

## PROMPTING WOMEN TO GET INVOLVED IN POLITICS

### A Woman's View GINETTE PETITPAS-TAYLOR

What if the best candidate was a woman and she wasn't running?

Like humourist Kin Hubbard said 100 years ago, "We'd all like to vote for the best man, but he's never a candidate." The next election - that we know of for certain - are the municipal elections in New Brunswick in May 2008.

When we pick our elected representatives from 50% of the pool, we might not be getting the best candidate. Just as importantly, an "unbalanced" elected body is often not aware of some of the issues it should be dealing with.

Moncton's municipal councillor Kathryn Barnes, said recently there are many reasons why women should get involved - for the satisfaction of serving in politics, because women must share the burden of governing - but a key reason is the fact that men and women have a different point of view.

In today's society, women and men still have, in general, different lives and experiences, so the best decisions are made when everyone is represented. As the president of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities says, that's when policies are rooted in reality.

In the long term, we must find ways to fix what is keeping women out of the political game - that is the goal for sometime in the future when we consider that it is a problem that we have elected bodies that look so different from the voting public.

Meantime there are some women ready to take on the game as it is played. Just a few more women running in the municipal elections in May could make a real difference. During the last elections in 2004, fewer than 200 women ran for a councillor seat in about 100 municipalities. If just one additional woman ran in each municipality, we might have quite a breakthrough. And if a dozen additional women were elected as mayors in the province, it would double the number of female mayors.

Female candidates more often than not get elected - more often than men. In the 2004 municipal elections, 70 per cent of the women who threw their hat in the ring won a council seat, compared to 63 per cent of the male candidates.

And yet, only a quarter of our municipal councillors and less than 12 per cent of mayors are women - about average for Canadian municipalities. In recent years, women's numbers on municipal councils have mainly stagnated, if not fallen back.

Interestingly, in New Brunswick's First Nations communities, 29% of the 100 councillors women and 27% of the 15 chiefs are women, up from 14% of councillors and no female chiefs in 1990. For the last few years, a female chief also heads up the New Brunswick Aboriginal Peoples Council that represents Aboriginal people who live off reserve in New Brunswick. It is also interesting to note that Aboriginal women were only allowed to vote and to hold office on band councils in 1951, when the federal Indian Act was finally amended.

In November 2007, Madawaska Maliseet First Nation elected the province's first all-female band government, returning its female Chief for a third term and electing two female councillors. While New Brunswick had an all-female municipal council in Rogersville a few years ago, the number of all-male councils has always been large, although after the 2004 municipal elections, there were only 16: Aroostook, Beaubassin Est, Campbellton, Drummond, Edmundston, Eel River Crossing,

Fredericton Junction, Kedgwick, Lac Baker, Maissonette, Millville, Petitcodiac, Pointe-Verte, Saint-Anne de Mad., St. Hilaire and Sussex Corner.

Like other levels of government, municipal councils deal with some issues that affect women and men in different ways. They deal with quality of life issues that are very close to citizens. Of importance to some women, mayors and councillors do not have to commute to the capital, as in other levels of elected politics. And, what is also attractive to many women, you don't have to belong to a political party to get involved in municipal politics.

Improving women's representation is not only about being fair to women. It increases the chance of good government, not because women are better, but because balance is better. Studies show it: the most successful corporations are the ones who are diverse and the most innovative teams of workers are made up of even numbers of men and women. A recent British study by the London Business School found that individuals tend to contribute less fully and confidently if they are in a minority and an even mix fertile ground for innovation because it allows "a psychological safe communication climate". The Conference Board of Canada and others have found that women in senior management and on boards are good for the bottom line

There is no reason to think the 2008 municipal elections in New Brunswick will result in many more women running and being elected. Around the world, progress in women's representation has happened after governments made changes to laws, required political parties and other gatekeepers to improve their representativity and offered bridging and incentives.

Women's experience of inequality in the workplace and in society does not prepare them to think "I am a leader - I should run in politics". But some women do want to get involved and just need a bit of prompting. A few good women could improve our numbers. If you know a woman who should consider running, approach her soon. Tell her all of the above.

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