



SOUTH ASIA PARTNERSHIP  
SOCIÉTÉ ASIATIQUE DES PARTENAIRES  
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## Equal Voice: Advocating for the Election of Women

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### **Introduction:**

This presentation on Canadian's women's political participation and the efforts of Equal Voice to get more women in politics and create an awareness about the issue, was made at the *South Asia Regional Forum on Women and Governance: Focus on Local Government*. Kokila Jacob was one of three Canadian delegates who attended the Forum.

### **Canadian women and politics:**

- **In Canada women are more than half the population, but only a fifth, at best, of its politicians. Men still dominate the country's politics.**

Men's grip on politics in Canada is tightening at a time when women in other countries are making exciting political breakthroughs. As Equal Voice chair, Rosemary Speirs, points out the number of women nominated, and elected, is falling across Canada, not just in the federal (national) elections to the House of Commons but provincially as well. We have 10 provinces (states), and in the last nine provincial elections the number of women elected declined across the country. In the 2004 recently concluded elections, 391 women were candidates out of total 1685 candidates, or 23 per cent female. Of them 62 women were elected, but since there are more seats in the new House, female MPs actually hold a lower percentage of seats, i.e., 20 per cent. This is a setback when we had hoped for a breakthrough for women in politics. In 2000, 375 women stood for election out of 1808, or 20.7 per cent. In 1997, 408 were women of 1672 or 24.4 per cent. In 1997 and 2000, 62 women were elected or 21 per cent of the House.

- **The first step towards gender equity was taken in the early 1900's – women's right to vote was achieved between 1919 and 1925.**

The right of women to vote was obtained after 50 years of struggle. The first women's suffrage organization in Canada was the Toronto's Women's Literary League which was formed around 1886. Women's legal right to vote was obtained at both the provincial and federal level over a nine year period (1916-1925) with the exception of the Province of Quebec where the right to vote in provincial elections was not obtained until 1940.

- **The next step: The right to be appointed to the Canadian Senate - A Woman but not a "Person" case.**

A major figure in the changing role of women, and the advancement of women in politics was Agnes MacPhail, the first woman elected to the House of Commons (Lower House) in 1921 despite resistance to the nomination of women candidates. (The 1921 federal election was the first in which women had the vote and could run for elections.) However, until 1929 women in Canada could not be appointed to the Senate (Upper House) because they were not deemed as a 'person'. The British North America Act of 1867 which set out the powers and responsibilities of the provinces and of the federal government used the word "persons" when it referred to more than one person and the word "he" when it referred to one person. And since the act also said only "qualified persons" could be appointed to the Canadian Senate it was interpreted as only men could be appointed to the Senate<sup>1</sup>.

Women's groups led by five women, nicknamed "The Valiant Five" or "The Famous Five" fought for the right for women to be appointed to the Senate in the "person's case". The women took the 'Persons Case' to the Privy Council in England which in those days was Canada's highest court. The historic decision by the Privy Council came on 18 October, 1929 when it announced that Canadian women were indeed persons. Thus women could now be appointed to the Senate<sup>1</sup>.

Almost eight decades later the prospects for women seem to be getting worse, not better. In the Canadian Parliament, and provincial legislatures, women still hold only about 20 per cent of elected positions. So why aren't more women entering government?

Women are more likely to participate in unconventional politics such as local neighbourhood groups or single issue protest movements, rather than conventional politics of parties and interest groups<sup>1</sup>. Also women interested in taking part in governing bump up against a glass ceiling. On many of the decisions the government takes - from weakening plans for national health care to homecare for the elderly - women are most closely affected, yet have little say<sup>2</sup>. We can't afford to wait. At the current rate of progress, it will take four generations to become equal partners in running the country. Our great, great granddaughters might see a 50/50 House of Commons.

## **Equal Voice History:**

- **Equal Voice has evolved from the original group called The Committee for '94.**
- **We are a group of women and men, more than 400 nation wide, who are deeply concerned about Canadian politics. We want to help create a climate in which more women will be elected to help govern Canada.**
- **We are convinced that changes that promote women in politics will improve the opportunities of other under-represented Canadians and create a healthier, more democratic political system.**

Experts note that one of the ways progress is made in electing women comes where powerful women's movements mobilize and pressure the political parties. It is this realization that has drawn the women in Canada to form advocacy groups such as the Women for Political Action in the 70s, The Committee of '94 in the 80s and its recent successor Equal Voice. We are following in the footsteps of the Committee of '94 which was created in 1984 with a formal goal of seeing women elected to half the seats in Parliament in 10 years.

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<sup>1</sup> Women and Politics in Canada - Heather MacIvor

<sup>2</sup> Equal Voice website – [www.equalvoice.ca](http://www.equalvoice.ca)

The Committee was multi-partisan as we are in Equal Voice. Similarly we include non-political members as well as prominent organizers and fundraisers for all three parties, including some woman partisans who actually cross party lines on occasion to help out strong women candidates running for rival organizations<sup>2</sup>.

Like the Committee we set out to educate the public about the barriers to female election, to press the political parties to nominate and elect more women in winnable seats (i.e. in constituencies where the parties are sure their candidate will win majority votes), to campaign for public funding of elections so women could realistically compete and to help women equip themselves to run for office at any level of government<sup>2</sup>.

The Committee however petered out after 1994 with its goal unmet, despite best intentions and persistent calls to action. We have returned with renewed vigor as Equal Voice backed by more than 40 women's organizations. Members include women politicians and cabinet ministers, political activists from all parties, academics, pollsters, journalists and students. We are growing as new members sign up from across the country via our bilingual website, or by word of mouth. Men are welcome too.

### **Our goal:**

- **Our short-term goal is one-third women – 104 in 2004 -- women in the House of Commons, or approximately one-third of its seats.**
- **But longer term we are working for political equality. We seek proportional representation, i.e., more than 40 per cent of our elected representatives should be women.**

### **Our strategy:**

- **We have formed a multi-partisan action committee to lobby for more women to be elected to every level of government in Canada**
- **We have formed an action group dedicated to raising publicly the issue of under-representation of our gender in our national parliament and legislatures.**
- **We aim to promulgate fresh ideas, to grab media attention and to embarrass the existing political parties into fairer treatment of our half of the population.**
- **We are working towards the reform of an outmoded electoral system that disadvantages women. For e.g., we want to replace our winner-takes-all electoral system by a system of proportional representation to give women a fairer chance at political success.**
- **We want women to get their fair share of nominations in winnable ridings.**

- **We are seeking to level the political playing field by lowering the financial requirements that now work to exclude women and others who don't have the backing of the corporate world.**

## **How we function:**

- **Monthly meetings of steering committee**
- **Internet communications with all members**
- **Website**
- **Outreach to other women's networks**
- **Membership**

The engine that propels Equal Voice forward is the steering committee whose members meet every month. We are focused on one urban centre – Toronto – for regular meetings. The steering committee membership includes people with different skill sets and strengths, and ad hoc working groups emerge with each proposed initiative to mobilize our resources to best get things done. The key is getting together like-minded women from different parties and/or roles (political involvement, party involvement, past and present politicians, media involvement, pollsters) and get on the public radar with no dollars and no resources.

The steering committee does the brainstorming to come up with ideas, initiatives, email networking to assign tasks and take on tasks to complete various elements of each project, and networking/exerting influence to ensure materials, messages etc. reach the right audience.

The internet has been a great boon and lynchpin of Equal Voice activities. Discussions and decisions made at the meetings are communicated via email to broaden and strengthen the virtual network. All developments are posted on our website. One of our major initiatives through the website and our chair Rosemary's emails to members and the media is ongoing awareness of women's participation issues -- so our 400 members have the information or access to it when they are speaking on similar issues as well. We also interact with other women's organizations and network with them to support and further our collective cause.

Since Equal Voice has no major funding resources it relies entirely on membership fees, which at \$100 per person a year is hardly a financial bonanza. However, we operate on ingenuity and creatively use our member's skills to propel us forward.

In terms of skill sets and resources, the contribution of one of the steering committee members Dianne Williamson who provides our website and has her own website services firm – is very vital and we would not be able to function without it – so people wanting to organize similar groups should be sure to recruit members with this kind of technical ability. Also another simple thing that proved effective as website resource was the tracking of women candidates being nominated in the run-up to the election by different parties and by region which was undertaken by one of our graduate student members.

## **Action and reaction: Plan of action**

- 1. Lobbying political parties – directly and indirectly**
- 2. Media campaign**
- 3. Supporting women candidates**

#### **4. Participation in public forums**

#### **5. Website resource and research**

#### **6. Promotional print material**

Equal Voice's plan of action can be put into the above six broad categories. In the run up to the Federal/national elections which took place on June 28, 2004, we stepped up our activities. We lobbied hard for more women to be nominated by the June 9 deadline, once the nominations closed, we moved into a new phase. The most important thing to note here is that we did this with no funds but just using our contacts and influence and the creative skills of our members.

### **1. Lobbying:**

- We spoke out when capable women who do get elected are left ignored on the back benches. How? Directly. We wrote to all the major leadership candidates regarding their commitment to increase women's participation, i.e., 30 per cent – and managed to elicit responses from major ones through our members or contacts who were involved with the various campaigns. We also featured their responses on our website. Copies of these letters with a press release were sent out to all Canadian media. The effect of this was that the media did sit up and take notice.
- We lobbied each political party through women politicians within the parties, supporting their efforts at getting their own parties to nominate more women.
- In the case of the Progressive Conservative (one of the major political parties) party leadership, we did an inexpensive pamphlet based on the main candidate's responses and signed by two steering committee members. We then used our contacts at the leadership convention to insert copies in all the media kits and to distribute to a large gathering of delegates. Similarly we did an inexpensive quick print pamphlet for the Liberal (the ruling party) party convention quoting the chair of the Liberal Women's caucus who is an Equal Voice member as well as the leadership candidates. The pamphlet was designed by an Equal Voice member, yet another arranged for printing, and our chair Rosemary delivered it to Ottawa (Canada's capital) and arranged through a contact in the Liberal conference organization to have these inserted in all the conference kits being sent to delegates -- thousands of them. This was then the basis for very high profile discussions and presentation by the Liberal Party women's group at the convention.
- We sent out letters of support to women candidates.
- We sent out letters to political leaders again after the June 9 nomination deadline expressing dismay at the shortfall in women candidates and taking them to task for not keeping their commitments. Simultaneously we released these letters to the media and posted them on our website.
- We mobilized former women politicians into sending a letter to the leaders of the major political parties expressing their dismay at the decline in the nominations of women candidates. (Sent on June 14)
- We released it to the media as well.
- Experienced women politicians among us are volunteering to mentor women interested in getting into politics.
- The election is a great opportunity for Equal Voice members and we asked them to call their MPs to tell him, or her, that a parliament that is 80 per cent men can't pretend to speak for all Canadians. We also urged them to call the Liberal party offices to say we want "104 in 2004" and ask what are they doing to reach out for women candidates.

### **2. Media Campaign:**

We took every opportunity we got to keep our issue alive in the media – radio, television and print - in order to raise public awareness and thus indirectly putting pressure on political parties.

- We sent out press releases.
- We got in touch with journalists who we felt were sympathetic to our cause and urged them to write about the issue
- Our members who are journalists themselves wrote articles for the media. E.g., our chair Rosemary wrote in the Hill Times (Ottawa). Our chair was interviewed and quoted in several news-stories.
- Many of our members were invited to panel discussions, or even one-on-one interviews on radio and national television. E.g., steering committee member Donna Dasko and our chair Rosemary on CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation – Canada’s national television).
- We used our contacts to try and get questions on discrimination against women in politics included on national debates. Donna lobbied CBC for the inclusion of a question on women candidates to be posed during the national televised debate between the leaders of the political parties.
- We called press conferences to ask the political parties "How far do we still have to go guys?" And "How long will it take?"
- All the broadcast outlets pick their election night panelists and spokespeople. We sent each of them a small briefing package on Equal Voice and our work. It is always a challenge to fill the airwaves for a full evening covering an election, especially if the results come in slowly. Information such as we have makes good “filler” for commentators. Getting the names and addresses could be done by calling the stations and talk to their election night coordinator.
- We had plans to encourage major networks to do a “Women’s Watch” on election night – tracking the wins etc. of women candidates through the evening.

### **3. Supporting women candidates:**

- We launched several initiatives at encouraging more women to take part in politics in the future. Our initial idea of holding breakfast groups could not take off this time because we needed more lead time for such events. But we hope to do it in future. We made efforts to set up meetings with political party strategists responsible for their party renewal programs (e.g., an Equal Voice meeting with Michael Bryant, the provincial Attorney General) to discuss the issue.
- We supported the Liberal women's caucus, chaired by MP Anita Neville, (an Equal Voice supporter) who will work on an action plan to get more women nominated in ridings/constituencies where incumbent Liberal MPs decide not to stand next time. The caucus has struck a subcommittee on Women's Participation in Politics to consider how to increase the number of women candidates, how to get more women elected to party office, appointed to cabinet positions, and to government boards.
- Through increasing the informal networking through our chair Rosemary's creation of Women's Political ConneXion. The Women's Political ConneXion links 44 organizations and prominent academics interested in promoting the election of more women. Our first joint action was our letters to the four party leaders urging them to nominate more women candidates. Twenty-eight of the groups signed the letters, giving them national backing from important organizations in the women's movement.

### **4. Participation in public forums:**

We made all efforts to take part in events which would put our cause on the public and media radars. Our chair Rosemary participated in the Ottawa Women and Westminster conference from June 10-11. Some of our representatives attended political party conventions and distributed flyers. At a women's conference - “Women in motion” for students interested in careers in politics - some of us on the steering committee participated as one of the facilitators or as keynote speakers and we contacted them to ensure they reinforced

the Equal Voice messages in their remarks. Our chair Rosemary arranged a booth; members once again put together simple promotional materials for it (flyers, bookmarks etc). We arranged to have our bookmarks put in every student's kit, we put out an email asking if members would stand at the booth and therefore had one or two members there at all the critical times. We worked with the organizers to get a two-minute impromptu speaking spot where one of our members was able to speak to the whole conference specifically about Equal Voice. We garnered considerable interest which was reflected in an increase in hits to our website.

### **5. Website resource and research:**

We have been offering research and updated information on our website. Our website tracking, i.e., listing of all the women candidates, by party and by riding proved to be a very effective resource for all. We ended up being visited and quoted extensively in the media as a result of our chair Rosemary bringing this to the attention of the media.

### **6. Promotional print material:**

Whenever there was a need the members have swiftly put their creative skills together and through sheer ingenuity, and one needs this when faced with almost zero dollar funding, have designed and printed pamphlets and bookmarks.

### **The results: What we have achieved so far:**

- **Equal voice is gaining strength**
- **We are building a reputation for our advocacy at a time when the women's movement needs a voice.**
- **We are on the media's radar at last!**
- **We get regular requests for exchanges of information from women's organizations working in other countries**

We raised the issue of under-representation of women in governance in national debates. The increased awareness among women nationwide has led to an increase in Equal Voice's membership. We have linked up with other women's networks nationwide for the first time. Two Equal Voice members have represented us in submissions to the Citizen's Assembly, which is considering a proportional representation system for British Columbia.

We are delighted to be on the media's radar screen at last. Canadian media – electronic and print – have all devoted space or airtime recently to Equal Voice's cause and quoted our members extensively. Our website tracking got us a great deal of media attention.

We are being invited to speak at conferences and to university students. We've distributed thousands of promotional material.

### **What we have yet to achieve:**

- **Getting political parties to nominate 30 per cent women in winnable ridings**
- **Our goal of one-third women in parliament in 2004 federal elections.**

We are disappointed at the failure of political parties to attract/nominate more women candidates to parliament in this year's federal/national elections. For the first time since 1993 no woman heads a federal/national political party. After decades of slow progress there is regression...there is a decrease in the number of women being elected.

Why is this so? We hear from the party organizers that it is increasingly difficult to recruit women. A big problem is our voting system which is based on Westminster (Britain) and so still puts the choice of candidates in the hands of local constituencies, which often still assume a male professional with two children is the best candidate. Even if a female candidate is extraordinary, she often has little chance if her male opponents have been raising money for years in advance. Men tend to support other men.

Women are discouraged from running by the combative "blood sport" nature of Canadian politics and because they see that it is harder for women to succeed in politics. We have had a woman Prime Minister--Kim Campbell--in 1993 but she lasted only a few months. The New Democrats twice elected women leaders but now have a male leader in Jack Layton. Parties have no special process for appointing or recruiting women. Even when they claim to have it, critics point out that it is mere 'tokenism'.

### **What we plan to do:**

- **Seek proportional representation with affirmative action**
- **Create a larger movement for political equality – branches of EV nation wide**
- **Set up a national panel**
- **Start a campaign school**

So, what next? Overall the lesson is clear. Canada's male political leaders have no intention of opening the doors to women voluntarily. We are pressing the parties to nominate more women in the belief that voters are as likely to elect a woman as a man, given the choice. We are fighting for equality of opportunity in politics to ensure that choice. As things stand, voters are offered four men for every woman candidate, and elect legislatures and councils that reflect that imbalance. If Canadian party leaders can be convinced this is a public issue, they'll send the message down the ranks demanding more women candidates. They'll put strict spending limits on nominations so women, with fewer financial resources, have a chance of running and winning.

We are seeking proportional representation and toward this we have been supporting the Charter challenge to the present electoral system\*. So, when Ontario starts public consultations this fall, we will be there to say proportional representation backed by affirmative action as well. (Ontario's new premier Dalton McGuinty promised a public consultation on electoral reform during the recent campaign.)

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\*Note: Equal Voice supports the Charter challenge brought by the University of Toronto Constitutional Test Case Centre against the Canada Elections Act. The challenge argues that the Act violates the rights of minority parties to be represented, and also violates the equality rights of Canadian women to fair representation. It says the Act works to "systemically exclude" women from political office. Equal Voice agreed and held a press conference at which members Marylou McPhedran (a constitutional lawyer) and Frances Lankin argued proportional representation would be a fairer electoral system for Canadian women. Five provinces—Ontario, Quebec, British Columbia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island—are looking at adopting systems of proportional representation; to better reflect the makeup of the population, particularly the 52 per cent who are women.

British Columbia's government has already created the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform (158 ordinary BC citizens) to examine alternative voting methods, including proportional representation. The recommendations will go to a binding referendum. Prince Edward Island is also studying electoral change. Experts from other countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Wales and Scotland talk about how proportional representation helps women get elected. BUT most progress is made when parties either make a

concerted effort to nominate women (New Zealand), or adopt internal quotas as the labor parties did in Australia, Wales and Scotland (requiring 40 per cent candidates in Australia and twinning ridings in Wales and Scotland to get half women running for labor). In European countries, such as Sweden (48.5 per cent women elected), the electoral systems favor fairer representation of the population at large, most effectively through gender-balanced slates.

The Law Reform Commission of Canada recently produced a report recommending some form of proportional representation. Our chair Rosemary cautions that it's not a guarantee because if parties don't want to put women forward, they can prevent it. But in general, most of the studies show that proportionality is better for women representation.

It's time to bring those debates back, says our chair Rosemary.

And if party leaders are serious about attracting more women to represent this country, it's got to start at the top, she says. "They've got to make it clear that they want a strong contingent of women, they can't just let the riding (constituency) associations decide this".

Women from across the country have been inquiring about provincial branches of Equal Voice, or membership on the steering committee. We are considering setting up a national panel, communicating by e-mail, and exchanging ideas across the country. This would help us create a larger movement for political equality.

Women politicians who are Equal Voice members can help us start a campaign school and mentor women who are considering entering the fray. In fact, the meeting of the steering committee held in June 2004 struck a sub-committee to put this into action.

## **Conclusion: Can we win?**

- **YES!**
- **Experienced women politicians say we need a “critical mass”--one third women--to start making a real difference.**
- **In most advanced democracies, women have succeeded in making their voices heard.**

A diminished band of women in the next House of Commons is bad for democracy. We know Canadians are increasingly disenchanted with their politics, and the numbers casting their votes is dropping dangerously. The disengagement is the worst among young people under age 25—fewer than a quarter of who vote—and worst of all among young women.

Who can blame young women? They see few role models in politics. We will, of course, continue to fight for electoral reforms to level the playing field for women. We hope our members will make their voices heard at the hearings into electoral reform being held in British Columbia, Quebec, Ontario, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island.

**We will keep hammering home our message. The little brave band of women running for Parliament deserves our help. For further information on Equal Voice please refer to our website: [www.equalvoice.ca](http://www.equalvoice.ca) or e-mail me at [kokila@rogers.com](mailto:kokila@rogers.com)**