

"POLITICALLY SPEAKING"

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August, 2011*

Wow. Women! Nearly a THIRD of all of Canada's Premiers are now women.

Alison Redford in Alberta, Christy Clark in British Columbia, Eva Aariak in Nunavut, and most recently, Kathy Dunderdale in Newfoundland and Labrador. They make up nearly a third of all Canadian Premiers.

First, a great big congratulations to all four of them -- and a big thank you for significantly increasing the proportion of women at that level of public office.

For anyone who has been paying attention, you will already know that Canada has a dismal record of female representation in public office. Dismal. Embarrassing, really. It varies a bit by region and by order of government, but for the most part, we barely make it past 20% in our representation in public office. This past May, we saw improvement in the House of Commons -- almost 24% of MPs are now women. But pardon me if I'm not rushing around excitedly noting what great strides we've made. We managed to hit about 20% in 1995, which means that not much has really changed in over two decades. Worse, Canada still ranks behind dozens of other countries. The Scandinavian countries (surprise, surprise) all are in the high 30s or 40s -- some are close to fully equal representation. But Canada is also way behind places like Rwanda, Costa Rica, Argentina, South Africa. We do worse than Mexico and -- wait for it -- Tunisia. Canada ranks a distant 40th in the world on the Inter-Parliamentary Union's "List of Women in National Parliaments".

"So what?", you say. Well, it matters because women represent 52% of the population. We are the majority. Full confession here, I am not one of those who believes that we need more women in public office because they are any "better" at it than men. After many years in law, business and then politics, I do not believe for a minute that women, as a rule, are any more cooperative, any more consensus driven, any more collegial, or any 'nicer' than men. (Little known fact: Some of the worst hecklers in the House of Commons are women.) But in comprising 52% of the population in Canada, women represent a majority of the people affected by all of the legislation passed in the House of Commons, in provincial and territorial legislatures, and in municipalities all across Canada. And, whether we like it or not, a lot of legislation can affect women differently than men - funding for childcare as an example. As such, women need to be at the table when the policies behind those decisions are discussed, and should be there as they work through the different legislatures and committee processes before eventually becoming law. Imagine a proposed

law banning any broadcast of NFL football on Saturday afternoons. I'm pretty sure that men would want at least equal representation at that decision-making table. (Although maybe we should insist on only 48%.)

So how did those four women Premiers achieve their current positions? Trust me, there was no easy path to candidacy or elected office. Indeed, chances are pretty good that they not only had to do what they do well, but they had to do it better than a lot of the men they were competing against – not just for leadership, but all along. The key is that each of these women at some point stood up and said, "I WANT to do that, and I CAN do that, so I WILL do that."

The only way to get more women in public office is to get more women running for public office. But a lot of women hesitate - not the least because they see a male-dominated environment. So why do I stress that it's almost a 'third' of all Premiers instead of saying 'four'? Because a third creates an important critical mass. A large number of studies have shown that in many cases of social inequality, situations where the public or a certain subgroup treats people differently because of their gender, race, colour, creed, or some other distinguishing factor, people's perceptions are known to change when that magical critical mass of "1/3" happens.

Let's hope that this achievement encourages more women to say, "I want to run for office, I can run for office -- I will run for office."

(Other reading: *"The Accidental Symbol – How Martha Hall Findlay became synonymous with "women in politics" — despite her best efforts"*, Egle Procuta, This Magazine, May-June 2007 ([pdf version](#)))

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