

GETTING INVOLVED IN POLITICS: YES YOU CAN – AND SHOULD

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Recently, I wrote an article published in the UofT Magazine (Summer 2010 issue) called [“Where are the Women?”](#) lamenting the shortage of women in politics. We need more women involved in the political process, for the reasons I mentioned in the original article, and I am really excited that so many people have responded, expressing interest in getting involved. Many have asked for more advice on running for public office. Many have also asked for advice on, not necessarily running for office, but in getting involved politically in other ways. I encourage men AND women to become more involved, so guys—feel free to use this too.

One comment I’d really like to make first: Quite often people (*particularly* women) will say, “I don’t have the right education”, or “I don’t have the right experience”, or “I don’t have a thick-enough skin”. *Nonsense*. A full 1/3 of Canadian MPs do not have a university degree—but some of those people are the best MPs, because they have extraordinarily valuable practical experience. Who better to know what so many women face than someone who has multi-tasked her way through raising kids and keeping a household, while holding down a job to pay the bills? Who knows better the challenges facing the thousands of new immigrants coming to Canada than people who have been through that experience? Who better to understand the pressing needs of innovation and entrepreneurship, and the challenges facing small and medium businesses, than people with business experience? The Canadian government needs to both understand and represent Canadians, and their diversity—that means people with a variety of educational and experiential backgrounds not only can, but should, get involved.

Another comment is that many people feel that politics is somehow the realm of elites, or cliques, and that you need to have connections in order to get involved. *Nonsense to that, too.* The political process is far more accessible, and easy to start participating in, than even I thought when I started. But you need to start somewhere.

ASK YOURSELF SOME QUESTIONS. What order of government interests you? How much time do you have to contribute? What issues are you most interested in? Which MPs, MPPs/MLAs, municipal councillors do you like or admire? Why? Which ones do you not respect as much, and why not? The answers will help you decide where to focus your efforts, and with whom.

JOIN A PARTY. Although not necessary for municipal politics, this is a fundamental part of both federal and provincial politics. You may want to get involved somewhere other than the riding where you live, if you happen to like an MP or MPP/MLA elsewhere, or you know some of the people already involved elsewhere. There is no requirement, even to run for office, that you actually live in the riding that you focus your efforts on, although it helps to have some kind of connection.

VOLUNTEER. It's the best way to get to know the people, the system, the processes, what works and what doesn't. For example, we welcome volunteers to our constituency office. We welcome all involvement, large or small, because it's a great way for anyone to learn what really goes on in an MP's office at the constituency level, which is very much focused on the community and the needs of people in their dealings with government. We also welcome volunteers in our Ottawa office. The work there is very different than in the constituency, but it's great exposure for those interested in the more legislative, Parliamentary aspects of an MP's job. You can learn a great deal (particularly if you ask lots of questions) about what is involved.

RUN FOR PUBLIC OFFICE. Actually running for public office is a big step, but I strongly encourage everyone to at least consider it—particularly after you've

taken the time to learn and experience what you might be getting into. My first answer to the question, "How do we get more women in Parliament?" is to say we need, quite simply, more women to run.

If you are interested to read the full article plus tips on "who, what, when, where and how", please visit Martha's blog on her website: MarthaHallFindlay.ca