

# Female politicians push to make Parliament more family-friendly

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Cabinet minister Karina Gould is back at work after 10-week maternity leave

**Source:** CBC Radio One, The Current

**Format:** Article

**Publication Date:** 21 May 2018

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The first Canadian federal cabinet minister to ever take maternity leave is returning to work Tuesday with baby in tow, joining the chorus of women in politics pushing for a more family-friendly Parliament.

"I believe so strongly that women should have that year, that 18-month maternity leave and to be able to share it with a partner, and to make sure that we're creating structures and spaces that work for the realities of families," federal Minister of Democratic Institutions Karina Gould told The Current's Anna Maria Tremonti.

Gould's stance might seem like a contradiction, given that she only took 10 weeks leave.

"I wouldn't feel comfortable taking a full year as an elected representative," she said.

But she argued that every woman should have the choice to make a decision that works best for their family.

Gould will be bringing her son to work and has accommodated what he needs in both her Ottawa and Burlington, Ont. office.

[Video clip available to view online, "Gould brings infant son Oliver to cabinet meeting"]

Members of parliament and cabinet ministers in Canada do not officially qualify for parental leave because they don't pay into Employment Insurance. If an MP wants to take time beyond the 21 days of medical leave, she must work out an arrangement with the party leadership.

## Child care on the Hill

"Right now the way it's set up, women in politics don't have a choice. I mean we don't have a clear parental leave policy and we don't have access to infant care," said Niki Ashton, MP for Churchill-Keewatinook Aski. Ashton ran for the NDP leadership in 2017, while she was expecting twins.

"I breastfed while voting a number of times," Ashton said. "I didn't do it because I wanted to prove something, I did it because I had to."

In 1987, Sheila Copps was the first Canadian MP to give birth while in office. She held several senior cabinet posts including Deputy Prime Minister under Jean Chrétien's Liberals.

"I brought my daughter with me everywhere and all of the gaggle was more concerned about why wasn't I home with my daughter as opposed to pursuing other ambitions," Copps told Tremonti.

She echoed the need for better infant care on the Hill. There are currently services available for young children, as long as they're toilet-trained.

"If we had childcare on the Hill at 0, from the time a child was born it would certainly send a signal to the country that we're looking at really integrated care and I think could be great for the kids," Copps said.

Things may be different now, Copps said, but argued the age from 0 to three is critical for women in politics who come back to work.

"That's the really fragile time for a politician to try and balance all these responsibilities," she said.

## Negative superhero message

Freelance journalist and working mom Jen Gerson wants women to have choices, too. But she worries that women in politics are currently being forced to confront a challenging message: to have it all, you also have to do it all.

"The only way that they can continue to balance career and motherhood is if they take on heroic levels of individual sacrifice," Gerson said.

"All of the pressure goes on them as individuals and there is no pressure put on society as a whole to create the structures that we need to

compete equally in the workplace."

She argued that this message plays into the "unrealistic conversation about what postpartum recovery looks like."

Gould, who says she's "certainly not a superwoman," said that going back to work on Parliament Hill was the right decision for her.

She agreed with Gerson, adding that proper structures need to be created for women in politics — structures that value what it means to give birth and take care of an infant.

"At the same time, trying not to judge anyone who makes different choices because people are making the choices that are hopefully right for them and for their family," said Gould.

**Related link:** The second time around, Karina Gould's maternity plans are much different [3]

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