

# Addressing the Democratic Deficit: Women and Political Culture in Atlantic Canada

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## ABSTRACT

This paper questions the notion that women in the Atlantic region are uniquely hobbled by conservatism and traditionalism in their political choices, arguing instead that resistance to women's full participation in formal political structures is a national phenomenon and that Atlantic Canada's political marginalization within the federal framework serves as the context for women's political marginalization in the region. It also argues that the failure to address the exclusivity of our political structures constitutes a "democratic deficit," a serious loss of talent that we can ill-afford at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

## RÉSUMÉ

Cet article questionne la notion que les femmes de la région de l'Atlantique sont uniquement entravées par le conservatisme et le traditionalisme de leurs choix politiques, discutant plutôt que la résistance envers la participation totale des femmes dans les structures politiques formelles est un phénomène national et que la marginalisation politique au Canada Atlantique à l'intérieur du cadre fédéral sert de contexte pour la marginalisation des femmes dans la région. Il discute aussi du fait que de ne pas adresser l'exclusivité de nos structures politiques constitue un « déficit politique, une grande perte de talent que nous ne pouvons nous permettre à l'aube du vingt et unième siècle.

## THE BURDEN OF CONSERVATISM

In the 2000 general election, Atlantic Canadians elected four female Members of Parliament (MPs) (12.5 percent), compared to 58 MPs (22 percent) in the rest of the country. Nova Scotia currently has the smallest percentage of female Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) of all the provinces (7 percent). This poor showing seems to be part of a longer trend in Atlantic Canada. Not only were the Atlantic provinces among the last to grant women the right to vote, they were also among the last to elect women to public office. What does this information tell us about women and political culture in the Atlantic Region?

In her study of the "woman suffrage movement" in Canada published in 1950, historian Catherine Cleverdon cited the following "anecdote" to illustrate the "conservatism" and "weight of indifference" that was alleged to have hobbled the efforts of women in the Maritime provinces (she includes Newfoundland in this designation) to secure the vote:

Late one afternoon a campaigner entered a farm kitchen in Nova Scotia, prepared to do some educational work on women's rights. While the canvasser talked, the housewife bustled about, trying to attend to two or three chores at once. Her good husband sat by the stove doing nothing more strenuous than

keeping warm. Sensing that her arguments were not having much effect, the visitor at length asked point-blank: "Don't you want the vote?" "No," said the farmer's wife with emphasis, "If there's one thing John can do alone, for goodness sake, let him do it!" (Cleverdon 1974,157)

As historian E. R. Forbes pointed out some years ago (1978), by citing an anecdote related to her by "Mrs. Adam Shortt of Ottawa" (a.k.a. Elizabeth Smith Shortt, physician and social activist) to illustrate her point, Cleverdon said more about the biased attitudes that prevailed in mid-twentieth-century Canada than she did about the movement for female suffrage in the Atlantic region. A generic joke, widely used throughout Canada and elsewhere during the campaign for female suffrage, it was dropped into the chapter on the Atlantic region (subtitled "The Stronghold of Conservatism") to advance Cleverdon's argument. To further clinch it, she noted that the region's "coolness to the suffrage question may also have been a result of isolation from the rest of Canada and the United States." On the same page, she contradicted this very point by including a note on Halifax suffrage leader Ella Murray who, like many women in the Atlantic region, had spent "protracted periods of residence in the United States."

Other information included in Cleverdon's study reveals that suffragists in the Atlantic region consulted their British counterparts in developing

political strategies and even sponsored a public appearance by militant suffragette Sylvia Pankhurst. In support of her efforts to bring Pankhurst to speak in Saint John's Opera House in January 1912, suffragist Ella Hatheway exhibited little of the conservatism attributed to Maritime women: "Let us withhold our judgment upon the window-smashers until the quiet comes after victory and not condemn what must seem rude and mistaken methods to us who have had no experience with old country politics... remember what these English women are fighting for" (Cleverdon 1974, 189). Although Cleverdon seems not to have known it, one New Brunswick woman, Gertrude Harding, joined the militant suffragette movement in London, wrecking an orchid house in Kew Gardens to bring attention to the cause and serving for a time as Emmeline Pankhurst's bodyguard (Wilson 1996).

The attitudes embedded in Cleverdon's work continue to this day to inform much of the scholarly analysis of the suffrage crusade in Atlantic Canada and women's political activity in the region generally. In her study of the ideas of the English Canadian suffragists, published in 1983, Carol Lee Bacchi tended to repeat Cleverdon's conclusions rather than challenge them (Forbes 1985). Neither Forbes's research on the Maritimes (1989) nor that of Margot I. Duley on Newfoundland (1993), which raise serious doubts about separating out Atlantic Canadians as uniquely conservative in their attitudes toward female suffrage, have received much scholarly attention. In the recently-published *International Encyclopedia of Women's Suffrage* (Hannam et al. 2000, 51), for example, Cleverdon's judgments and even her factual errors are simply repeated. Although the statistical evidence is disappointing for those of us eager to see more women engaged in the region's formal political structures, there are reasons more complex than conservatism, political or otherwise, to account for the low numbers of women in political life.

There is little to justify writing off the region as politically backward in relationship to other areas of Canada. In displaying a conservative attitude toward engaging women in formal political structures, the Atlantic provinces are typical of the trends that prevail in Canada and, indeed, in much of the rest of the world (<http://www.ipu.org> 14/9/02). By indulging in the narcissism of small differences as we do, we avoid the larger truth that women everywhere in Canada are under-represented in formal political processes. That being said, it is also important that scholars not conflate the region into one all-encompassing political culture. Not only have the Maritime provinces a different political experience from Newfoundland and Labrador, which joined Confederation only in 1949, the success of women in achieving the vote and getting elected to public office differs considerably in New Brunswick,

Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island, just as it does, for example, in the three Prairie provinces.

Finally, we need to be cautious in relying on statistics to bolster claims to conservative or progressive tendencies in Atlantic Canada. When Margaret May MacDonald won a federal by-election for the Prince Edward Island riding of Kings in 1961, becoming the first female MP elected from the region, she was one of four Island MPs, raising the province's female representation to 25 percent. This is greater than the current representation of women in the House of Commons. The small scale of politics in the Atlantic provinces makes it dangerous to resort to direct comparison with larger jurisdictions or to single out one election as indicative of trends. Rather than seeing the poor electoral showing of women in the region as an example of some mind-numbing conservatism, we might as easily hypothesize that it is a harbinger of trends to come elsewhere in Canada. Nowhere is it written that women's political participation rate is destined to increase. The failure of the Chrétien government to maintain female representation in the January 2002 cabinet shuffle suggests that, as *Globe and Mail* columnist Hugh Winsor concluded, "when it comes to real muscle, the guys have got it and they are going to keep it" (Winsor 2002). Even more to the point, in making Canada the benchmark for female political participation, we clearly lack ambition. Why are the Atlantic provinces, with their small scale politics and deeply-rooted cultures, not the Scandinavia of North America, sites where female political participation rates approach 50 per cent?

Before pressing ahead to answer this question, it is important to acknowledge the potential radicalism of our inquiry. By posing questions about women and region, we confront larger issues, including what kind of democratic processes best meet the needs of Atlantic Canadians, and, even more fundamentally, what it means to be a man or woman in the twenty-first century. Although the jury is still out on the exact impact of gender and regional political cultures, they are at the heart of the difficulties we face in bringing women in particular, and Atlantic Canadians generally, more fully into the political vanguard. A questioning of deep-seated cultural practices in Canada is long overdue and rich with potential benefits but it is also certain to raise the level of our collective anxiety. For, if we are serious about achieving real political inclusivity, we may find it necessary to adjust our political practices in dramatic and unsettling ways.

It is important that we ask ourselves at the outset what it is that we hope to accomplish by increasing women's political participation. Do we want simply to add women (presumably up to 50 percent of those holding public office), and stir, assuming that women, like men, will fall more or less evenly across

the political spectrum; or do we expect women to transform political structures in some way, perhaps reflecting their lower levels of testosterone and traditional preoccupation with family and community well-being? While some studies suggest that there are gender differences that complicate efforts to integrate women into the competitive and hierarchical structures that characterize Canadian political life, recent experience seems to confirm that women in positions of formal political power have done little to change the system for the benefit of women. Is this because there is not a critical mass of women in positions of power? And what exactly do we mean by representation? Will the interests of the majority of women be served if we elect the female equivalent of the men currently holding public office who are white, middle class, and urban (Arscott 1997, 66)? If, as some scholars claim, there is a women's political culture that demands more humane and cooperative approaches, the political system as it is presently configured in Canada may never serve women and minorities very well. Indeed, the current climate of privatization, competition, militarization, and globalization seems to fly in the face of women's way of engaging the world and may well result in a decline of female involvement, not only in public political and military structures over which we have some democratic control, but also in the private corporate ones that increasingly dominate our society (Brodie 1995; Bashevkin 1998; Young 2000).

A similar point might also be made with respect to the Atlantic region's relationship to the rest of Canada. Competitive political practices, first-past-the-post elections, and per capita representation do not work well for the small, less powerful provinces in Confederation. As a result of trying to adjust to such conditions, Atlantic Canadians may have distorted democratic practices in ways that disadvantage women. In a suggestive study, Richard Matland and Donley Studlar (1998) found that, when they controlled for New Democratic Party (NDP) support (since the 1980s the NDP has used quotas to enhance women's involvement in party committees), rural/urban mix (rural voters are less likely than urban voters to support female candidates), and the incidence of incumbents who run again and win (women seem to do better in volatile political situations), regional political culture plays little, if any, role in the election of women in the Atlantic provinces. This finding raises two points. First, social democratic leanings in the region have often been expressed in terms of red toryism and left liberalism rather than in NDP support; second, a majority of Atlantic Canadians have calculated their interests as being best served by remaining closely linked with powerful federal parties, leading to a rather stable, if not staid, political culture, just like the federal one. The politics of economic

dependency has been overwhelmingly dominated by the need to be pragmatic about what can be accomplished in a symmetrical federal system. Because women have also taken a pragmatic approach to their political prospects (Dobrowolsky 2000), we in Atlantic Canada suffer from a double dose of pragmatism that perhaps undermines our ability to engage larger political ideals.

Since the politics of dependence has increasingly failed to deliver in recent years, this is an opportune time to seriously question the logic informing our voting choices. Has the federal system, based on nineteenth century notions of liberal democratic practices, outlived its usefulness as far as the Atlantic provinces are concerned? Should we as a region be prepared to take control of our future by redefining political structures to ensure better representation of the population at large in our political institutions? These are tough questions that need to be addressed by both women and men as we face a new century and new global power arrangements. To fully engage these questions, we would do well to look at what the past can contribute to our understanding.

#### ATLANTIC CANADIAN WOMEN IN ELECTORAL POLITICS

Before the electoral reforms associated with the granting of responsible government, single women who met the requisite property qualifications were theoretically eligible to vote in the Maritime colonies. Few women apparently exercised this right but their status as voters became a source of some concern in the hotly-contested elections of the 1840s. In the mid-nineteenth century, so-called "liberal" regimes introduced the term "male" into their reformed statutes to exclude women, along with Natives, landless labourers, wards of the state, and relief recipients, from voting and holding public office (Garner 1969, 155-60). According to the reigning ideology, men of property exercised power in the public sphere, while women were relegated to the domestic sphere.

As Gail Campbell (1989) has reminded us, women in the Atlantic region made their voices heard despite their marginal political status. They participated in public protests, assembled monster petitions, wrote letters to politicians, and joined voluntary organizations to influence public policy. By the end of the nineteenth century, they were also becoming involved in the structures of formal political parties, doing the support work that is necessary to keep any organization running. By that time, too, men as well as women were beginning to challenge the gendered political order, becoming involved in the women's suffrage campaign. Because voting qualifications were determined provincially as well as federally, each Canadian province had a slightly different slant on female suffrage, but none could escape

taking up the issue, which was a key objective of the first wave of the women's movement.

It is indeed the case that women in the Atlantic region were a few years behind some women in Canada in securing the vote, but not behind all women. The Nova Scotia legislature enacted female suffrage in April 1918, a month before a similar measure was passed at the federal level. Nova Scotia also has the unique distinction in Canada of having passed a resolution in the legislative assembly granting women the vote in 1893 (the same year that New Zealand adopted female suffrage) only to have it scuttled in the Law Amendments Committee by Attorney General J.W. Longley, who apparently balked at Nova Scotia taking the lead in adopting such a controversial policy (Forbes 1989, 71-72). New Brunswick granted women the right to vote in 1919 (though not to hold public office until 1934), Prince Edward Island in 1922, and Newfoundland in 1925 (though women had to be 25 years old rather than the male qualification of 21 years to exercise the franchise). Quebec was the last province to concede female suffrage - in 1940 - giving most Atlantic Canadian women a commanding lead in political rights over their counterparts in the neighbouring province (Bashevkin 1993, 5). No one in Labrador voted in democratic elections until the entry of Newfoundland and Labrador into Confederation in 1949 (Conrad and Hiller 2001, 185). As elsewhere in Canada, status Indians in the region were denied the right to vote federally until 1960 and began voting provincially at about the same time (Arscott and Trimble 1997). Meanwhile, in 1951, Native women were granted the right to vote for band councils and run for band office (Jamieson 1978, 59).

While it is true that the Atlantic provinces were slow to elect women to provincial and federal legislatures, so, too, was the rest of Canada. Only five women were elected to the House of Commons prior to 1950 and, of those, only one, Agnes Macphail, held office for more than one term. This was not for lack of trying. In Nova Scotia, Bertha Donaldson (Labour, Pictou) and Grace McLeod Rogers (Conservative, Cumberland) ran provincially in 1920. New Brunswick's Minnie Bell Adney, who billed herself as the "Greatest Piano Virtuoso, Music Teacher and Horticulturist," ran as an Independent candidate in the New Brunswick constituency of Victoria-Carleton in the federal election of 1925 (Provincial Archives of New Brunswick 1925). The first woman to be elected to a provincial legislature in the Atlantic region was Lady Helena Squires, wife of Newfoundland Liberal premier Richard Squires, who won a by-election in Lewisport in 1930 (Duley [1993], 111). The region's first two female MPs - Margaret MacDonald, elected in 1961 (Progressive Conservative (PC) Kings PEI), and Margaret Rideout, elected in 1964 (Liberal (Lib) Westmorland NB) - were widows who

won their recently-deceased husband's seats in by-elections. Lest we see these examples as typical of a conservative, and perhaps even corrupt, political culture, it should be noted that the second woman to be elected to the House of Commons, Conservative Party member Martha Munger Black, won the Yukon seat held by her ailing husband, in 1935, keeping it warm for him until he returned to the House of Commons in 1940. The first Liberal woman elected to the House of Commons, Cora Taylor Casselman in Edmonton East (1941-45), won the riding in a by-election following the death of her husband (<http://www.parl.gc.ca/14/09/02>).

Interestingly, women in the Atlantic provinces have been better served by appointed political offices than elected ones. While the region accounts for only 10.4 percent (16) of the 154 women elected to the House of Commons since 1921, 28.9 percent (19) of the 66 women appointed to the Senate have hailed from Atlantic Canada. New Brunswick with nine female Senators and Prince Edward Island with five are the provinces most likely to have women in the Red Chamber, relative to the number of seats available to them. Nova Scotia with three female Senators and Newfoundland with two fall behind British Columbia, Manitoba, and Alberta, which have four female Senators to their credit, but are ahead of Saskatchewan, which has only one woman in the Senate. The success of women in the Atlantic region in gaining access to the Senate - ten women from the Atlantic region are serving in the Senate in early 2003 - is not only a result of the relatively large number of Senate seats available to the region. It also reflects the tendency in recent years to make the Atlantic region the vehicle for female representation in nationally-appointed bodies. If powerful men from Quebec, Ontario, and the West have claims to entitlement, then it is often in the Atlantic region that female representation must be sought to achieve balance. This process seems also to prevail in the appointment of lieutenant-governors in the region. When Marilyn Trenholme Counsell was appointed lieutenant-governor of New Brunswick in 1999, it was the first time that a woman succeeded another woman, in this case Margaret McCain, to the office.

Although senatorships and lieutenant-governorships may be forthcoming to women in Atlantic Canada, cabinet positions have not been. Unless we count three Nova Scotian expatriates - Flora MacDonald, who served in both the Clark (1979-80) and Mulroney cabinets (1984-88); Sharon Carstairs, who was appointed leader of the government in the Senate in 2001; and Anne McLellan, who has served in the Chr tien cabinet since 1993 - the Atlantic region has had only one female voice at the cabinet level, Claudette Bradshaw (Moncton-Riverview-Dieppe), who was appointed Minister of Labour in 1998 and Federal Coordinator on Homelessness in 1999. Following her

success at the polls in 1997, Bradshaw was appointed Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister Responsible for International Cooperation and Minister Responsible for the Francophonie. Several other female MPs from Atlantic Canada have also held positions as Parliamentary Secretaries: Margaret Rideout served as Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Health and Welfare from 1966 to 1968 as did Coline Campbell (Lib South Western Nova) from 1974 to 1976, while Mary Clancy (Lib Halifax) was Parliamentary Secretary for Citizenship and Immigration from 1993-96. Given her political experience at the provincial level, one might have expected Prince Edward Island's Catherine Callbeck to have become the region's first female federal cabinet minister but she held her seat in the Liberal opposition to the Mulroney government from 1988 to 1993 and heeded her party's call to run for provincial office just as the Liberals were returning to power federally.

The reasons for this lack of recognition at the cabinet level have less to do with the relative merits of female MPs from the Atlantic provinces than with the weakness of the region in the larger federal framework. Studies show that in jurisdictions where proportional representation is practised, women are more likely to achieve electoral success because at least one woman is usually included in a slate of candidates presented to the electorate. In the majoritarian first-past-the-post electoral system, parties and voters tend to choose a man to serve as their sole representative (Henig and Henig 96). The same trend seems to hold true for cabinet selection. Because each of the Atlantic provinces is lucky to get one cabinet representative, that representative is likely to be a man. In larger provinces such as Quebec, Ontario, and British Columbia, it is likely not only that there will be more female candidates to choose from, but also that, out of three or more cabinet posts, one will be awarded to a woman.

It should be noted here that the narrow pipeline governing access to power at all levels of electoral politics constitutes a formidable barrier to cultural minorities. When Yvonne Atwell won a seat for the NDP in Nova Scotia in 1998, she became the first Black woman and only the second African Nova Scotian to sit in the province's legislature. No Black woman has ever been elected to federal office from the Atlantic region. Acadians, in part because they tend to dominate certain geographical areas, especially in New Brunswick, have been more successful in electing women to political office (Desserud 1997; Seguin 2000). Coline Campbell, the first federal female MP from Nova Scotia, elected in 1974 (and again in 1980 and 1988) in a fiercely competitive riding, no doubt benefitted from her deep roots in the Acadian communities of South West(ern) Nova.

Identity politics, defined not only on the basis of race, language, and culture, but also on the basis of region, works to complicate efforts to foreground gender representation in Atlantic Canada. A woman, of whatever cultural identity, entering the polling booth in a federal election may well put aside considerations of gender and culture to ensure the strongest possible regional voice at the national level, where the leadership is predominantly white and male. Although Canadians everywhere face these either/or choices, they may pose a greater dilemma for voters in the Atlantic provinces, whose citizens play a relatively minor role in defining the issues dominating the political agenda. Identity politics for Aboriginal peoples, immigrants, and women, even Acadians, in Atlantic Canada is to a greater or lesser degree defined elsewhere and communicated through networks dominated by other regions of the country. The distortion this situation creates has not been systematically studied, but it is a factor that must be taken into account in any effort to understand political representation in the region.

On the issue of women in positions of party leadership in recent years, the Atlantic provinces cannot be considered laggards in comparison to the rest of the country. Alexa McDonough and Elizabeth Weir have had long and impressive careers as leaders of provincial New Democratic parties, but they do not stand alone. When Catherine Callbeck emerged in Prince Edward Island as the first *elected* female premier in Canada in 1993, the leader of the PC opposition was also a woman (Pat Mella), an achievement yet to be equalled in any other province of Canada (Crossley 1997). Women have led both the Liberal (Shirley Dysart, 1985) and PC (Barbara Baird-Filliter, 1989-1991) parties in New Brunswick. In Newfoundland and Labrador, Lynn Verge briefly led the PC Party (1995-96). While it is true that both Catherine Callbeck and Barbara Baird-Filliter have had less than happy experiences as leaders of their parties, unhappy leadership experiences are no respecter of region or gender as the careers of Kim Campbell and Stockwell Day, to name two obvious examples, clearly document. No Canadian province currently has a female premier so the Atlantic region is not unique in this respect.

At the federal level of party leadership, Alexa McDonough, leader of the NDP from 1995 to 2003, again shines. So, too, does Elsie Wayne, who has served as Deputy Leader and Acting Leader of the PC Party. Both women, of course, are prominent in parties that are currently less likely than the Liberal Party to be successful in gaining office. According to the "law of increasing disproportion" the number of women grows smaller as we approach the centre of political power. Fewer women are therefore found in the higher stratosphere of political parties holding office (usually parties with a long history of success) than in smaller

and newer parties in the political spectrum (Henig and Henig 2001, 58). At the provincial level in Atlantic Canada, third parties have a poor history of success at the polls so this avenue to political power has, until recently, been closed to women (Carbert 2002, 205).

Little research has been done on women at the municipal level in Atlantic Canada but here, too, the trends are not out of line. As elsewhere, experience at the municipal level often serves as a stepping stone for participation at the provincial and federal levels. Both Muriel McQueen Fergusson, the region's first female Senator (1953) and the first female Speaker of the Senate, and Gladys Porter, Nova Scotia's first female MLA (1960), had successful careers in municipal politics before moving to a larger stage. Elsie Wayne's high-profile career as mayor of Saint John gave her an edge over other candidates in her bid for federal office. In contrast, Dorothy Wyatt's experience as councillor and mayor of St. John's failed to translate into provincial or federal success. Daurene Lewis of Annapolis Royal became Canada's first female African Canadian mayor in 1984 but lost her bid for a provincial seat in 1988. While it appears that women are currently doing quite well in getting elected to school boards and town councils, they are scarce at the mayoralty level throughout the region. Nor is it necessarily always the case, as it has sometimes been in the past, that urban areas are more likely to elect women than rural jurisdictions. The first election following the creation of the Halifax Regional Municipality in 1996 resulted in men winning every seat on the new 24-member municipal council.

The electoral experience of Aboriginal women in the Atlantic provinces mirrors the larger regional and national trends. Following an amendment to the *Indian Act* in 1951 granting women the right to vote for and sit on band councils, Irene Bernard of the Tobique Reserve in New Brunswick became the first Native woman to be elected to a band council in Canada (Tulloch 1984, 72). Nevertheless, men continue to dominate the institutions governing the lives of Aboriginal peoples in the region, a situation reflecting the patriarchal structures that long prevailed under the *Indian Act*. Taking as an example the Mi'kmaq, who live in all four Atlantic provinces, only 20 of the 94 band councillors in New Brunswick are women and several councils have no women at all. A similar situation prevails in Nova Scotia, where 16 of the 79 band councillors are women. On Prince Edward Island, the Abegweit First Nation has two male councillors while the Lennox Island First Nation is represented by two women. Two of the six councillors representing the Miawpukek First Nation of Newfoundland are women (<http://mrc.uccb.ns.ca/14/9/02>). In Nova Scotia, five of the band chiefs are women, but there are no female chiefs elsewhere in the region.

The obvious conclusion to draw from this brief summary of firsts and lasts is that women in Atlantic Canada share with women elsewhere in the country the obstacles to achieving political power. In the academic literature addressing this topic, the usual suspects blocking women's greater involvement in political life include family and domestic responsibilities; a continuing willingness, especially in rural areas, to accept traditional roles in society; reluctance to challenge the influence of the church, especially in Roman Catholic cultures; stable political cultures in which incumbent candidates hold their seats through several elections; workplace structures that keep women in menial support jobs; lower participation rates in unions; the structure of political parties and electoral systems; a weak women's movement; and long-standing patriarchal attitudes and practices. While these obstacles are historically constructed and are currently being eroded, especially the religious and rural factors, some obstacles remain remarkably persistent, most notably the gatekeeping functions of the old boys' network in mainstream political parties.

#### TOWARD A MORE INCLUSIVE POLITICS

The Scandinavian countries are the only nations in the world where women's political involvement approaches 50 percent. Such gender equality was not always typical of Scandinavian political systems. In 1945 women made up less than 10 percent of representatives in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark (Henig and Henig 2001, 16 & 88). These nations moved beyond token representation of women in their political institutions by establishing quotas, adopting a system of proportional representation, and making women's participation a priority of public policy. All three strategies working together are essential to achieving the final goal. Without the gender factor being mainstreamed, choices based on deeply-rooted patriarchal traditions resurface. Even more critical is that there is a women's movement outside of the formal political structure prepared to keep up the pressure for democratic reforms. Since it is clear that politics works at both the formal and the informal level, it is essential that women cover both bases as, of course, men do.

Are Atlantic Canadians, men as well as women, ready to break new ground in adopting political structures and practices designed to change the face of democracy? There is little in the history of the region to suggest that there are barriers to innovation. Nova Scotia was the first colony in the British Empire to achieve responsible government in 1848; Mount Allison was the first college in the British Empire to grant a degree to a woman; and since 1945, the Atlantic provinces have taken major initiatives in municipal

reform, social reconstruction, and political intervention (Conrad and Hiller 2001). Since Atlantic Canadians seem to have less aversion than many other regions of North America to state initiative, they may be open to a well-organized effort to bring women into the political mainstream.

There is a lot at stake in deciding to make gender parity a condition of democratic politics and the arguments for doing so must be more widely understood. First, democratic justice and equity demands that our institutions not exclude half the electorate from the exercise of political power at every level. Without correspondence between the population and institutions representing it, the very legitimacy of our democratic institutions is called into question. Second, so-called women's interests, developed in the different contexts of their family, work, and civic experiences, need to be fully represented in any political system claiming to be democratic. For some of us, the issues currently identified as being especially the preserve of women are really human issues and desperately need our attention if the species is to survive its present travails. Third, women's participation is necessary if we make any claims to be efficient in the

deployment of the talents of our citizens. What a loss it is to Atlantic Canada if we ignore the contribution that half the population can make to formal political life. Taken together, these three arguments point to a reinvigorated democracy should women's full participation be achieved. Without it we are handicapped by a "democratic deficit," a serious loss of talent and expertise that Atlantic Canadians can ill-afford at the dawn of the twenty-first century (Henig and Henig 2001, 82).

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## WEBSITES

Canada's Parliament (<http://www.parl.gc.ca>)  
 Inter-Parliamentary Union Website (<http://www.ipu.org>) Women in National Parliaments  
 Mi'kmaq Resource Centre (<http://mrc.uccb.ns.ca/>) Band Governments

A full list of women from the Atlantic region who have served in federal office can be found at my website at <http://www.unb.ca> along with an extended bibliography on the role of women in politics in Canada.