

# Analysis: More woman trouble for Stephen Harper and his cabinet <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

It isn't easy to be a female cabinet minister in Prime Minister Stephen Harper's government.

Just ask Helena Guergis, ousted as minister of state for the status of women on Friday, and also ejected from the Conservative caucus - a particularly severe form of punishment, unused to date against a Harper cabinet minister.

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Even the quietly competent and experienced Diane Ablonczy, relegated seemingly forever to junior status within Harper's cabinet, has been tagged as troublesome - losing her right to announce tourism programs last summer after she posed for pictures with drag queens while handing over funds to Toronto's Gay Pride parade.

Trouble, when it comes to Harper's government, often appears to come in female form, whether it's the promotion of women who disappoint, or the harsh discipline of strong performers who err.

Maxime Bernier lost his job as foreign affairs minister in 2008 because of his attachment to Julie Couillard, an ex-girlfriend with alleged ties to biker gangs in Quebec.

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Harper's Conservatives have long been wrestling with suggestions that they are female-unfriendly. Belinda Stronach's explosive defection from the Conservatives to the Liberal cabinet in 2005 may have been an early warning that this leader would have trouble with prominent females in his circle.

The recent political storm over the place of family planning and abortion in promoting maternal health - prompting a rare public reproach from U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton - only further sealed an impression that the Harper government is more preoccupied with hockey and winding down the gun registry than appealing to women and their concerns.

Among parties in Parliament, the Conservatives have the smallest percentage of women in their caucus - just 16 per cent - but Harper has made sure women are overrepresented in cabinet, filling 27 per cent of the ministers' positions with women from that small pool.

Yet apart from Human Resources Minister Diane Finley, women are not in charge of the departments the Conservative government considers a priority, getting shuffled instead around the second-rung posts,

junior ministries or ministries of state.

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The Conservatives' decisions to abandon a national child-care program, as well as cutting advocacy dollars to women's organizations and the equality mandate of status of women, has not helped any minister in that post build strong constituencies of support across Canada.

There was no discernible outcry from women's groups on Friday, for instance, about Guergis's departure. It's doubtful that she'll be missed. Just last month, while she was at the United Nations boasting of progress Canada had made on women's issues, strong women's advocates in Canada were sending withering, dissenting reports to the UN to undercut her message.

On Friday, the New Democrats' critic on women's issues, Irene Mathysen, issued a news release to argue that the Guergis "fiasco" is proof of the Conservatives' lack of commitment to women.

"This government has proven through its actions, time and again, that women in Canada simply do not matter," says Mathysen. She argues that by giving the status of women job to Ambrose, it has been further downgraded to a part-time concern.

"We need a competent, capable, dedicated minister responsible for the status of women; not a junior minister and not 'postscript' in someone else's portfolio."

-reprinted from the Toronto Star

**Region:** Canada <sup>[2]</sup>

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