

Lack of women real deficit [CA]^[1]

Opinion

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EXCERPTS

After this next election, there will be even fewer women elected than before.

Women didn't exactly storm the barricades of the all-male House of Commons after they won the vote on May 24, 1918. In fact, some women didn't exercise their vote at all. Too unlady-like, it seems.

But with the second wave of the women's movement in the 1960s and '70s there was a new impetus. Why, we asked, did we lag so far behind European nations who had 25 per cent or more women in parliament against Canada's 11 per cent? (We also realized that countries with more women MPs usually had better child care, maternity leave, equality in pay and smaller numbers of women living in poverty.)

In the 1970s, we launched Women for Political Action. We held workshops, coached women on how to lobby governments, give speeches, and win nominations. We even started a short-lived Women's Party and ran two candidates - unsuccessfully. In the 1980s and 1990s another organization, The Committee of '94, held more conferences, workshops, and raised even more money to help women candidates. The objective: Half the House of Commons made up of women by 1994. When 1994 came and went with little change, the committee disbanded.

Undaunted, for the past three years Equal Voice, backed by more than 40 women's organizations, has been pressuring political parties to run more women. The parties assured us they would. The results are now trickling in.

After this next election there will be even fewer women elected than before. Today, most European countries have anywhere from 33 per cent to almost half women in their parliaments while we are stuck at 21 per cent - and it's going down.

Why are we marching backward in spite of all our efforts? According to the latest stats, Canada now ranks 39th among more than 70 democracies in number of women in parliament. And it's little consolation to realize that the U.K. at 47th and the U.S. at 57th are worse.

Is it just a coincidence that the three major English-speaking democracies - supposedly leaders in the world - lag so far behind most other countries?

The answer is yes. All three use our antique first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system. All other modern democracies changed to some form of proportional representation decades ago. And the figures speak for themselves. When New Zealand, Scotland and Wales changed to P.R., the number of women shot up dramatically.

Under FPTP, women lose out in nomination races, especially if the seat is winnable. Women also find it hard to raise money against men with better financial connections.

What is P.R.?

It simply means every vote counts and counts equally. Under P.R., if a party gets 40 per cent of the vote, it gets 40 per cent of the seats. Under our system, a party can win huge majorities with 40 per cent or less of the vote and end up with 57 per cent or more of the seats. Parties that get fewer votes are penalized with far fewer seats than they get in votes.

Under FPTP, your vote doesn't even count unless your candidate wins.

P.R. works better for women because, instead of slugging it out with men for the best ridings, each party has to produce a list of candidates that is used to top up the number of seats won.

The only good news in this coming federal election is that six provinces are now seriously considering changing their electoral system. As well, the Law Commission of Canada has strongly recommended that we change to some form of P.R.

Until we do, Canadian women will continue decade after decade trying to push the rock of change up the steep hill of our unfair electoral system for the next century.

* Doris Anderson is president of Fair Vote Canada and a former columnist at the Star.

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