

# Commentary

*Ann Bell*

I came into the political scene from the women's movement and through the women's movement into politics and out of politics. I ran twice, unsuccessfully, for the Progressive Conservative [PC] Party in Newfoundland.

Back in the early 1970s, the women's movement flared up and I was very involved. In Newfoundland, we have almost a unique kind of women's movement in that we set up five separate, volunteer-based Status of Women Councils all over the province. This was back before the Secretaries of State were set up; it was before money was allocated for Status of Women activities. I was a member of the one in Corner Brook, and in those early years, we did not even talk about the fact that there were no women on city council; we would say, "There are no women on the recreation committee, and no women on the transportation committee, and no women on the traffic committee." We would write a letter to the Mayor, complaining about the absence of women, and ask to have women appointed to these committees. After the next public meeting, our letter would be duly reported in the newspaper. The local newspapers don't have many investigative journalists around, and they are always looking for something to report, so they jumped on the Status of Women Council with a vengeance. Therefore, in the local communities, we became a lightning rod for every kind of character and every kind of issue.

From there, we moved to trying to lobby our provincial Premier, Frank Moores. We moved past consciousness-raising and started by focusing on matrimonial-property legislation; this was in response to the Supreme Court's landmark decision on the Irene Murdoch case in Alberta. When Frank Moores went on the radio, he was accosted by one of our Status of Women members who asked, "Why aren't there any women on certain boards?" and he said, "There are no women qualified or capable." So our group put together a little piece of paper and we had it printed in the local papers right across Newfoundland. It said: "We are qualified to serve on any government appointed board and commission," with a blank below for women to write in their names and qualifications. The printed

ad asked women to fill in the blank form, clip it, and mail it to Premier Frank Moores. He received thousands of those forms.

That event was the beginning of our political awareness. We began to see that the Premier was starting to listen to us - not a lot but slightly. In our small groups, our little selves as we were, we wondered how we were going to influence change. We were writing the Premier all the time and trying to meet with him, but he was not answering us. So we decided to become politically active. The members of our group in Corner Brook were pretty partisan, but we were also polarised. So we tried all three parties. First, we went to the Liberal meeting and they all asked us to join up as party members, and they really welcomed us. Again, at the NDP [New Democratic Party] meeting, they were all really welcoming. Then we went to the Tory [PC] meeting and they closed the door on us. They were not going to have anything to do with us. But this was the party that was in power and we knew by all the polls that they were going to be elected back to government. So we had to get in the door. In the meantime, Premier Moores resigned, which meant there was going to be a leadership convention. The local riding association announced at the next meeting that it was going to elect seven members at large to go as delegates to the leadership convention. My friend and I left that meeting thinking, "Click, click, click - this was the chance to influence the power brokers." We sat down and organised; we wrote down the name of every single person that we knew and every member of our family and everybody who was over the age of sixteen. By the following week, at the voting for the seven convention delegates, we had all our people, their children, their children's friends, brother, sister, aunt, uncle, mother, father and whoever that we could get out for the vote. When we got to the hall, we had to pay two dollars a membership for each of them. I remember bringing in two loads of nursing students and paying two dollars for each of their memberships. We got the nurses into the hall and explained to them: "You can officially vote for seven delegates, but only vote for two people - myself and my friend. Don't vote

for any other name on the ballot." We did not tell everybody, but we told as many people as we could trust, "Only vote for two, because if you give the third person a vote, they might knock one of us off." You know what? We won. We topped the ballot. But even though we won the battle, it eventually came back to haunt us because the all-male riding executive was really ticked off. They were already ex-officio delegates, but they wanted their buddies to go as delegates to the convention with them. They were really ticked off because we had used that tactic.

Anyway, it worked and it was fun. We went to the leadership convention as delegates, and remember the Leader was going to be Premier. So we were in a powerful position. The leadership candidates wine and dined all the delegates, and every two or three days we would get a call to come to this or that meeting. We set our agenda and Brian Peckford was the one leadership candidate who agreed to support our agenda if elected as Premier; he agreed to support matrimonial-property legislation, he agreed to appoint women to boards and commissions, and he agreed to set up an Advisory Council on the Status of Women. He got elected. The first piece of legislation that he brought in was the matrimonial-property legislation. The second year, he brought in the provincial Advisory Council for the Status of Women and he appointed me as the first chairperson. None of this happened all of a sudden. It came as the result of months and months of phone calls, and lobbying, and working, and pushing. That is where I came into the political process.

Now, in retrospect, I think that over the past fifteen/twenty years, the federal and provincial governments have institutionalised the volunteer women's movement. With the volunteer women's movement, people were gung-ho, kicking and screaming, and knocking on doors saying, "Open up, let us in." Now that we're in the door, people are muzzled. You saw what happened when the people from the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women spoke out; they were absorbed into the Women's Directorate or else it was all put together. Staff from the Women's Directorate are employees of the federal and provincial governments and are civil servants. They cannot speak publicly and they cannot criticise their political masters who pay the bills. I have been involved intimately in all of these agencies. The

institutionalisation of the women's movement - as we knew it - took away the energy of the volunteer movement. The same energy can come if you have a dynamic hotshot as an Executive Director to run the show, but they can be muzzled.

I also ran for the provincial Tory nomination two years after the Peckford government was elected. I ran in the area where I grew up, which was a sister riding to the town in which I lived, and I was not supported. I was not supported - not so much by the local executive - but I was not supported by the Premier and the powers that be. The Premier said to me that he didn't support anybody. But you know the difference. You always know the difference because you know that people in the area get the nod from him about who to support and who not to support. So, you know, I lost. It was a marvellous experience that I would not have missed for anything. It was just absolutely fabulous, but it was a situation where the Premier supported someone else.

Two years later, there was a federal nomination in the same area. The Tories did not have anybody to run for that area, and my friends eventually talked me into running for the nomination. I had my job with the Advisory Council on the Status of Women. I was not a quiet person in that position; I was vocal and outspoken. The riding executive is supposed to be at "arms-length" from the nomination contest, but there was a young fellow, a phys-ed teacher, that they supported. The executive fundraised for him and paid his salary for six weeks, so he could take a leave of absence to run. Well, the riding executive tried every dirty trick in the books. They wouldn't give me the sign-up cards for new members. Finally, I was so frustrated, they gave me 75 cards and I wanted 1000 cards. Cards for the new members had to be signed by the President of the riding association. At the end of the day, I travelled up the coast and people told me the other candidate for the nomination was here last week and he had all sorts of membership cards. I phoned the President of the PC Party in Ottawa and said, "My next call is to the *Globe and Mail*. They are looking for stories on election irregularities." Within an hour, I had a box full of cards delivered to my door in a taxi, from the President of our riding association. So you really have to play hardball a lot of the time. The riding executive did other things to circumvent me from getting the nomination. They moved the place of the nomination meeting away

from the area of the largest population where I lived and worked and had a following, to the small town to where the other candidate was teaching junior high school. They bussed in truckload after truckload of fourteen-year olds to vote for him.

I lost the nomination, but it was a fabulous experience. You lose but still you don't lose because you benefit from not only the organisation and the knowledge, but from the friends you make, the people you meet, and the stories you hear. I don't want to leave anyone with the idea that it was a negative experience because it was not.

This leads to a final comment on the mythology around the democracy process for nominations and selection of candidates for elections. I don't know if it is any different in other provinces, but in my experience, the Leader of the Party decides with a provincial or federal campaign team as to who the candidates should be. I have been on those campaign teams. I know. Often women will be considered as potential candidates if there are none of the guys available - you know, the hockey guy, the fellow who sells insurance or whoever. If all of these fellows say no, they might look at some woman in the community as possible candidates. Last time round with the Liberals in Newfoundland, [Liberal Leader] Brian Tobin went out and recruited women because he was running against a woman. Since Lynn Verge was the Tory Leader, Tobin needed to get a lot of women in his team, and he did not go to the party to get them. He went to the Newfoundland Nurses' Union to get their President [Joan Marie Aylward]. He went to the Mayor of Mount Pearl, and recruited her, Julie Bettney, and that is how he got his people. Neither of those had any party affiliation whatsoever. If you think coming up the ranks through the party is the way to go, it is not.

Finally, about the media. I don't think that you can identify media coverage of women during the electoral process as a major factor in women being elected or not. Certainly in our province, from my observation, women receive the same attention from the media - and I have worked on every provincial and federal campaign for the past fifteen years. Sometimes women receive more media attention because it is a novelty and some of them are able to create more media. But it's obvious now that we live in a t.v. world. Radio and print treat women and men basically the same, but it is a whole different world with television. Both men and women are judged on appearance, but how many ways can you identify a three-piece suit? Maybe if they are Liberal they have a red tie, but most of them dress so conservatively. Women must have an extensive wardrobe, which has to be colour co-ordinated and it has to be suited to their body. I'll give you an example: Lynn [Verge] had a red coat. And you cannot believe how many calls came in because she was not running for the Liberals; she was running for the Tories.

I want to end by stressing that we need to be asking the media questions. It is all for good for us to be critical, but they only go where you take them. You have to feed the media, and feed them on a regular basis. You need to be asking them questions about why they're not doing stories about the lack of women being elected, and about the barriers.