

Debate on women's issues not a question of political convenience ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The last national leaders' debate on women's issues was the only national leaders debate on women's issues in Canadian history.

It was held in 1984. You can watch in all on the CBC archives - two hours of young women panelists grilling the three male party leaders on a podium shrouded in mustard-yellow.

Some 2,000 women who packed the audience of the Royal York Hotel room that day - big glasses, short hair, shiny idealism.

This was the first time the men vying for the job of prime minister had taken the time to deliberate, let alone address, issues traditionally considered feminine and therefore peripheral.

"This marks the creation of a new tradition," National Action Committee on the Status of Women President Chaviva Hosek said in her introduction to the televised debate, "a tradition that now takes its natural place in the political process of Canada."

That didn't happen. There were a handful of other national debates on women's issues, but never with the political leaders. They sent their representatives, and women's issues slid back under the rock of political neglect.

A broad group of organizations have decided it's time for a rematch. They are calling their campaign, "Up For Debate."

"During the last leaders debate, the word 'women' was only mentioned 12 times - and four of those were the phrase 'our men and women in uniform'," says Kate McInturff, a senior researcher at the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. "We want to provoke a conversation."

The list of supporting organizations stretches well past 100, and reflects the wide interests of Canadian women, from rape crisis centres to labour unions, international development organizations to child care advocates.

They've outlined three areas they'd like addressed during the debate: violence against women and girls; women's economic inequality, and women's leadership, where they want the government to re-invest in advocacy.

So far, only two party leaders have committed - the NDP's Thomas Mulcair and Elizabeth May from the Green Party. Not surprisingly, Prime Minister Stephen Harper has not.

Why would he willingly enter a game he can only lose? His government cut funding to women's advocacy groups first before siccing its auditors on development and environmental groups they deemed too political. At the same time, his Status of Women Minister took the word "equality" out of the program's mandate.

In Harper's mind, there is nothing to debate. The only women's issues that warrant our attention - and money - are far away, in distant places like Afghanistan.

"Harper is doing all he can to push terrorism to the top of the agenda," says Caroline Andrew, director of the University of Ottawa's Centre on Governance who moderated that debate 30 years ago. "There are lot of issues this election that are crucially important, and they impact women."

Watching the debate online, I was struck by two things. The first was how much has changed. The leaders spent a long time lamenting how hard it was for women to get bank loans. John Turner, who would lose his brief job as prime minister on voting day, stood by his government's decision to not expand abortion rights to all women. (At the time, the law permitted only 'therapeutic' abortions when a committee of doctors considered the pregnant woman's well-being at risk.)

The second was how little has changed. The women then made 60 cents, on average, on a man's dollar. Today it's 72 cents. The women then demanded child care. Ditto today. The women then asked about the unequal treatment of native women, who lost their Indian status when they married non-natives. Today, we question the treatment that costs them their lives.

Andrew points out that 500,000 more women than men voted last election. We might not agree on everything. But surely, we can agree that our concerns - and our lives - be considered.

"What the debate did do was legitimize that these issues were worth talking about," says Hosek, now a professor at the University of Toronto's School of Public Policy and Governance.

She points out, too, that the debate was born from the labour of 500 groups that made up the National Action Council on the Status of Women back then. It has long since dissolved, along with the organized feminist movement in Canada.

I'm hoping this new alliance jells to take its place - to push change not just during elections, but between them.

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