



Harper waking up to his party's gender problem, Equal Voice says

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The Harper Conservatives, traditionally neglectful of women and their issues, plans to go a-courting.

Reports retired Conservative senator Pat Carney: "Stephen Harper has reviewed the numbers and realizes this isn't a gender issue, it's a political issue."

The long-time B.C. politician -- a powerful minister in Brian Mulroney's government in the 1980s, is a board member of Equal Voice, a seven-year old national organization promoting women in politics. She says Harper has decided to "bite the bullet."

To date Harper has shown zero sensitivity on the issue, doing little to encourage female candidacies and less to advance women within his caucus.

Women comprise no better than 11 per cent of the caucus. Of 32 cabinet jobs, six are held by women, none representing a heavyweight portfolio such as finance, health, defence or foreign affairs.

Harper also performs poorly when it comes to appointing women to senior posts on boards and commissions.

In preparations for the next election, 36 per cent of Liberal candidates nominated so far and 38 per cent of NDP candidates are women. This contrasts with just 16 per cent for the Conservative.

Polling data is unequivocal; Harper is paying for this gender skew.

Conservatives are supported by 35.3 per cent of men, only 26 per cent of women. Female voters may well be the single biggest reason Harper has been unable to inch his party into majority territory in the polls.

At a time when Hillary Clinton is a serious contender for the U.S. presidency, it's hard to believe battles must still be fought in North America to get women into politics.

But think of the annual premiers' conferences -- every year they gather and every year it's all testosterone, all the time. National party leaders are male,

except for Elizabeth May, Green leader, who is unelected.

"Canada now has fewer women in Parliament than most of Europe, parts of Africa and the Middle East," Equal Voice says.

At the federal level, Canada -- with 52 per cent of the population being female -- features a Parliament with 21 per cent female representation.

This puts Canada 47th in an international ranking of women in national parliaments, behind countries like Eritrea, Bulgaria and the United Arab Emirates. (Interestingly, that great bastion of democracy and equality, the U.S., is in 65th place.)

Countries that feature greater gender equality in their politics -- Sweden, Finland, Rwanda -- tend to have specific mandates or targets for the inclusion of women, Equal Voice says. They make a special effort.

In Canada, initiatives have been less formal, ranging from the NDP's policy of actively recruiting female candidates to the Liberal party's setting of a one-third target for female candidates in the next election.

Some may question the imperative of coaxing more women into the political process.

Equal Voice argues, quite reasonably, that it's healthy for young females to have political role models. More equality on legislative benches also translates into more representative government.

Polling demonstrates that women have different policy priorities than men and those priorities receive more attention from governments with more women. Equal Voice asserts that a critical mass of 30-per-cent female is required to adjust the corporate culture that traditionally dominates political assemblies.

On a positive note, politics in Canada no longer is an old boy's club. Reformed financing rules give women better access to the political process, Carney says. And when women do run, they have a good record of success at the polls.

So, why aren't more women biting?

As primary caregivers for children, they're more reluctant than men to put up with long hours and travel demands.

They also aren't as confident as men of their ability to do the job, says Equal Voice member Christie Clark, a former provincial minister in the Campbell government, now a radio talk show host.

Among the reforms Equal Voice is pushing is a change to the parliamentary calendar to lessen the need for MPs to fly back and forth to Ottawa so frequently.

Carney says, in that respect, teleconferencing and electronic voting would help.

That such modest innovations have not yet been adopted shows what a long way, baby, we still have to go.

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