

## Where have the women gone?

With the departure of the NDP's Alexa McDonough, the once-bright future for female leaders in Canadian politics is gloomy. Political parties, not voters are to blame.

By Rosemary Speirs  
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ALEXA MCDONOUGH renounced her leadership with the dignity that's marked her seven years as leader of the federal New Democrats, and got more media attention than for almost any other moment.

Almost guiltily, commentators recalled she's the only female national leader in Canada, and once she steps out, Parliament will once again be the preserve mainly of white males.

In saying that, I'm not dismissing the 63 women who sit in the House of Commons among the 301 Members of Parliament. But, as in provincial legislatures across the country, women hold fewer than a quarter of the Commons' seats. For a member of the female minority to challenge the male status quo can cost dearly, as Liberal MP Carolyn Bennett learned when she criticized the downgrading of women in cabinet and was humiliatingly dressed down by Prime Minister Jean Chrétien.

In a few months, when McDonough is replaced — and so far only men are lined up for the job — there will be no women awaiting leadership in the five federal parties, unless Heritage Minister Sheila Copps decides to carry the flag when Chrétien finally leaves.

Less than a decade ago, the advancement of female leaders in Canadian politics appeared inevitable. Kim Campbell was chosen by the federal Conservatives to be prime minister, at a convention that cheered her refreshing difference. Audrey McLaughlin was the first woman leader of the NDP, Lyn McLeod first to lead the Ontario Liberals.

Women who had fought for the election of more female politicians relaxed — too soon.

Campbell went down in the Tories' post-Brian Mulroney debacle.

McLeod blew the election campaign that Mike Harris won. In Prince Edward Island, Liberal Catharine Callbeck (the only woman ever elected a provincial premier) lasted only one term, then stepped down. The number of women candidates running in federal elections dropped with each successive federal vote.

So McDonough's leaving this week marks a watershed for women. The New Democrats, the one party committed to gender parity, has twice tried women leaders and been disappointed. Even in NDP backrooms

there will be discussions about Canadians not being ready for women leaders, or about women not really having the stuff for politics.

We know neither of those canards is true.

Canadian politics hasn't yet thrown up the equivalent of fearless women leaders like Golda Meir in Israel, Margaret Thatcher in Britain or Indira Gandhi in India.

But there are strong women in key political positions, proving that women can do the job. Federal Justice Minister Anne McLellan, Ontario Finance Minister Janet Ecker, and British Columbia's Deputy Premier and Education Minister, Christy Clark.

The polls tell us Canadian voters will elect women. Political scientist Andre Blais, after an exhaustive study of voter attitudes in the last federal election, concluded, "If women are under-represented in the Commons it is not because of the voters."

It is, bluntly, because of Canada's political parties.

Once you wade through all the stuff about women having greater family responsibilities, or not suiting the cut-and-thrust of politics, the fact is that the parties usually choose women leaders when the situation already appears hopeless.

Parties pay lip service to wanting women in their ranks and nominate mostly men. The NDP alone actively promotes women candidates, by insisting riding associations must prove they've searched for women and minority candidates in order to get headquarters to sign off.

But the NDP is in eclipse. The Canadian Alliance replaced it as the party of ideas, and one of its ideas is to reject so-called gender politics. Chrétien belatedly tried to compensate for the Liberal party's failure to nominate enough women in 1993 and 1997 by appointing female candidates to constituencies. But he bowed to Alliance criticisms that he was usurping local democracy for the last election.

Other countries (the United States is the notable exception) have moved to increase women's representation by law.

Sweden requires alternating male and female candidacies on party lists under a proportional representation system and tops the world at 42.7 per cent. Two years ago France passed a "parity law" requiring equal numbers of male and female candidates, with financial penalties for parties that fell short.

Canada ranks 31st in the Inter-Parliamentary Union's ranking of 179 countries by the number of women legislators. So far we've rejected legislating quotas as an answer.

But now that McDonough is slipping away, the picture for elected women becomes bleaker, and any hope that the parties will voluntarily reform is fading fast.

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