdictions have a woman premier. How would you characterize this kind of progression? And how far away do you believe we are from achieving gender balance among government leaders and parliamentarians in general?

KC: There are a couple of factors that play into that. The ability to fundraise is one factor. We don't have quite the money-intensive system that the Americans have, but that is sometimes a challenge. Then there's geography – it can be easier for women to serve locally or provincially if they have family connections and their husbands are not mobile. It had been that families went where the husband worked. That's changing. And when I was in cabinet, at least three of us women ministers didn't have husbands. I started out with a husband when in cabinet, but the marriage ended when I was there. But my husband had been willing to move to Ottawa. That's a challenge. Men are expected to go where the job is and their spouses are expected to either trail along or hold the fort at home. The geography is part of it.

But I think it's slowly changing. We don't have a tradition of premiers becoming prime minister in Canada. But seeing women on TV leading their provincial governments changes the landscape. It changes people's implicit idea of who gets to do that job. At first they may find it odd that a premier looks and sounds different from what they are used to, but eventually once they are used to it, it creates a greater acceptance. Even if these women aren't likely to make the move to federal politics, it creates the space for other women. It's the same with people like Angela Merkel; she has been leading Germany for so long and in many ways she is defying what a female leader needs to be. That's part of changing the landscape from which people derive their understanding of the way the world works. It's slow, but I think it's happening; there's no question about



Elizabeth May
MP for Saanich—Gulf Islands (British Columbia)

A Message To My Younger Self

I have aged, but I haven't changed. In my head, I am still my younger self. Not thinking of myself as having or wanting a career, I have always been committed to a better world. So, what would I say to my younger self?

Keep doing what your heart says is the right thing. Don't let the bullying of the powerful intimidate you. Stay strong and keep smiling. Do not focus on what you earn, but on how much you can accomplish. Try to be kind and remember that the people who annoy you today may be able to help you tomorrow. If you make your life "all about you," you offer nothing worth sharing. If you can surrender self to the greater good, your life will be enriched as you enrich the lives of all around you. Having more can never replace being more.

it. And, certainly, there are many conscious efforts of improving the number of women in parliament. For instance, we had that Daughters of the Vote event in Ottawa. It was interesting to look at those 338 women, some of whom were absolutely stoked to go on to a career in politics. I think we created a few monsters – in a nice way – there. *(Laughs)* The vision of seeing the House full of these women was quite something.

CPR: In this issue of the *Canadian Parliamentary Review* we have a roundtable discussion with Daughters of the Vote delegates. We also have a roundtable with several current and former women parliamentarians who have experienced intense social media bullying, harassment and threats based largely on their gender. Reading these discussions back to back gives you a sense of great hope for the future and also great despair for the current state of political discourse in our country. Based on your experience, how can parliamentarians and the Canadian public work towards ensuring future generations of women parliamentarians will not have to deal with this kind of misogyny to such an extent?

KC: We didn't have social media when I was in parliament. There may have been people gnashing their teeth, and we did get some letters. The problem with social media is that people can be anonymous. A lot of people will say things anonymously that may be a more vicious version of their actual attitude. We have seen that in Alberta, from where I'm speaking to you. Rachel Notley has received some threats. A woman running for the leadership of the provincial Tories dropped out because of sexism and taunting, etc.

But I think what we have to do is to develop strategies – and this does not only apply to women – to ignore those things. They should understand that these are cowardly people who hide behind anonymity. I never pay attention to people who Tweet or show up on my notifications if I can't identify them. People will sometimes say the anonymity is key for people in countries that may be targeted for their politics – well, yes, but those aren't the people Tweeting out vicious messages and things here.

I go through and clear out the bots in my account and I don't pay attention to the people who do not have the fortitude to identify themselves. I'm identified. If you want to say something to me, then identify yourself. I think those are the strategies people need to find. Unfortunately, young people on social media may not have those defence mechanisms.

CPR: Finally, reflecting on your career, I'd like you to think back to your 16-year old self running for student council president. Knowing what you know now about a life in politics that you didn't know then, what kind of words of advice, warning or encouragement would you give to your younger self to prepare her for what was to come?

KC: I've been asked that question before and I don't think it's possible to imagine your life where you don't make mistakes or do stupid things. Whatever I'd advise myself to do, if I didn't make those mistakes I'd make different ones. You have to make mistakes. You have to put your foot in your mouth. You have to learn from that. But, the two bits of advice I might give myself as I got older would be to pay attention to keeping my weight down and my languages up. *(Laughs)*

CPR: Is there anything I might have missed in this interview that you'd like to add?

KC: I think we are in a different time. Perhaps one of the reasons I didn't encounter so much sexism during my time in politics was that there were not so many of us. Sometimes people react more if they believe their world is changing than if there are just a few people

A Message To My Younger Self

Caroline Cochrane
MLA for Range Lake
(Northwest Territories)

You are stronger than you know. Persevere through all the trials and tribulations you will experience; you will come out better than okay in the end. Learn all that you can along the way and understand the priorities and mandates of the organizations and governments that you are working for and with. Forge strong relationships with your peers as they will be some of your greatest political supporters. One day, you will be a leader for women and provide a voice for them so work hard and never let anything stop you from achieving your dreams - you can do this!



who they are willing to accept as an exception. For instance, Margaret Thatcher. If she had run as the thin edge of a wedge of talented women, she probably wouldn't have gotten as far as she did. She regarded herself as exceptional, and as long as other people regarded her as exceptional, she wasn't threatening to the whole social order. It was just her, and people could then pat themselves on the back with how broad-minded they were for having a woman leader. Once you start getting different numbers, you start getting a different kind of reaction.

I think with respect to the misogyny, one of the many troubling things I find about Donald Trump is how he's part of a phenomenon that's breaking down standards of civil discourse and giving people permission to express themselves in the most hateful

ways, whether it's about gender or race or whatever. It's framed as this attack on political correctness. But I think political correctness is really the notion that you can't make hateful comments towards people. Those comments can become the basis for real discrimination and real exclusion. I mean, the idea you can make sexist comments and not undermine the ability of a woman to be taken seriously is preposterous. Casual racism in humour. Casual sexism in humour. Casual anti-Semitism in humour. We recognize that these are hateful and harmful. It's not just that they're rude or politically incorrect, they actually undermine people's ability to be fully-fledged citizens. It worries me to see a reversion to standards that I thought we had abandoned. I think, as with everything we gain in society, that the cost of liberty is eternal vigilance.

On one hand, this pushback may be a reflection of the fact that more women are there. It's unquestionable that women have made some great gains. But the combination of social media and bad leaders willing to break the social norms, means we can't take those achievements for granted. They have to be protected.

On the other hand, and I really mean this sincerely, a very important part of the advancement of women and the gains that women have made over the past decades has been the role played by enlightened men. A lot of men really do get it. They get it when they see their daughters, whom they may consider clever and able, start encountering barriers. They see it with people they work with. And even thinking to a prime minister appointing women to cabinet... at one level it may be good politics. But on another level, as you do it and as you work with capable women, you develop a much stronger confidence. Most women who have accomplished a lot can point to men who they've worked with who have been willing to share their power, to use their power to advance them and to give them an opportunity. By doing that, by increasing the number of women who have been able to gain stature, it allows these women to help other women. At a time, when women were only admitted on sufferance, and only when they were seen as individual exceptions, it was hard for women to help other women. If you have tokenism, then women are all competing with one another. I think you have a much greater solidarity among women now. As we really make these gains, it allows women the opportunity to share their individual gains with others and to encourage them.

I always say it's not men against women. It's men and women who get it, working together to persuade men and women who don't.



A Message To My Younger Self

Cindy Lamoureux
MLA for Burrows
(Manitoba)

Dear former Cindy from future Cindy,

You can do this. Every day remind yourself that people are inherently good and in this job you have the opportunity to change lives for the better. Don't be discouraged by negativity, bad articles and feeling pushed outside of your comfort zone. Stay determined, remain honest, and always fight for your constituents.

Politics has many highs and lows, but as long as you surround yourself with good people, you take care of yourself and you don't take anything for granted, you will be okay.

Don't ever let people make you feel small because of your age or marital status.

Be determined.

"Though she may be but little, she is fierce." – Shakespeare