

What's behind the gender gap in politics

Women are collaborative, not combative, they don't like yelling and name-calling, and they like to see results

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You may notice that I am wearing a tie today -- my Expo 86 tie. The tie is highly symbolic for me because it speaks to how far we have come as women just since this one local milestone 22 years ago.

Expo 86 marked my first "big job." I was appointed assistant deputy minister of marketing for the Ministry of Tourism.

In the process of being selected for this job, I met with several decision-makers, including a then-minister who said to me, "I was thinking of something a little different in a "candidate." Pressed to elaborate, he said, "I was thinking of a man."

And when I held my first meeting days after my appointment with the vice-president of marketing for Expo and his staff, they presented me with two gifts: A gold 86 pin and this tie! I guess to kind of help me to fit in.

A friend of mine and someone I worked with at the time -- Anne Ironside, a pathfinder in women's employment issues -- once said, "the trick for women in the '80s will be to act as much like men as possible to make their way up in organizations."

Our future, she said, "lies in being able to act as much like women as possible in order to bring all our gifts and talents to bear wherever in public or corporate life we may be."

Today we celebrate women in all aspects of public life bringing their gifts and talents to bear while being true to themselves as women.



CREDIT: Chris Wattie. Reuters; Vancouver Sun files

Federal Environment Minister John Baird in the House of Commons: Confrontational situations such as question period tend to bring out the fighting side of male politicians.

I looked up "influential" in my Webster's. It is defined as "to affect or alter by indirect or intangible means;" "to have an effect on the condition of things;" "to sway without apparent exertion of force."

Power is defined as "having authority or influence over others." Far more important than power or force in making change is "influence." Women are change agents and our style tends to be to do so "without apparent exertion of force."

In 1951, only a little over 50 years ago and well within my lifetime, 11 per cent of married women in Canada worked. Today, close to 60 per cent of all females, of all ages, work. Participation rates among 25-44 cohorts have jumped from 60 per cent in 1976 to 80 per cent in 2006.

We work for many personal reasons, but we work because we have to. Our families, our economy, our very lives depend upon it.

Women's participation in the workforce is as broad and varied as work itself. As today's awards will illustrate, we have attained positions of leadership in the corporate world, as entrepreneurs, in the professions, in arts and communications, and in the public sector.

But we still earn 65-70 per cent of what our male counterparts earn and are still poorly represented in most boardrooms across the country.

In a recent article in The Vancouver Sun entitled "Glass Ceiling Getting Thicker," a survey indicated there were 16 per cent fewer women holding top corporate jobs in Canada than the previous year. Only 31 women occupied top jobs (CEO or CFO) in Canada's top 100 largest publicly traded companies.

Here is another stat you will love. Women spend 4.3 hours a day on housework and men just 2.5 hours.

Women are also "big" in the so-called "sandwich" generation, that being term for men and women between 45 and 64 who have at least one parent alive for whom they provide care, and children at home under 25.

So we work in unprecedented numbers at senior levels in all fields; we volunteer actively, we run our households, we care for our children and, increasingly, our parents.

Now, let me move to politics and what I said was the topic of my comments today and try to bring a few thoughts together.

In 1972 in Canada, 71 women ran in the federal election and five were elected or 1.9 per cent of all MPs. In 1993, the numbers of women running peaked at 476, with 53, or 18 per cent, being elected. In 2006 more of us were elected; we now represent 21 per cent of MPs, but only 380 female candidates ran.

In 2006, 83 per cent of all British Columbia ridings ran a female candidate -- the third-highest provincial count after Quebec and Newfoundland.

Why does the picture look this way? At a time when women are stepping up to and excelling as we have discussed, in all aspects of Canadian life, why are such small numbers of us choosing politics as a field?

I want to hazard some guesses based on my own long life in working with men and women and my personal experience in seeking office.

In 2005 I was encouraged to do something I had said I would likely never do -- I ran in the provincial election for the B.C. Liberals in Vancouver-Fairview. I was flattered to be asked, felt if I didn't do it, who would? I ran and lost.

By running for office it is as if I have crossed a great divide from which I can never return. In doing what I thought to be the right thing, the noble thing, and in fact making personal sacrifices to do so, I have become somehow tainted.

So that's the first thing -- if in fact we feel and speak this way about our elected officials, why would anyone, any woman, want to take this risk of reputation exposure quite beyond her control?

My second observation: Women are collaborative in their style; women like to get together in co-operative groups and work their issues through together, arriving at a place and a consensus where there are, as much as possible, only winners.

Women are not, by nature, combative (this does not mean we can't be if we have to), and the culture of politics, from the process of running for election to the way legislatures in this country operate, is conflict- and combat-based. There are winners and losers. That's the point!

Third, women like to be close to the solving of problems and they like to see the fruits of their labours immediately and tangibly, it is our role as change agents.

Much of the work of legislators and policy-makers (not that it isn't important) has long-term outcomes and benefits; it operates conceptually at the 30,000-foot level and the tangible result may not be seen for many years. I think women tire of all this talk and want a little more action.

Fourth, women are less content to wear the jersey and sit on the bench. It is not enough to wear the Grey Cup ring but never have been on the field. So unless women are able to achieve positions of importance in politics (often a challenge for newcomers), they may tire of the waiting and the lack of independent action inherent in the democratic practice and move back to a place of greater contribution after a single term.

Fifth, women are busy -- they simply don't have the time. During the age span from 23 to 55, women are working, raising families, active in their communities. To remove ourselves from our homes and families for long periods is simply not realistic; many of us consider it too great a sacrifice to make.

Finally, women do not like to be spoken ill to or about. We are nice to others. Our role as mothers is to teach to be nice -- no name-calling, no yelling, no

bringing others down to enhance ourselves.

In summary, any future debate about how to increase the participation of women in politics must go beyond quota-setting and talk about the things that really keep women from moving in greater numbers in this direction.

This article is an excerpt of a speech delivered by Virginia Greene, president and CEO of the Business Council of British Columbia, at the 2007 Canada's Most Powerful Women: Top 100 Winners in Vancouver on Jan. 22.

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