

Building Women's Leadership in Atlantic Canada

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The following section of this issue of *Atlantis* presents the proceedings of a workshop about women and politics that was held at Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax in December 2001. "Building Women's Leadership in Atlantic Canada" was a small, three-day workshop that brought together some thirty academics, policy makers, and politicians - all of them women - in an innovative format designed to maximize interaction and mutual learning. The project grew out of our shared interests, both research and practical, in the role of women and politics in the four Atlantic provinces of Canada. The two of us organized the workshop because we thought it was time to consolidate some of the empirically-based academic research relating to women and politics in the region. We also hoped to bring that research to the attention of those policy-makers and elected officials who are becoming attentive to the role of women in politics. Finally, and just as important, we wanted to hear what those women actually involved in electoral politics had to say about the academic research on the topic. We therefore invited six academics - a historian and five political scientists, including one PhD student - to present papers, each on her own particular area of expertise, to which invited women politicians from the Atlantic region responded. The comments of all but one of the discussants, along with two other addresses presented at the workshop, have been transcribed and edited, but kept in the form and voice in which they were presented; all have been approved by their authors for publication here.

In this Introduction, we provide background and context for the workshop, do our best to convey some flavour of the lively discussions, and draw some general observations about strategies for the future. While we cannot speak for the policy makers, activists, and politicians present, the workshop was an intensive learning exercise for the academics, and certainly more effective (not to say enjoyable) than conventional forms of research dissemination. Like most political scientists, we are enthralled with the exercise of political power and, as we listened to the practitioners speak over the weekend, our respect and admiration for them steadily increased.

On a world scale, Canadian women are doing well in relation to politics. Women's involvement with informal political activity is long established,

substantial, and increasing across the country, as is their role in electoral politics; in 2001, about twenty percent of elected officials in Canada were women, as compared to only five percent in 1970. However, in this as in so many other ways, the Atlantic region is conspicuously different. Community-level involvement on the part of women is high in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland, but participation in policy formation and leadership via elected office is the lowest in the country. Although elected office is not the only indicator of women's participation in political leadership, involvement in electoral politics is crucial to women's potential impact on policy. It is therefore important to first understand the reasons for the low level of women's electoral participation in the Atlantic provinces and then to move towards remedies.

In the most recent national election, Atlantic Canada elected four women while the rest of Canada elected 58 (12.5 percent of their parliamentary contingent as compared to 22 percent over all). At the provincial level, the Nova Scotia legislature, at 10 percent, has the smallest percentage of women elected in the country. The politicisation of women in this largely rural and economically dependent region of the country is therefore a crucial part of the overall advancement of Canadian women to political leadership, beginning with elected office. An improved understanding of their political situation may also shed light on the challenges facing women elsewhere in the world, in political settings which are similarly rural and on the economic periphery.

Some historical context is necessary for understanding the nature of public life as it affects women in the Atlantic Provinces. The Atlantic region was significant for Canadian women from an early date. For example, Mount Allison University in New Brunswick was the first university in the British Empire to grant a bachelor's degree to a woman and Mount Saint Vincent University in Nova Scotia was Canada's only women's university. A lively suffrage movement with international linkages was active in the region, prohibition and other women's organisations were prominent, and women played major roles in the co-operative movement (Conrad et al. 1988; Kealey 1993; Neal 1998; Prentice et al. 1996).

Contemporary women from both majority and minority populations in the Atlantic provinces continue to be active in community-based politics, in a region that replicates the country's fundamental cleavages, both ethnic and linguistic. Recent examples of women's activism include a March on Ottawa and appeal to the United Nations by the Maliseet women of New Brunswick's Tobique reserve, protests against fishplant closures by women in Newfoundland, a film on violence against women in the Black community commissioned in 2000 by Halifax's African Baptist Women's Institute, the activities of the Société Madeleine LeBlanc in Nova Scotia, and the impact of Halifax Voice of Women (McGrath et al. 1995; Silman 1987). This locally specific historical context is important for building women's leadership because women's organisations can serve as springboards for involvement in more formal political action. Women in policy-relevant elected and appointed office in turn tend to retain links to informal organisations of women, with consequences for broader agenda changes and social changes (Cohen 1990; Dobrowolsky 2000; Young 2000). But in this region women's local activism has not translated into equivalent levels of electoral presence.

Since the early 1990s, the low level of participation of women in public office has emerged internationally as an issue of central political importance. In Canada, the 1991 Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing concluded that the low proportion of women elected undermined Canada's commitment to political equality (1991, 113-15; see also Bashevkin, Brodie with Chandler, Erickson, Young, all 1991). A small, related body of research looked specifically at the distinctiveness of Atlantic Canada; it is reviewed in the academic articles included here. Prominent in this research is the suggestion that a regionally defined "traditionalism" might inhibit women's involvement in electoral politics (e.g. Arscott 1997).

We asked historian Margaret Conrad to launch the academic sessions of our workshop with an assessment of the impact of past history on women's leadership in the region. Her article ("Addressing the Democratic Deficit") begins with this last point - the alleged traditionalism of the region. She suggests that the marginalization of the region itself is more significant than anything about the position of women as such, while the impact of a political structure that assists incumbents may be the most influential of all. Conrad's article ends with two points that recurred during the workshop: the danger of basing substantive conclusions on inferences drawn from the very few examples possible in a small and sparsely populated region, and the importance of critically evaluating the existing institutional structures. A presentation at the workshop by political scientists Brenda O'Neill and Lynda

Erickson concurred with Conrad's analysis. Their paper ("Evaluating Traditionalism in the Atlantic Provinces") analyzes vote patterns and attitudes in the region to agree that this is not an area conspicuous for traditionalism in either behaviour or beliefs that might limit women's access to politics. More religious, more committed to government intervention in the economy, the people of Atlantic Canada do not stand out as hostile to feminism nor to women's political involvement.

As can be seen by the topics we proposed, this workshop was explicitly framed in terms of the barriers and deterrents that women face in seeking public office. Indeed, such an approach is characteristic of the political science literature. True to expectations, the academic articles begin from this perspective, though they were less discouraged by the prospect for electoral success than is often the case. By contrast, in both responses to papers and informal discussion, the politicians tended to depart from the academic script. Most strikingly, they shared their conviction that public life is gratifying and exciting. It is satisfying to have some ability, however limited, to make a contribution to the community. Power, they told us repeatedly, enables women to do something good. And despite all the stresses and pressures, public life is also exciting; politicians love what they do - and more women should be sharing that satisfaction.

On just such a positive note, Mary Clancy, former Liberal Member of Parliament for Halifax, started our sessions with an informal presentation based on her own experiences. She shared a personal recollection of a moment when she realized, "Oh God, I love the House of Commons," and another memory of when, during an ordinary Supply debate, everyone in the House - from the parliamentary pages to the Deputy Speaker - was female. Clancy recalled that it was partly the collegiality in the House, particularly her friendships with other women, even women in other parties, that made working in the House so enjoyable for her. But she was proudest and most satisfied with contributing to the legislative process and achieving substantive public policy changes.

Women participating in the workshop were, not surprisingly, already committed to the electoral process, but they also expressed doubt about their ability to recruit other, particularly younger, women into the partisan fray. The tension between electoral politics and non-partisan grass roots politics was a recurring theme. Peace activist Muriel Duckworth, who had also twice served as a candidate for the New Democratic Party (NDP), made a compelling case for activist politics, as she pointed to the vibrancy of the anti-globalization movement and the peace movement. One young activist (Calinda Brown) sought to persuade young people in the new movements to turn their energy and enthusiasm to the electoral project, while Duckworth, like many others

present, insisted on the absolute necessity of women continuing activism both inside and outside the electoral process. Women like Mary Clancy saw no dilemma; she was firmly convinced that she made more impact as a private (backbench) Member of Parliament in Ottawa than as an activist. Clancy assessed her impact as greater than that of the President of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women when Clancy was in Parliament. Retired Senator Erminie Cohen (from New Brunswick) seconded Clancy's opinion, and spoke to her own role in passing gun-control legislation; she was a Progressive Conservative (PC) Senator and she reported providing, across party lines in the Senate, the crucial vote to pass the Liberal Party's gun control bill. "It was terrible, probably the worst three weeks of my life," she said, "but people do support you if you vote your conscience."

The same conviction about what could be achieved through the electoral system came through clearly again during the session featuring the Right Honourable Claudette Bradshaw; she spoke from notes, referring to Conrad's paper. Bradshaw is the only woman from this region to have served in cabinet; she was appointed to Jean Chrétien's cabinet in 1997 and when she spoke to us her major portfolio was the Department of Labour. She came into politics as a committed anti-poverty activist. Entering into politics with a cause and a purpose, she has been rewarded with the ability to improve the situation of people living in poverty. Bradshaw said that she realized early on that in order to help the poor, she had to deal with the rich and powerful. So she sought out, first, powerful male community groups such as the Rotary Club, and, later, the Liberal Party in Ottawa, in order to exercise power from the inside. Driven as she was by devotion to a cause, she did not report problems with substantial opposition from men, and found the "glass ceiling" fragile and largely imaginary. The theme of politics as pursuit of a social goal, rather than a career, re-emerged repeatedly during the workshop, as did Bradshaw's belief in the effectiveness of electoral politics for furthering such goals.

Bradshaw also had another point to convey to this particular audience. As the Regional Minister for New Brunswick, she was responsible for making recommendations for appointments to a wide range of boards and commissions, but although she had made efforts to seek out women for appointments, she found that women tended to wait passively to be asked. She suggested that, instead women should actively strategize and seek out appointments. She also expressed disappointment that the efforts of Ministers (including the Prime Minister) to achieve equity in appointments go unnoticed and unappreciated by the public, and unpraised by women who value equity in appointments.

The Minister's comments sparked intense discussion among the political women present, a discussion that, for the most part, left the academics spinning. The activists buzzed back and forth about which appointments were partisan and which were non-partisan, who was keeping track of women's appointments, what was the proper procedure to submit résumés, and so on. For example, Cynthia Layden-Baron, Senior Program and Policy Analyst with the Women's Policy Office in Newfoundland, keeps track of all provincial appointments, but Brigitte Neumann, Acting Executive Director of the government-appointed, arms-length Advisory Council on the Status of Women in Nova Scotia, considers it too partisan an activity for her office. The session ended with increased awareness that considerably more attention should be directed to gender equity in the appointments process.

It is worth emphasizing just how sophisticated, and indeed brutally pragmatic, the political activists present were about the political process. Next to them, we political scientists sometimes felt that we were mere babes in the woods. For example, whereas feminist scholars regularly argue in favour of gender-based quotas, one politician was adamantly opposed to the idea, saying that a riding that was not won fair and square through a competitive nomination contest was a second-class riding and didn't carry weight in caucus; similarly, a candidate appointed by the party Leader would lack, once in office, any countervailing basis of power on which to oppose the Leader. Another politician had no such scruples and advised that women seize whatever office was available, even if appointed as a "token woman."

At the same time, it was striking that, no matter how hard-nosed, these women were driven to succeed in the public arena by their will to achieve some substantive goal other than their own personal ambition. The politicians who spoke about the glass ceiling collapsing, the waters parting before them, or the men who literally stood aside, were politicians who were driven by the need to achieve some goal for their constituents, of whom they spoke possessively as "my people." They talked of opposition to be sure, but because the issue was larger than themselves these women were able to brush off criticism and subtle bullying by the "grey-haired suits." One member of a provincial legislature talked about how she shrugged off the official party pollsters and instead relied on her own Saturday morning poll at local grocery stores to get a sense of public opinion. If it takes her three hours to do the groceries, listening to people's complaints, she knows she's in trouble, whereas if she whips through in twenty minutes with a smile and a wave, she knows that she has affairs under control. The political scientists were appalled to think of a politician relying on such a

biased, informal means of measuring public opinion, but surely the point is that this woman is a successful suburban politician because she knows who "her people" are - middle-class, dual-career couples who shop on Saturdays - and she knows what they want.

The second academic presentation at the workshop was by Joanna Everitt, on the topic of election-period coverage of male and female candidates by the print media. As her article "Media in the Maritimes" demonstrates, Everitt's research points to a distinctive feature of political life in the Maritimes in regard to how the print media report on candidates during election campaigns. Particularly in the smaller provinces, the press characterizes all candidates, though women more so than men, in terms of their family background, or in local diction, "who their people are." This might seem to diminish a female candidate's credibility, but at least one politician was quick to seize on the advantages of such coverage in terms of its ability to humanize or personalize a candidate. Everitt further suggested that individual journalists make a difference, so that candidates would do well to cultivate such relationships. This inference was soundly endorsed by a public-relations professional at the workshop.

Responding to Everitt, Ann Bell recounted her own experience in party politics in Newfoundland in the 1980s. She first became politically active in the women's movement and then, with other feminists, recruited women to contest a series of old-fashioned leadership and nomination battles. Bell and an associate became voting delegates at the Newfoundland PC leadership convention by selling more party memberships than the "old boys." They then parleyed convention votes into a commitment from the future premier to establish an Advisory Council on the Status of Women - which he did, and appointed Bell as Chair. Her story suggests that party gatekeepers may not always exercise the level of control that is attributed to them (though the gatekeepers were later able to block her attempts to obtain a PC nomination). Understandably, Bell believes that coming up through the ranks of a party does not work for women, and that it is more effective for women to come in at the top, through the Leader's recommendation. Other women disagreed strongly, citing their own examples. It seems that the best strategy is very much context-specific, depending on the particular Leader, party, riding, and time period.

Bell also addressed, with some bitterness, another issue that recurred in discussion: the way in which the media destroy privacy for all politicians but far more so for women. Like others, she perceived media intrusiveness as a major deterrent to women's willingness to contemplate political office. Television, she said, has made things much worse: "Both men and women are judged on appearance, but how many ways

can you identify a three-piece suit?" When feminist Lynn Verge was running (successfully) for the leadership of the Newfoundland PC party, she wore a red coat, and, "you cannot believe how many calls came in because she was not running for the Liberals."

The next academic presentation was by Sonia Pitre, who is completing a doctoral dissertation on women in party politics in New Brunswick. Her paper, "Women's Struggle for Legislative Power," provides a useful review of the political science literature on women and electoral politics, a baseline reference for the more specialized research articles in this collection. Pitre takes a cross-national approach to review the formal institutional factors - chiefly the electoral system - and the informal inter-personal dynamics inside political parties that are relevant to women's partisan political participation.

Pitre's presentation was followed by Yvonne Atwell's reflections on her own experience in provincial politics, including her time as an NDP Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) of Nova Scotia (eighteen months in 1997-98). Atwell represented the electoral district of Preston, an area which has been populated by African-Canadians since Loyalist times; the district's electoral boundaries were deliberately drawn in order to elect a Black MLA such as Atwell. Recruited initially by Alexa McDonough, she said convincingly that her involvement with electoral politics was "a wonderful experience." However, as her comments show, she was deeply ambivalent about the job of the MLA. Having gone into politics to give a voice to the Black community, she was expected also to defend the interests of those wealthy White constituents present in her riding - and she was the only Black woman, including staff, in the legislature. She is still the only Black woman to have served in a legislature in the Atlantic region.

Patricia Doyle-Bedwell's article, based on a moving address to the workshop, again speaks powerfully to ambivalence about seeking elected office. Doyle-Bedwell has become prominent in Nova Scotia public life: she is a law professor and Director of the Transition Year Program for Aboriginal and Minority Students at Dalhousie University, and she has served as Chair of the Nova Scotia Advisory Committee on the Status of Women. As a result, she has been approached to run as a candidate for several different parties on numerous occasions, but she equivocates. Her first commitment is to the Mi'kmaq community, from whose matriarchs she draws her strength to continue. She reflects on her dual marginalization, first as a non-status Indian child growing up on a Cape Breton reserve in the pre-Charter days when her mother lost Indian status with her marriage to Doyle-Bedwell's father, and then, under difficult conditions, as a Mi'kmaq woman at the elite White institutions of Dalhousie Law School and

beyond. Electoral politics looks like an even less welcoming environment, even though it represents possibilities of influence fully compatible with the Mi'kmaq traditions of powerful women.

The final session of the workshop focused specifically on the impact of women legislators on policy. Susan Carroll presented material on women in the state legislatures across the United States in order to provide the basis for a comparative perspective on the Atlantic region. Carroll is affiliated with the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University (CAWP). The Center, which has an extensive history of collaboration among academics, policy-makers, and party activists concerned with analyzing and enlarging the participation of women in politics, has for a considerable period been using public-opinion surveys of legislators to pin down the characteristics of women legislators and the difference they make in politics. In her paper, "Have Women Legislators in the United States Become More Conservative?" Carroll reports on the most recent survey, which we are proud to be the first to publish.

Canadian scholars tend to be uncomfortable with the use of data drawn from the rather dissimilar political system south of the border. To be sure, a parliamentary system with strict party discipline differs significantly from a presidential system with weaker parties, and the ideological terrain is far wider in Canada. Nonetheless, the substantial body of research on women and politics in the United States provides a valuable comparative dimension for research. Importantly, the two countries share the single-member, first-past-the-post electoral system that has been identified as a major factor in limiting women's electoral success. Within that common electoral system, although nomination procedures differ substantially, parties in both countries exercise comparable local autonomy during candidate nomination - and the nomination stage is crucial to increasing women's electoral presence. Furthermore, there is a long history of cross-border migration as well as integration and collaboration in private and public-sector ventures between Canada and United States, which has generated a similar if hardly identical cultural context. Finally, the sheer scale of politics in the United States means a far greater number of politicians elected in the fifty state legislatures than in the ten provinces. Small as the percentage is of women office-holders, the absolute numbers are large enough that scholars in the United States have been able to develop a rich data base referring to actual women.

Carroll reports that, overall, there is more continuity than difference across the years as women state legislators - both Republicans and Democrats - continue to say in 2001 that they have a special responsibility to represent women's concerns and to effect legislation relating to those concerns. However,

there is evidence that, like their party, Republican women are now more conservative; the party's shift to the right seems to be pushing out its more progressive women members. Party identification, important as it is, is not the whole story.

The final article presents comments made by Alexa McDonough, Leader of the federal New Democratic Party of Canada at the time of the workshop, in response to Carroll's paper. She spoke to us just as she must have been deciding to step down as party Leader, so the article can be read as a retrospective on her political career. McDonough articulated best, perhaps, the idea that partisanship matters. She prefaced it by saying that women do have a "kind of humanizing, a politicizing, and feminizing effect" inside political parties, and that the quality of any party's caucus is improved by having more women. However, she had a stronger conviction that it was more important, even for women, to have social democrats - whether men or women - in the legislature than to have more women elected by other, less progressive parties. Given the varied party affiliations of those present, her remarks sparked a lively discussion.

Indeed, one of the strongest themes to emerge from this workshop was the multiple roles of partisanship. Extremely rigid party discipline characterizes Canadian legislatures, so that elected members, both male and female, do usually have to "toe the party line." In its current form, according to many analysts, party discipline is excessive and harms the quality of parliamentary democracy in Canada. We found that, for the partisan women at our workshop, belonging to the "Party" is like being part of an extended family bound together by personal loyalty; for them, it is less a matter of toeing the line than of being a team player. Nor is it easy to disregard party policies. The women who held or had held governmental positions stressed how just how unusual, and how politically risky, cooperation across party lines can be. A rather heated discussion also reminded us that around contentious issues such as the response to terrorism, women, even politically active women, are by no means in agreement as to the proper policies.

There was considerable discussion of what can be said in favour of more women holding public office, given their diversity of views and agendas. We talked about service, equity, ambition, and the need to represent women. Carroll made a new and important argument on the basis of her experience of watching the Republican Party rise to dominate the United States Congress and state legislatures over the 1990s. Even as Democratic women are being elected, they have increasingly less influence in Republican-dominated institutions. If moderate women leave the governing party, there is likely to be no effective voice for women at all.

We ended the workshop wondering what will happen next, here in the Atlantic region, in relation to the role of women in politics. Alexa McDonough has resigned as leader of the political party that has been the most hospitable to women, and the party's future is unknown. On the bright side, women's empowerment continues to be a centrepiece of non-partisan public-policy initiatives. The Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women has carried out a series of workshops to build momentum. As the representative of Status of Women Canada, Lucinda Montazimbert reminded us at the workshop that the agency has a formal commitment, not just to the advancement of women, but also to their empowerment. The Government of Canada has initiated the Metropolis Project, with the capacity to link women's organisations throughout the region, and a particular emphasis on the full integration of immigrant women into public affairs. Nonetheless, there is a real limit to such initiatives. Cynthia Layden-Baron expressed doubts about non-partisan projects, pointing out that political life beyond the municipal and school-board level is structured in terms of political parties. At some point, women and efforts to recruit women for leadership must involve themselves, not just with parties, but with the dominant political parties, and work within them for access to power.

But which party should we direct our attention to in this region? We do not think that individual women are obliged to agree on a decision that is bound to rest on a unique combination of personal ties and friendships, opportunism, and principles, and always in a particular riding association at a specific time. We will say, however, that we took particular note of the Liberal Party women, whose strong contingent from Newfoundland included a stalwart delegation from Gander, one of whom hobbled off the plane on crutches. When the Liberal women arrived at the workshop, some of them were wearing signature red jackets and dresses, women from three different provinces greeted each other as familiar friends. We think this speaks to the strength of the Liberal Women's Commission (the extra-parliamentary branch of the Party that links women in the federal and provincial parties) in Atlantic Canada. We are well acquainted with the apparent marginalization of the federal sector of the Liberal Women's Commission, as evidenced by the Prime Minister's very public dressing down of MP Carolyn Bennett in the early spring of 2002. But we were nonetheless impressed by what we saw.

By contrast, the Progressive Conservative women at the workshop clearly did not know each other (although Erminie Cohen was greeted by all the federal politicians from other parties who were present). To our surprise, it had proved difficult to recruit PC women for the workshop, either as speakers or attendees; this in

spite of the relative strength of the party in provincial legislatures. Putting ideology aside for the moment (if that is ever possible), the relatively lower public profile of PC women in the region can be attributed, in part, to the party's collapse on the national scene. It seems that the women who remain inside what is now called the "Atlantic rump" of the once grand PC Party are isolated from each other as well as from the main currents of party life. The cohesion and energy of the Liberal women suggests that vertical linkages with the national party organization in Ottawa are crucial for partisan activists in this peripheral and economically dependent part of the country. Regional co-operation among dispersed women is all the more difficult to maintain without connections to powerful patrons at the centre.

Overall, the politicians expressed a positive and optimistic view of public life. In their comments, they emphasized what is probably the most important, and least discussed, fact about political life: that politics is about friendship and loyalty. The academic research related to attempts to promote women's leadership has already drawn attention to the importance of increasing the impact of women inside parties. But efforts at affirmative action will not go far unless they support the special kind of friendship that develops around the quest for electoral office. In the end, it is the women inside the parties who do the invisible work of recruitment and building friendships, the kind of work that occurs behind the scenes and rarely appears in public. They are the ones who work at building the infrastructure that can support a network of alliances and friendship, not just among a few women in the provincial capitals, but throughout each province, and across provinces in the region. We hope that, in a small way, our workshop was able to contribute to such networks among women interested in electoral politics, here in Atlantic Canada.

We hope also that the texts presented below can make a further contribution by suggesting new directions for future research on women and politics. Specifically in regard to Atlantic Canada, this collection casts doubt on the alleged traditionalism of the region - in political culture or history, public opinion, or media coverage - as a factor deterring women. Perhaps more research attention could be directed to traditionalism in the sense of the survival here of a traditional two-party system, which has blocked the rise to power of the more "women-friendly" NDP. The discussion at this workshop also underlines the fact that elected office is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of political life, and that much more research could be directed to the submerged bulk of women's appointment to non-elected boards and commissions.

But what else, specific to this region, might be keeping women out of electoral politics? Louise Carbert's research on rural women's leadership in Atlantic Canada suggests that the prominent role of

women as agents of regional economic development programs may be a factor in drawing women away from partisan involvements (2003). Her work also suggests, once again, that the situation of women in Atlantic Canada is likely to be relevant elsewhere. After all, many other regions, in North America and elsewhere,

are also distant from the main engines of economic growth and prosperity. Perhaps some of the same mechanisms are operating there to keep women distant from political influence. And perhaps the possible solutions can be useful, not just for women of the Atlantic provinces, nor even just for Canada as a whole, but far more widely.

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