

Keynote Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy
Margaret Campbell Fund
Toronto, Ontario
December 3, 2001

Colleagues and friends:

We are here today to raise money for the Margaret Campbell Fund, set up in 1984, to support Liberal women candidates in the province of Ontario. This evening, we are paying tribute to an extraordinary woman, Margaret Campbell, who was elected in 1973 as the first female Liberal Member of the Ontario Legislature.

Ms. Campbell was one of Toronto's most active and visible politicians for more than two decades. During her long career, she was a member of the city council, a provincial court judge, as well as an M.P.P.

As a member of the Ontario legislature for almost ten years, Ms. Campbell led the crusade for women's rights, as well as fighting for better health care and improvements to the justice system. When she passed away in 1999, one of the beneficiaries of the fund in her name, M.P.P. Lyn McLeod, described her as being both a "formidable" member of the legislature and a "caring, compassionate person" who was a "social visionary".

Many of the women who helped pave the way for Margaret Campbell might also be described in a similar fashion. Women who make their way in politics, which is traditionally men's domain, require great strength of character. Many of these women bring a social agenda to politics, often championing the rights of those whose voices would otherwise go unheard. As Nellie McClung is reported to have said, "the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world is a beautiful fiction, handed out to soothe us when we are

restless. The hand that rocks the cradle does not rule the world or many things would be different."

Each woman's individual success builds on the foundation of those who have come before her. In 1921, Agnes Macphail was the first woman ever elected to the House of Commons. In 1943, she became one of the first women elected as an M.P.P. in Ontario. Women like Agnes Macphail and Margaret Campbell owed a great deal to the suffragettes who fought for, and won, women's right to vote in Canada. Federally, women, that is, white women, were able to vote on May 24, 1918.

For my own appointment to the Senate, I owe a debt of gratitude to five women who refused to accept a Supreme Court ruling in 1928, and appealed to the Privy Council in London. On October 18, 1929, the Privy Council ruled that the word "persons" in the BNA Act referred to both men and women equally in rights and privileges. This decision made it possible for women to be appointed to the highest offices. Since then, hundreds of Canadian women have moved forward with perseverance and conviction to participate in the agenda of our country.

As women, we have gained considerable ground. As we entered the political arena, and gained positions of power in society, we have also pursued a progressive social agenda. Women like Margaret Campbell championed the rights of women, as well as other groups in society. They spoke out against ignorance, inequities, and intolerance. They envisioned a society in which people's value was determined solely on the basis of their abilities, rather than on the basis of their gender, sexual preference, or ethnic origin.

The result is that the legal barriers to the full participation of women of all ethnic origins in Canadian life have been torn down. The challenges we face today are different, but they are equally daunting. The challenges I'm referring to are attitudes. The laws may have changed, but there are those who still think women don't belong in public life.

We must remember that less than thirty years ago, women were not allowed to be members of the RCMP, we made up only 10-15% of university professors, and we did not have the fundamental right to control our own bodies.

In politics, women continue to play a limited role in public life worldwide. The International Parliamentary Union reports that, despite the fact that women are gaining ground in legislatures around the world, we still account for fewer than 15% of the members of all Parliaments. Women make up only 14 % of the members of lower houses and 13 % of the upper chambers. In Canada, the numbers are somewhat better - we now hold 21% of the seats in the House of Commons, and 34% of those in the Senate. However, in the Ontario legislature, women still occupy less than 20% of the total number of seats.

And, what these percentages don't show is that in our last federal election, while the number of women elected to the House of Commons stayed the same, the number of female candidates actually dropped dramatically. Women are dropping out of the race. The reasons for the decline are familiar: women have greater responsibilities to their families, fewer financial networks, and sometimes less support in the nomination process among white males.

According to one female candidate, the nomination process can be costly, totaling between \$25,000 and \$100,000. This price tag shuts the door on a lot of talented women who otherwise might be interested in public life.

When women do make it into the House of Commons, according to Judy Sgro, a second-term female M.P., they are often held up to a higher standard than men, and criticized for the slightest transgression. The Canadian political world is still tainted with sexism, and this makes it an unfriendly place for women. Female politicians have been described as "aggressive" and "shrill", and they receive regular criticisms for the way they look and dress. Male Members of Parliament have been known to shout across the Legislature, "Why don't you go home to take care of your kids?"

The fact is that men who sit in legislatures are able to do so because their wives take care of their families. Women rarely have the same support from their husbands in pursuing careers in public life. This has to change. Men need to take on more roles in the home, and be more supportive of their wives.

Even though women face many barriers in entering politics, I contend that we must become involved if we are to have an influence on the policies

that will determine Canada's future. We are, after all, often the most affected by changes in social policies. As the main caregivers of our families, any change in social programs will have an immediate effect on the quality of our lives, and our ability to earn a living.

It should come as no surprise to anyone in this room that in Nordic countries, where women are well-represented in the legislatures, social programs are given a high priority. And social programs have been maintained alongside an emphasis on economic growth. For example, Sweden's productivity grew by 47% between 1990 and 1999 – more than both the European average, and American growth over the same period. Women are also influencing the foreign policy agenda in these countries. Only Norway, Denmark, Sweden, and the Netherlands have ever reached the internationally recognized goal of 0.7% of G.N.P. for Overseas Development Assistance (ODA).

New democracies like South Africa are paying attention to the European model. In South Africa, over 30% of the cabinet and 30% of the legislature consists of women. As a result, South Africa has passed a significant number of laws that touch on gender issues. These include the liberalization of abortion laws, domestic violence laws, and legislation related to sexual harassment.

What can we learn from the international community? These examples all highlight the importance of a critical mass of women who are able, through their numbers, to make a significant impact on the political agenda. Undoubtedly, the election of women is a cause for celebration, but if we are going to make a real difference, it is not enough to have a few women as token representatives of our gender. We need more women in leadership positions within our communities, so that we become the norm as in the Nordic countries.

Rogersville, a municipality of 1,300 people in New Brunswick, has taken this lesson to heart. In May of this year, it became the largest municipality in Canada to elect an all-female council. The women on the council, all of whom have full-time day jobs, hope that they will inspire other young women to get involved in their communities and in politics. "It would be a great pleasure if they noticed us and thought they could do it also," said one of the new councillors.

I hope that more women in Ontario will heed their call, and make a commitment to public life. While it is unlikely that we will achieve Rogersville's numbers any time soon, we must not accept the current status of women in politics.

That is why I am here today to support the Margaret Campbell Fund. By providing funds to women candidates, we can help remove one of the major barriers to women's participation in political life. We need to encourage more women to enter politics - women of principle who will use their formidable energies to fight for equal rights for all Canadians.

As Margaret Campbell said in 1981 when she stepped down as an Ontario MPP, "I won some skirmishes and I won some battles, but I did not win the war." Like Ms. Campbell, we must not be complacent in what we have achieved. Since women make up just over 50% of the population of Ontario, this percentage should be reflected in the legislature, otherwise we are grossly underrepresented. There are still many hurdles to overcome before we can say that men and women are true partners in democracy.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak at this important event.