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EXCLUSIVE

A woman's place is in the House; But MP Carolyn Bennett, past-chair of the federal Liberal women's caucus, says it'll take a radical change to get more women in Parliament

Mp Dr. **Carolyn Bennett**

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I have to confess I think women are different -- and not a special interest group. I believe they think differently, prefer consensus over adversarial relations and tend to make decisions in an inclusive way. They even ask for directions.

For these reasons, I believe the current representation of women in Parliament at 21 per cent is not good enough.

It's not just about equity. It's because including more women in public life will generate different and, I submit, better results.

When I entered medical school in 1970, women were 20 per cent of the class. Now they are more than half.

But the gender makeup of the House of Commons in 2002 resembles my med school class of 30 years ago. While the structural barriers to women entering medical school have been removed, they still exist in politics.

Two weeks ago, I participated in a debate at Hart House at the University of Toronto. It was ironic that when I was at U of T, women still weren't allowed in Hart House.

Now we were debating the statement: "This House believes that a men's Parliament is not a people's Parliament."

The North American debating champions maintained that without a "critical mass" of 30 per cent, it is impossible for women to have an effective voice and impact. It was impressive.

The debate reminded me of Nellie McClung, the Ontario-born activist and member of the Famous 5 group of suffragist Canadian women in the early 1900s.

In 1914, McClung and other women packed a Winnipeg theatre to debate whether men should be given the vote -- at a time when women did not have the vote in Canada.

I remarked at the Hart House debate that if in 1914 we had had a Parliament dominated by women and operated by consensus and inclusive decision-making, why would we have

been keen on inviting men in greater numbers to bring their adversarial, locker-room "gotcha!" approach into a system that was working extremely well?

That hypothetical dilemma is being played out for real today in the forced merger of Toronto's Women's College Hospital with the former military hospital at Sunnybrook. In the lobby of Women's Hospital there is a statue, named Woman, which is inscribed with the Latin words "Non quo sed quo modo" (It is not what we do but how). This speaks to the importance the hospital founders placed on a different way of delivering health care. It put the patient at the centre, and listened and adapted to her needs.

That's what we want for Parliament. We envision a future where Parliament is viewed as relevant and responsive. Where parliamentarians are seen to be listening. Where committees are prepared to ask Canadians for direction and then reflect their wisdom in good reports that make good legislation. Where Parliament is no longer viewed as an obstacle by the bureaucracy. Where question period doesn't make teachers wish they hadn't brought their classes to pick up bad habits.

Ursula Franklin tells a story that best explains the real advantages of inclusive decision-making. She tells of being asked to a professional development day devoted to identifying children at risk. Teachers wanted to exclude support staff, but she insisted they be there.

In the first half hour, the janitor told of children from abusive homes who were at the school's door when he opened it at 7 a.m. Later the cook talked about children who were so hungry, they'd offer to clear plates at lunch so they could eat the scraps.

The teachers were impressed by how much information and insight the other staff had to offer. They ended up with a much better outcome because all were included.

In Parliament we have a few good examples of inclusive processes. Finance Minister Paul Martin's pre-budget consultation process has resulted in many good ideas being harvested from the trenches and a series of extremely well-received budgets.

It may be that listening to his wonderfully enlightened executive assistant Teri O'Leary helped Martin depart from the old style of budget-making and elite accommodation. Although it could also be that Martin is in touch with his feminine side or he was merely implementing consensus and collaborative techniques now taught in every MBA school.

The Supreme Court of Canada Chief Justice Beverly McLachlin has said her job is made for a woman. The chief justice has no extra power than any other member of the court -- just more administrative responsibilities. Everything must be achieved by consensus -- a truly horizontal rather than hierarchical model. Who would have imagined the Supreme Court could be so prescient about effective decision-making principles?

Scientists have finally resolved the nature versus nurture debate between the sexes. We are biologically different in every cell and every organ. There is also new neuroscientific evidence that women use more of their brains in making decisions. Women will generally consider all possible outcomes to all people potentially affected by decisions.

This difference in female brain activity can now be visualized in imaging techniques that allow comparison with the smaller focus of activity in the male brain confronted with the same decision.

We know it means girls don't put their hands up in math class until they think they have the right answer. The boys are much more prepared to raise their hands and take the risk the right answer will come to them by the time the teacher gets to them. We also know that even if boys get only half the answers right, girls have interpreted these experiences as proof they're not very good at math.

Observers have noticed a parallel phenomenon in Parliament: that women don't often speak unless they have something to say. They balk at the prospect of reading a prepared speech from government departments or just speaking off the top of their heads on something they know nothing about.

Having said this, I hasten to add that some of my favourite champions of women's issues are men. Irwin Cotler, MP for Mount Royal in Montreal, has been a truly effective voice for the women's caucus and a crusader for human rights long before he was elected to Parliament.

This argument is not about chromosomes. The "sperms with perms" like Margaret Thatcher have not helped the cause of women in politics. The former British prime minister did not put one woman in her cabinet and operated in the traditional male model.

Business leaders like Maureen Kempston Darkes, the General Motors Corporation Group vice-president and president of GM's operations in Latin America, Africa and the Middle East, have found it invaluable to work with a women's committee to help them improve the market share of female buyers and move women up through the organization.

It's the same in politics. The Liberal women's caucus has virtually the same mandate -- to make sure our policies reflect the needs of women and their families as well as to ensure women are fairly represented in leadership. That last one got me into a little trouble.

Most women enter politics to try to influence public policy, not for the tactics or the power. Some see women in politics as less likely to be swayed by the "wet finger in the air" judgments based on public opinion or on the demands of staying and playing in politics.

This difference was evident after the Toronto mayoral election between Barbara Hall and Mel Lastman. I worked on Hall's campaign, and when I returned to Parliament Hill, there were two distinct reactions. The policy people (men and women) wanted to know what would happen to Toronto and whether Lastman would be a disaster. The other group (men only) congratulated me for my great "media success" when I introduced Hall for her concession speech on all the TV channels.

If it's so obvious that we need more women in Parliament, why hasn't it happened? In 1991 the Lortie Commission on electoral reform posed two explanations -- money and the nomination process. Last year, in our informal post-election survey of women who ran for a nomination, we found those two reasons have now become entwined.

Most women did not feel they had as much trouble raising money once they were chosen as candidate. However, raising money to run for a nomination was extremely difficult.

The current controversy about the Liberal membership rules is about trying to find a balance between an open party and a party open to abuse by groups with lots of money that can buy memberships for meetings, rent buses and pack halls and prevent the often superior (and often female) candidate from winning the nomination.

Since the last election, there has been a reunion of the fantastic women's group named the Committee for '94, an all-party group that worked for years toward the goal of having women make up half the House of Commons by 1994. The stall -- at 21 per cent -- after the 2000 election has galvanized these women, led by pollster Donna Dasko and journalist Rosemary Speirs, to reorganize themselves as the group Equal Voice and to strategize the next steps to their original goal.

It seems clear to them that the present first-past-the-post system will forever be a challenge to women. Internationally, only the countries with a mixed or proportional system have been able to get beyond the critical mass of 33 per cent.

Activists like Doris Anderson, former editor of *Chatelaine*, have gone even further by becoming involved in Fair Vote Canada, an organization dedicated to insisting on a referendum on changing the electoral system.

It's clear that electoral reform would not be enough. We need to be working hard on parliamentary reform, party reform and an improved respect for the work that parliamentarians do in their communities -- democracy between elections.

I listen to the girls in the Grade 5 classrooms in my riding, the young women in the Grade 10 civics classes and the senior high school students in our Women in Politics day, and I am optimistic. They want to make a difference and help build a system that will enable, in Ursula Franklin's words, a system that is fair, transparent and takes people seriously.

We need these bright young women to want to get out to vote and one day consider running for public office. It is, indeed, the best job in the world.

We have a challenge to make sure they can get their names on a ballot.

Dr. Carolyn Bennett is a family doctor, MP for the mid-Toronto riding of St. Paul's and the past chair of the federal Liberal women's caucus.

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Photo: Canadian Press File Photo

Nellie McClung fought an uphill battle to win women recognition as 'persons.'

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General Motors VP Maureen Kempston Darkes

Photo: Hamilton Spectator File Photo

Former Chatelaine editor Doris Anderson

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Supreme Court of Canada Chief Justice Beverley McLachlin

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