

Keynote Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy

Canadian Women Now: Charting a course for the 21st century

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1. Introduction

I would like to thank the Ottawa Women's Canadian Club for inviting me to speak to you today, and on behalf of the Senate of Canada, welcome. I chose the topic, "Canadian Women Now", because in 2002, 32 years after the Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, we should reflect on what women have actually achieved in Canadian society.

2. The Myth

What really bothers me is the myth that we have achieved equality, and that the race is over. This is a myth shared by many women, especially young women, who believe that feminism is a thing of the past, and that there is no more work to be done. Some of my women friends see little cause for concern because their daughters are doing just fine. They don't want to rock the boat, so to speak, just in case those in power (and they are mostly men) might decide to take away what has already been achieved. This is a dangerous attitude that can lead to complacency. With complacency comes the possibility that we will lose what many of us have fought very hard for over the last four decades.

3. The Reality

Not long ago, I bought some furniture for our family room, and when the set was delivered, I paid with my credit card. Because the amount was large, I was asked to get on the phone when the card was being verified. Instead of the usual questions, I was asked by the woman on the line to put my husband on to o.k. the charge. I blew up, and told her I would not use that card. So, my friends, this **is** the reality today. I subsequently wrote a letter of

complaint to the President of that company, and gave him a piece of my mind.

Statistics also show that we lag behind men in many other areas. As a woman who is involved in both business, and politics, I know that this is true. Many of the women I encounter also tell me that they are frustrated at the progress we are making, and I'll expand on that later. For a while, we were moving forward, but now the momentum has slowed.

4. Measuring Equality – the U.N.'s Gender Empowerment Measure

One of the ways we can see how Canada measures up to other countries is by looking at where we stand on the United Nations' Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM). This measure provides a snapshot of the degree of participation by women in the economic and political life of a nation. In a sense, it also measures how democratic a country is. Women make up 50% of most nations. Our influence should be equivalent to our representation in the population in any democracy.

5. How does Canada rate?

So how does Canada rate on the GEM? We are not doing badly. After all, we surpass both the United States, and Australia. But we are consistently at #7 or #8, lagging behind the more progressive Scandinavian countries such as Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. . All of these countries, as I will discuss later, have gender equality as a priority at the highest levels of government.

6. The Royal Commission on the Status of Women, 1967-70

Every journey has to begin with the first step, and I will bring you back to 1967, when the Pearson government convened the Royal Commission on the Status of Women. We have Judy LaMarsh to thank. As the only female Minister in the Pearson government, she pushed for the creation of the Commission, which produced a report, after 3 years of consultations, and came up with 167 recommendations. These recommendations served as the guidelines for the recent feminist movement in Canada. Many of these recommendations have been implemented, some are in the process of being implemented, and some have never been dealt with at all.

The Commission looked at areas where there was discrimination against women. But, unfortunately, it was also a product of its time. It neglected to look at violence against women, the situation of women from ethnic minorities, and native women.

7. The Issues – How are we doing?

How many of these recommendations have been realized? The following are some of the issues I wish to touch upon here today. I want to highlight some of our achievements, but also touch upon some of the areas where we clearly need to work harder to bring about change.

8. Women and the Law

It wasn't until the passage of the Charter of the Rights and Freedoms in 1982 that women won our most important victory in our legal system. Many feminists, including Doris Anderson, fought hard to have women's rights included in the Charter, and the result was Section 28, which states that "Notwithstanding anything in this Charter, the rights and freedoms referred to in it are guaranteed equally to male and female persons." Section 28, when combined with the equality provisions of Section 15 of the Charter, have served as tools for women faced with discrimination. However, access to the Charter remains limited to those with time, money, and resources. In practice, many women still find themselves faced with discrimination in many facets of their daily lives with no recourse to the law.

9. Women and Work

Now we look at the workplace. Women's status, and independence, are heavily dependent on the degree to which we are equal players in the economic world. Statistics tell us that women earn about 73 cents for every dollar earned by a man. Women in Canada, as in most countries, still earn significantly less than our male counterparts. For women who are visible minorities and/or immigrants, the gap between male and female earners is even larger.

Women who have recently immigrated to Canada tend to have significantly higher levels of education than their Canadian born counterparts. Nevertheless, university-educated immigrant women, between the ages of 25 & 44, have a higher rate of unemployment than Canadian women of almost

any educational background, other than those with less than a grade 9 education.

10. Women and the Public Sector

You would expect the federal government to be a leader in change. After all, statistics on departments in the public sector now break down positions at each level by gender. However, despite target-setting, these statistics show that men still make up more than two thirds of the executive in the civil service, with women being over-represented in the administrative support category.

11. Women in Business

In the private sector, women are one of the fastest growing groups in terms of small business ownership, but women remain a rare sight in the boardrooms of our nation's top corporations. Just 7.5% of board seats, and 2% of CEOs are women. These numbers mean that despite the fact that many business owners are women, large corporations remain dominated by men.

And despite the rapid growth of women-owned businesses, the Canadian Federation of Independent Business found in a survey conducted in 1996 that there was "outrageous" discrimination by banks against female entrepreneurs. Women were refused loans 20% more often than men, and when they did get financing, they often paid a higher rate of interest than men. And what's more, some banks still ask husbands to co-sign these loans.

12. Women & Politics

Despite growing awareness of the need for women to participate in public life, women continue to play a limited role. The International Parliamentary Union (IPU) reported that despite the fact that women are gaining ground in legislatures around the world, we still account for fewer than 15% of members of all Parliaments. Worldwide, women make up only 14.6% of the members of lower houses and 14% of the upper chambers. While women are most strongly represented in Nordic countries, their representation dropped in some developing countries in the past year. In Canada, women hold 21% of the seats in the House of Commons and 32% in the Senate. Yes,

we are also doing better than the global average. However, according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), which tracks legislatures worldwide, Canada rates as #33 for women's representation in government, after countries such as New Zealand, and Australia.

My friends, these are the results, thirty-two years after the implementation of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, with its 167 recommendations.

Before I proceed to talk about how we might deal with these deficiencies, I'll discuss why it is important that women play an equal role in government, and in the boardrooms.

13. The Global Picture

Why is it important for a significant number of women to be involved in government, and business, you may ask. According to studies by the World Bank, a significant representation of women in government has been shown to reduce corruption, and cronyism, making these countries better environments for business and investments. Also, women take a different approach to foreign policy. Francis Fukuyama, the philosopher and political theorist, speculates that while men practice realpolitik, women build relationships, resulting in more dialogue, exchange, and conflict resolution. Canada has yet to realize the importance of women in politics.

In business, women have a lot to teach the business world. Women's natural traits, and skills, help them to build positive work environments, where employees feel like they are part of a family, working towards common business goals. Men are more likely to think in a hierarchical fashion and focus on established rules and procedures. In contrast, women business owners tend to emphasize creative thinking, are better communicators, and better power sharers, emphasizing team-work. Women's flexibility in management may make them more responsive to both their employees and to the ever-changing globalized economy in which we now live.

14. Major Barriers and Obstacles to Women in Politics

What are the major barriers to women in politics? Generally, women don't have sufficient training, and education, on how the political system works. Speaking personally, it was a shock for me when I first ended up on

Parliament Hill 4 years ago. It is a unique world, and you have to understand the rules of the legislature, of Committees, of lobbying and networks to get anything accomplished. I grew up in the world of business that operates on the principal of efficiency because time is money. This principle certainly doesn't apply on Parliament Hill.

- **Socioeconomic** – Women also often don't have the money, or the networks to raise the funds, such as board memberships, and links to different businesses, so they can run for office.

- **Ideological/Psychological** – and finally, perhaps the biggest obstacles for women, are traditional views that women don't belong in politics because they should be at home with their families

To make matters worse, women are held up to a higher standard than men in politics. Not only do they have to be brilliant, but they have to have a good sense of fashion, to pass the scrutiny of the ever-vigilant media pundits. As Pat Duncan, the Premier of Yukon, and Canada's only woman premier, emphasized, "For elected women the target the media and opposition choose to focus on often has little to do with policy, and a great deal to do with gender."

15. Solutions

Now that I have talked about the problems women have in Canada, I would like to discuss ways that we might be able to deal with them, as well as look at how other countries have overcome gender inequalities.

16. Are Quotas the solution?

So how can we move Canadian women's agenda forward in the 21st century? One of the tools that you keep hearing about is quotas. The United Nations says they work. The Scandinavian countries have had a great deal of success in changing the gender balance by using quotas. A lot of countries in the developing world, such as Costa Rica, and South Africa, are adopting quotas. Older countries like France, which is rather famous for its chauvinistic attitude towards women, have introduced quotas recently.

17. What do quotas do?

How the quota system works is that it places the burden of recruitment not on the individual woman, but on those who control the recruitment process. Previous notions of having reserved seats for only one or for very few women, representing a vague and an all-embracing category of "woman", are no longer considered sufficient. Today, quota systems aim at ensuring that women constitute at least a "critical minority" of 30 to 40 per cent. Quotas recognize that "equality of opportunity" is not enough because unless hidden systemic barriers to women are removed, women do not, in reality, have equal opportunity. Quotas may be applied as a temporary measure until the barriers for women's entry into politics are removed and real equal opportunity can exist. I will talk more about this later.

18. Quotas – Pros and Cons

Women make up 50% of the population of most countries, including Canada. And yet, under the current political system, in which nominations are controlled by political parties which are largely dominated by men, it is unlikely that women will be nominated in sufficient numbers to stand for parties, in order that they may be elected to provincial or federal parliaments. Essentially, women make up around 20% of most Canadian legislatures, and this number does not seem to be increasing. Quotas may be the only way to democratize our political system.

19. Quotas – where they have worked?

The Scandinavian countries have been using quotas for some time. The result is that their political landscape has changed completely with Sweden consistently appearing as #1 in the world in terms of women's representation in Parliament. Women occupy 45% of Parliamentary seats. What the Scandinavian countries have shown is that quotas act as a guideline, but once they are in effect for a period of time they become unnecessary by virtue of the changes they bring about in society. Society then changes its culture to become gender neutral.

I would like to share with you an anecdote recalled by Dr. Gro Harlem Brundtland at the Beijing Conference on Women. When Dr. Brundtland first became Prime Minister of Norway, many Norwegians did not believe a woman could handle the responsibilities of being Prime Minister. They predicted a short tenure, and a disastrous end. Well, she served as Prime Minister for 10 years, and during her tenure, a quota of 40% female

membership in the cabinet was established. Years later, Dr. Brundtland was told about a conversation in a schoolyard among a group of boys and girls. A boy boasted to his friends that he would be Prime Minister when he grew up. The girls laughed out loud and said, “Don’t be silly! A man can’t be a Prime Minister. It has to be a woman.”

20. Quotas & the Board Room

While many countries have considered using quotas for women in politics, few have considered applying the same practice in the private sector. In an unprecedented move, Norway recently did so. If the quotas are not met, the Norwegian government has threatened to back up the quotas with legislation. Incidentally, Norway’s representation of women on corporate Boards is very similar to Canada’s, at about 7%.

21. Changing language – how we speak is how we think

While quotas may be a tool to change the numbers of women in decision-making positions, language is a tool to change the way people think about women. I have discovered how potent this issue is. We have changed our use of language in many ways over the last few decades. Racist terms are no longer acceptable. Derogatory comments towards those who have disabilities are not tolerated. Even hymn books have made their language inclusive. For example, the best-selling modern bible, the New International Version, was updated last year so that all parishioners would feel included. For example, the word “sons” in Mathew 5:9 has been replaced by the word “children” to read “*children of God*”, and the word “man” in Romans 3:28 has been replaced by “person” to read “*a person is justified by faith*”. Even Time Magazine, which only a few years ago referred to “Man of the Year”, now refers to “Person of the Year”. Nevertheless, a certain level of discomfort remains in Canadian society when one discusses changing language to be more inclusive of women. There is a tendency to refer to this as political correctness.

22. Women and O Canada

The degree of resistance to equality in language became apparent to me when I started a debate about changing the third line in the national anthem which now reads as “in all thy sons command”. To me it is simply common sense to amend it to read in “all of us command”. After all, over 50% of the

Canadian population is made up of women, and so we should not be excluded in our national anthem. It became even more apparent when I discovered that the original wording in 1908 was “thou dost in us command”. I could not imagine why anyone would resist this change when Sir Robert Stanley Weir, who wrote the original song, “O Canada” in 1908, used the inclusive word “us”. Don’t you think Canada should command its sons as well as its daughters?

23. Changing the Institutions

Aside from quotas, and inclusive language, what is the next step for our government to bring about gender equality? Upon reflection, how would we rate Canada as a true democracy? Should it not mean equal representation of both genders in government, and inclusiveness in the language we use? I believe the institutions we have in place to deal with women’s issues, like the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, are somewhat outmoded. They were created at another time, and designed for another purpose. Consider that the Royal Commission on the Status of Women had no section on violence against women because this topic was considered too controversial to even mention in 1967.

What we need now is gender mainstreaming. The use of the term came into widespread use with the adoption of the 1995 Beijing *Platform for Action*, which emphasized the importance of mainstreaming gender perspective in all government policies and programs, so that, before decisions are taken, an analysis is made of the effects. It implies that women’s issues should not be marginalized, but rather integrated into every aspect of life. Gender mainstreaming also means that no gender, male or female, should occupy more than 60% of the seats in the legislature.

In Sweden, while Ministers have a responsibility to promote gender equality, they report to a Minister for Gender Equality who coordinates the effort. The emphasis in Sweden has moved from merely overcoming discrimination to achieving gender equality. Regular follow-ups, and evaluations, are used to ensure that mainstreaming occurs across all government departments.

Next, we need non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as those organizing Conferences like “the See Jane Run Conference” in Winnipeg, and the campaign school for women in Vancouver, that recently held its fourth annual meeting. These organizations are crucial for women to get

education, training, and mentoring, as well as to form networks that will help those who wish to enter politics. In addition to knowledge, of course, women need resources. We need to find ways to fund women who are interested in entering political careers.

We should emulate the kind of proactive approach towards women's issues that is being taken in Scandinavian countries that integrates gender mainstreaming across all levels of government rather than giving it token attention in one Secretary of State with little power.

24. Changing society – it starts with a child

After all that has been said, I believe education is the most important tool society has in changing its attitudes towards women.

This education is not only for boys; it's for girls too. There are far too many young women, whom I have encountered, with the perception that they are inferior to men. I can't believe that there are so many people, both men and women, who can't accept the fact that I'm a Senator, that I work, and speak my mind, and that I can actually think. These people would be much happier if I were "Mrs. Poy" who sits at home. So, we've got a long way to go to change these attitudes.

Speaking from the perspective of a mother with three sons, and as a grandmother, I know how important it is to raise children who understand what true equality means. Our sons don't believe that there are separate roles for women, and men.

All of us have the power to determine the future by educating our children, boys and girls, to confidently assume the varied responsibilities of life, in the workplace, in child rearing, and in the home. This education must start from the day a child is born. If we want real and lasting change, it means changing our concept of gender in society.