

# One Hundred Years and Counting: The State of Women in Politics in Canada

In the 100 years since voters in Alberta elected the first woman parliamentarian in the country – and the entire Commonwealth – women have made great strides in building their ranks in assemblies across the country. Progress has been slow and uneven, however, and there are risks of backsliding. In this article, the author surveys the recent history and current state of women elected to parliaments in Canada and urges Canadians to continue work towards full equality in our representation.

**Grace Alexandra Lore**

One hundred years ago Louise McKinney was elected to the Alberta provincial Legislature; the start of a long journey towards women's full political equality. It's been less than 30 years since the first First Nations (Ethel Blondin-Andrew, 1988) and black woman (Jean Augustine, 1993) took a seat in the House of Commons, and less than 20 years since the first openly gay woman (Libby Davis, 1997), the first South Asian women (Yasmin Ratansi, Nina Grewal, and Ruby Dhalla in 2004), and the first woman to serve at all three levels of government (Elinor Caplan, 1997) were elected to Parliament.

The journey towards full equality is ongoing – women comprise just more than one-in-four elected officials, from city councillors, to mayors, to provincial, territorial, and federal legislators.<sup>1</sup> One hundred years later, it is worth taking stock of where we are.

## Women in Legislatures – Provincial, Territorial, and Federal

The journey towards equality in political representation and participation has been long, slow and uneven in its progression. At the federal level, Canada ranks 62<sup>nd</sup> internationally with women making up just 27 per cent of Members of Parliament.<sup>2</sup> Just five years ago, after the 2011 election, Canada ranked 41<sup>st</sup> internationally and ahead of countries like France, the United Kingdom, and Australia; now it lags behind them.

*Grace Alexandra Lore is a researcher with Equal Voice Canada. She holds a PhD in political science from UBC.*

There is significant variation in representation across the provinces and territories. In British Columbia, 39 per cent of MLAs elected in the 2017 election are women. Although this represents a new all-time high in a legislature in Canada, the representation of women increased by just one per cent over the previous legislature.

British Columbia is followed closely by the Yukon (37 per cent), Ontario (35 per cent), and Alberta, (33 per cent). It's not a coincidence that the top three provinces

## A Message To My Younger Self

**Janet Routledge**  
MLA for Burnaby North  
(British Columbia)

Women tend to wait to be invited into positions of power and influence.

Don't do that.

You will miss out on many opportunities to make the world a better place and the world will miss out on what you have to contribute.

Speak up. Let them know you are there.



in terms of women's representation all have women premiers at the helm (at least at the time of writing, in the case of British Columbia). In the most recent election, Nova Scotia also made strides by increasing its percentage of women parliamentarians by four points. At 29 per cent, nearly one-third of the province's MLAs are now women.

Women are the least well represented in Nunavut (nine per cent) and the Northwest Territories (11 per cent), but some of the Atlantic provinces are not doing that much better – just 19 per cent of MLAs in Prince Edward Island and only 16 per cent of MLAs in New Brunswick are women.

### **Women in the Executive – First Ministers and Cabinet**

In 2013, six women served as leader of their respective province or territory. From Eva Aariak to Kathleen Wynne, women in Nunavut, British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario, Quebec, and Newfoundland and Labrador rose to the post of First Minister. Four of them, Wynne, Christy Clark, Allison Redford, and Kathy Dunderdale in Newfoundland and Labrador, like women before them (think Rita Johnson, Catherine Callbeck, and Kim Campbell), became premier by winning a leadership race, not a general election. At the time, some observers thought the rise of these women was evidence of the progress made towards gender equality in Canadian

politics. Others were less optimistic and raised concerns about the 'glass cliff' – the idea that it is only when governments and parties are in trouble that unconventional candidates, particularly women, are likely to ascend to power.

Both narratives are too simplistic. Wynne, Redford, and Clark all led their parties to surprising victories. But before the middle of 2014 all but Wynne and Clark had resigned, been pushed out, or lost a re-election bid. With the election of Premier Rachel Notley in Alberta in 2015 and the defeat of Christy Clark in BC by a vote of non-confidence, the number of women premiers currently sits at two.

Optimistically, however, women do hold a higher proportion of cabinet positions across the country (36 per cent) than seats in Canada's federal, provincial and territorial legislatures. Perhaps this is not so surprising given the intentional efforts of the NDP government in Alberta and British Columbia and the federal Liberal government to appoint gender balanced executives, despite no legislature in the country having 50 per cent women members. At the same time, there are six jurisdictions where women make up more than four-in-ten around the cabinet table (Ontario, Yukon, and Quebec). Although well below the 40 per cent mark, women in Manitoba are better represented in cabinet (31 per cent) than they are in the Legislative Assembly

## **A Message To My Younger Self**



**Candice Bergen**  
MP for Portage-Lisgar (Manitoba)

Don't doubt that your thoughts and opinions are important and valuable. That still small voice inside of you is actually bang on most of the time. Trust yourself. The fact that you think differently than a lot of your peers is a strength to be embraced, and not a reason to hold yourself back.

At the same time, don't be hard on yourself for being a little hesitant. A lot of your concerns are reasonable ones, and you shouldn't be embarrassed for having them. Caution is a good thing, and counting the cost of the decisions you make is going to serve you well.

Most importantly, don't measure your ability to lead by your grades, your popularity, or accolades. Your leadership is evident by your loyalty to your friends, family and community, your courage to do what is right, and your willingness to stand up to people more powerful than you.

Oh, and one more thing... your curiosity is a really good part of who you are. Being genuinely interested in people; who they are, their lives and their stories, will serve you very well as you go on to become a Member of Parliament, serving your constituents and Canadians.

(23 per cent). In Saskatchewan, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland and Labrador, the Northwest Territories and Nunavut women do about as well, or slightly worse, in cabinet as they do in the Legislature.

Notably, many individual women hold important, high profile posts including MP Chrystia Freeland, who serves as Foreign Affairs Minister, and provincial MLA Cathy Rogers in New Brunswick and MLA Carole James in British Columbia, both of whom serve as Ministers of Finance. Several women hold the Justice portfolio, including Heather Stefanson (Manitoba), Stéphanie Vallée (Quebec), and Jody-Wilson Raybold (federal government).

### Diversity among Women

At least in the House of Commons, women in politics are a more diverse group than their male colleagues. Nearly 23 per cent of women in the current Parliament are visible minorities, while the same is true of only 16 per cent of men. Moreover, women are better represented among Indigenous MPs than they are among non-Indigenous MPs (30 per cent are women). But both minority women and Indigenous women are underrepresented. After doubling from four per cent to eight per cent between 1993 and 2004,<sup>3</sup> minority women's representation now sits at about 6 per cent,<sup>4</sup> and Indigenous women make up less than one percent of all MPs.

The road since the election of McKinney has been long and exciting, but it has been far too slow. In March of this year, Equal Voice embarked upon a historic and ambitious initiative, Daughters of the Vote. Through this initiative, Equal Voice brought 338 young, dynamic, and diverse women to Ottawa to fill the House of Commons on International Women's Day. There were more women taking their seats in the House on that day than have been elected federally in the entirety of Canada's democratic history.

At the current pace, it will be more than 90 years before women are represented in equal numbers as men in the House of Commons. It will be sooner in some provinces if progress is maintained, but it will be much longer in others. The proportion of women in Prince Edward Island has been decreasing over the last three elections and if this continues, women's representation will be closer to zero than 50 percent in the next 20 years.

On the occasion of this centennial, there is much to celebrate in terms of women's participation in and

contribution to politics. But there remains much to be done so that equality of representation is a dream for the Daughters of the Vote and not just for their great granddaughters.

### Notes

- 1 This does not include school boards, park boards, or band councils.
- 2 All international statistics are from the Interparliamentary Union - <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/arc/classif011216.htm>
- 3 Young (2013) in *Stalled: The Representation of Women in Canadian Governments*.
- 4 Statistics Canada (2016) <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/99-010-x/2011001/tbl/tbl2-eng.cfm>. Note that the representation of visible minorities was determined by a visual assessment of pictures from the House of Commons website. MPs who self-described as First Nations, Inuit, or Metis were counted as indigenous.

## A Message To My Younger Self

**Linda Lapointe**  
MP for Rivière-des-Mille-Îles (Quebec)

Patience, patience, patience. Even if life is always moving at 100 km/h, take time to reflect on things on a regular basis. Things don't always happen as quickly as we would like, but good work does bring rewards.

Stay true to yourself, be persistent and strong, and still be feminine. Being a woman in politics can be difficult sometimes, but remember that the effort you put in and the pitfalls you overcome are giant leaps forward for the next generation of young, ambitious women. You will be a successful role model for them. Also, remember that we have two ears and one mouth. Use them well and in that ratio! The old adage is true: speech is silver, but silence is golden.

In short, abilities are one thing, but attitude is what sets people apart. Be positive, smile, have fun and work hard. That's the key!

