



LIBERAL PARTY OF CANADA
RENEWAL COMMISSION

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A Just Society Taskforce

I N T E R I M R E P O R T O N

W O M E N

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By: The Honourable Anne McLellan



Liberal Party of Canada Renewal Commission

Interim report on Women

By Anne McLellan

Because of the nature of the work of this Task Force, I felt that it was important to try and reach as many women, as possible, at the grassroots level within our party. To that end I have held six consultations across the country organized by local Liberal women, although in some cases a small number of those in attendance were not partisan Liberals. Those six consultations were held in Halifax, Charlottetown, Calgary, Edmonton, Ottawa and Toronto. These gatherings were generally well attended. In addition I was invited by the Chair of Women's Caucus, Belinda Stronach, to attend their two-day caucus meeting, at which not only were M.P.s and Senators present, but also a number of long serving women M.P.s, who were defeated in the last election.

In addition to this outreach, I contacted the eleven original leadership candidates with a series of questions and asked them to respond in writing. I indicated that their responses would be made available on the Task Force's website (www.annemclellan.ca or www.annemclellan.com). We have heard from eight of the candidates to date and their detailed responses appear on the Task Force website. In some cases, candidates issued press releases, backgrounders or statements which they wished to have attached to their responses and they also are found on the website.

Further, on a topic as fundamental as women's participation in our party, I felt it essential to write to all 308 federal ridings asking for their grassroots participation. I have submitted to them, in French and English, a questionnaire similar to that sent to the leadership candidates. I have asked them to respond to this questionnaire by September 15, 2006 and their responses will be posted on the website. The website provides the opportunity for any interested person to share his or her views. We have also included on the website a number of important links that encourage interested individuals to seek additional information on women in politics. For example, we include links to Equal Voice, One Woman One Vote, Emily's List, and to various Canadian and international research institutes and parliamentary associations. The Task Force website is readily available by simply accessing www.annemclellan.ca or www.annemclellan.com.

I have also discussed the work of the Task Force with the President of the Women's Commission, Alvah Hanrahan and have heard from many members of the Commission.

In summary, based on my consultations to date, I would say that there is an overwhelming sense of frustration, and in some cases anger and dismay, on the part of many women in our Party as it relates to our efforts to achieve greater gender equality. I think there is a sense that while the LPC has talked a good story in relation to the participation of women, both at the elected level and within the party itself, that we have a long way to go to give the talk concrete substance¹. Much of what I heard I will be putting in a more detailed report which I will present to the Women's Commission at our Leadership Convention in November/December 2006 in Montreal. However, I will outline for you what I think the key recommendations of the Task Force will be in its final report.

The LPC has a publicly stated goal of 25% women candidates in any federal election. There is a clear consensus that this number is not acceptable any longer and a virtually unanimous opinion that the goal should be 50%. People have differences of opinion as to how long it should take us to reach the 50% goal. However there appears to be no disagreement around the fact that we must establish the 50% goal and work diligently toward it over the next two to three elections. If you review the responses of the leadership candidates all of them speak to the importance of achieving the goal of parity. Some of the candidates are more specific than others; for example, Stephan Dion makes a firm commitment that in the next election he would have one-third women candidates. Ken Dryden speaks of a 30% target or goal if the election is called within two years and a 35% target or goal if the election is called within four years. Other colleagues talk of reaching gender parity within a number of election cycles, generally within two or three elections. In the case of Scott Brison he would achieve gender parity by 2011. Whatever the time frame accepted, benchmarks must be established along the way so that focus is maintained and accountability is ensured.

The present goal of 25% is not written into any of the Party's rules or policies. The goal of 25% was first put in place for the '93 general election by then opposition leader Jean Chrétien. Most women believe that if the Liberal Party is serious about gender parity, as it relates to nominated candidates, that we need to formalize the goal of 50%; for example in the Party's constitution or in its operating policies. Our view is that it would be a mistake to include such a goal in the constitution of our Party. However, a clear written statement of the commitment should be adopted at our convention in November and included in the policies of our Party. The Leader and the LPC National Executive would be held accountable for meeting the goal.

While gender parity has been achieved in our delegate selection at the riding level, there is a strong view that all committees and working groups of the Party should guarantee gender parity. It is recommended that in keeping with the philosophy of the Party in relation to the equal representation of women and men, that all committees and working groups guarantee gender parity.

In addition, there is growing interest in the creation of the position of "President-elect" for the LPC. Some, including leadership candidates, recommend that this position alternate between men and women on an on-going basis.

In conclusion, on this point, we should point out there was little support for a fixed quota. Nonetheless, everyone consulted was supportive of active measures to reach the goal of gender parity. For example, most women with whom I have consulted, and all leadership candidates, believe that the power of appointment should be retained, albeit to be used sparingly and in a judicious manner.

In relation to achieving the goal of gender parity, women believe that it is time that the Party put its "money where its mouth is". Women believe that it is essential to have both financial and human resources directed by the Party to ensure the identification, recruitment, training and mentoring of prospective female candidates. Most believe that there should be an office established whose sole function is to work on these objectives in conjunction with the leader, riding associations, the national campaign team and the Women's Commission. Some believe that this office should be within the Leader's office, while others suggested that the office be established within the LPC, reporting directly to the Leader.

It is our impression that women will not only be disillusioned but angry if the party does not make a serious commitment to gender parity and put the resources, both financial and human, behind achieving this goal. Therefore, we do think it will be imperative for the party, in discussions with the new leader, to determine both the resources necessary to deliver on a commitment of gender parity and how those resources are to be structured and utilized, taking into account the views and ideas of women.

It is quite clear that the majority of women consulted believe that the challenges of identification, recruitment, training and mentoring of perspective women candidates is not something that the Women's Commission, as presently structured, has been able to do. Quite truthfully, nor have our provincial and territorial associations been able to discharge these functions in a sustained, organized and focused manner. We think there is also a feeling, among many women, and especially some of those who are younger, that any attempt to renew the Women's Commission to carry out this task would fail. We realize that the role of the Commissions is a structural issue be dealt with elsewhere; however we do believe that there are serious questions to be asked in relation to the role and functions of the Women's Commission. There is a loss of confidence on the part of many women in relation to its ability to do that which many see as a paramount objective for Liberals at this time - the achievement of gender parity as it relates to candidates standing for election. The future of the Commissions and their appropriate role is obviously one that goes beyond the work of the Task Force on women's involvement in the Liberal Party. However, we think, based on what we have heard to date, that unless the Women's Commission is transformed into an organization with greater clarity of purpose and clearly articulated, expectations, as it relates to enhancing Liberal women's participation in politics, that it will continue to lose support and participants, especially younger women, who will look for other ways to have meaningful involvement in the LPC.

All women agree that the identification, recruitment, training and mentoring of women must be a key part of any work plan for the Party going forward and that there must be defined outcomes and accountability at the highest levels of the Party. It appears that little will happen to achieve the goal of gender parity if the leader does not make a clear commitment to that end and is held accountable by Liberals for delivering on that commitment. Once a new leader is in place, it will be important to determine, in discussions with the Party, how he or she wishes to develop a clearly articulated and focused strategy for the achievement of gender parity and the resources that he or she will commit to it. We would suggest however that if the Party is serious about gender parity and is serious about developing a structured plan in relationship to the identification, recruitment, training and mentoring of women, it will be imperative for the LPC to commit new resources to this goal. Based on the responses received from leadership candidates, all realize that such a commitment will have to be made.

In relation to the training and mentoring of prospective women candidates, it is quite clear we need to review our efforts to date and determine what would constitute a successful program for the future. We may be able to draw upon the experiences of non-partisan organizations such as Equal Voice and One Woman One Vote, both of whom have developed materials that can be accessed by women who are interested in running for elected office at the federal level. In fact, Equal Voice has developed a web based training program entitled "Getting to The Gate" that all women can access on the Internet. However, most women feel that if we, as a party, are serious about gender parity we will need to put more effort and resources into developing training materials that do much more than provide interested women with a few hours of information that can be described, at best, as an overview of what is required to run either a successful nomination or election campaign. Leadership candidates all agree that better training and mentoring programs have to be put in place if we have any chance of attracting more women to run for us. This must be a priority for the new leader and the Party as soon as the convention ends.

Identification and recruitment must be a planned, on-going process. It cannot be ad hoc or only undertaken close to an anticipated election. The reality of women's lives, especially as primary care-givers, means that more time is required for interested women to make the necessary arrangements to organize a serious run, in either a nomination or election campaign. Young women have suggested we need to develop a more structured approach to mentoring – identifying young female leaders in high school and university and then mentoring and promoting these young leaders through our riding associations, commissions and provincial and territorial executives. Women have made the point repeatedly that this process will be a long term one. In addition, it is clear that women are less likely than men to self-identify as possible candidates. Therefore a proactive identification process is more important for women.

The nomination process continues to be a source of concern. Without a truly transparent process that includes reasonable cut-off dates for submission of memberships, equal access to membership forms and membership lists, well in advance of any scheduled nomination meeting, it will be difficult to overcome the view that too many nominations are still pre-determined "by the boys". Women have stated clearly that they have no concern with a competitive nomination process; they just want to know that the process is fair and that the playing field is level.

Of course everything said here in relation to the challenges faced by women in pursuing political participation is magnified many times over for minority women. We need to be more aware of this reality and its implications for our identification, recruitment, training and mentoring efforts.

We also want to raise the possible role of the Judy LaMarsh Fund in the identification, recruitment, training and mentoring of women. This is a fund run independent of the LPC with its own objectives and by-laws. It has been a vehicle by which female candidates, once nominated, have been provided with support to help them finance their campaigns. Some of the women with whom I have spoken, are interested in revising the Judy LaMarsh Fund's objectives and by-laws to provide it with a more clearly defined and proactive role in the identification, recruitment, training and mentoring of female candidates for our party.

Some have suggested that the Fund, over time and with hard work, could transform itself into something more akin to the well-known Emily's List which provides different kinds of support, including financial, to women running for the Democratic Party in the United States. No one suggests that the Judy LaMarsh Fund can transform itself quickly into an Emily's List, which has been in existence for some time and has raised substantial amounts of money to support pro-choice, Democratic Party women candidates in the United States. They have structured programs of identification, mentoring and training for women candidates and because of the high cost of seeking both nominations and running for election in the United States, provide substantial financial assistance to their endorsed candidates. In addition, Emily's List plays an important role in helping women in targeted races contact voters and get the vote out.

I have discussed the future of the Judy LaMarsh Fund with its current Chair, Alvah Hanrahan. She has indicated that she would be supportive of discussions on how women in our party might be able to enhance the Judy LaMarsh Fund to make it a more activist vehicle by which we not only provide funds to women running in general elections, but for nomination races as well.

In the short term, this Fund must be encouraged to broaden its base, to reach women who are not Liberals, to enhance the profile and importance of the Fund and to provide meaningful support, financial and otherwise, to women. Any changes made to the objectives and by-laws of the Fund will need to be assessed in light of the anticipated Accountability Act.

As we have noted, the Fund is outside the jurisdiction of the LPC and requires no action on the part of the National Executive or delegates at our convention. However, we wanted to flag the Fund because there is a desire to see it become a more important vehicle for the support of women.

We look forward to hearing from Liberals, and others, interested in women's increased participation in politics. Consultations on our recommendations will continue throughout the Fall. The Task Force will participate in the meeting of the Women's Commission at our Convention in Montreal and will report our findings and recommendations. We hope that which has been presented above will lead to a constructive dialogue among Liberals as to how we can best help ameliorate the most basic deficit in our democracy – that of the under representation of women in political life.

Endnotes

¹For some of the relevant provisions in the LPC Constitution: see Article 1(2)(f) in which the LPC commits to "respect the principle of equal participation between men and women"; Article 4(4) - the creation of the Women's Liberal commission, the primary purpose which is "to ensure equal participation of women at all levels of the Party"; Article 4(7) One of the primary objectives of the LPC is to ensure equal participation of men and women at all levels of the Party. An assessment to determine the extent of which equal participation has been achieved will be reported to every biennial convention by the president of the LPC in consultation with the National Women's Liberal Commission; Article 14(8)(h) in carrying out its responsibilities the national campaign committee shall consider gender equity.