

Commentary

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I just want to talk a little bit about myself and my involvement in politics and a bit more about political parties and constituency associations and their role. I am from a very large family and I grew up mainly in an all-Black community called East Preston [in Nova Scotia]. I was never really interested in politics, even though I often was active within the community setting. But I met Alexa McDonough at a picnic in Uniacke Square, somewhere around 1991, 1992. She talked to me about the work that I was doing in the community - my activism - and asked if I had ever looked into politics. Of course I said no. But she invited me to come and speak with her, which I did. One of the things that interested me about her was her excitement about politics.

So, I got involved. In 1993, I ran in the riding in Preston which was a new, smaller riding that had just come into place to give African Nova Scotians an opportunity to run. So I ran and I came in fourth and decided that I was never going to run again. But, of course, I was not well known. I had lived away for quite some time and people did not really know me any more. They did not know my last name, Atwell. My family name is Thomas, and that was well known. It was difficult.

Then in 1996 there was an opportunity to run for the provincial New Democratic Party [NDP] leadership, which really disturbed a lot of people when I did it. Part of the reason I did that - knowing that I would not win - was to "up" my profile, so that people around the province would begin to know who I was, and to get some experience speaking, talking to people and just getting to know the communities. Some of the places I went were very accepting and open; some others were very, very racist. However, it was a wonderful experience; I would not trade it for anything. It set the stage for when I ran again, in the provincial election in 1997, which I did win in the Preston riding, with about 290 votes. That seat was held by a Liberal. So I did my year and a half in the Legislative Assembly, which was an incredible experience. This time I am really not going to do it again. I lost my seat in the last election to a Conservative.

A couple of things helped me to run, particularly as a Black woman, which has never happened before. I won the nomination twice. And the only party I could possibly run for was the NDP, because of how that party was laid out to encourage women to run. I must say that the political party really and truly did encourage me to run. Their Women in Legislature fund helped with expenses, it helped to buy some more clothing, pay for childcare and those sorts of things. There was an affirmative action fund, which also helped me, and it kept me going. I didn't have a salary in 1993 or 1997 when I was running, because I had to leave my job. That was really encouraging. Then, of course, women who were in politics and working as community activists supported me within my community as well as outside my community. I needed the encouragement, people that I could talk to, that I could call up when I wanted to vent, and that sort of thing. But when I entered the Legislative Assembly I was torn. Number one, there were no other Black women in that place, not even in terms of staff. And I was representing a riding that was two-thirds basically White, middle-upper class and the rest Black, which was quite poor. So, the conflict for me representing that riding was, how do I balance all of this? How do I get the issues of the community in which I live on the agenda, without getting the rest of the riding upset with me? Which happened quite often, by the way. It was difficult for me, trying to balance and trying to figure out where my attention should lie, whether it was with the guy with the \$250,000 house on the lake with the stone road that he wanted paved or with the person who was on social assistance who was going to lose their house because they could not pay their taxes. So I struggled with that, and of course in the media I always got a lot of attention when I made some decisions that were quite controversial, in terms of saying things for the Prestons.

My campaign expenses were very low. The riding was small, 10,000 voters maybe, so my budget was small. In the African Nova Scotian communities, people are very partisan, mostly Liberal, more Conservative now, but mostly Liberal

then. The NDP was not even heard of there until 1992. There was no NDP riding association where people were actually involved; it didn't happen until 1992. So the riding association was new and upcoming. In the last election people were more informed, people gave support, and I lost my seat by 50 votes. I tell people the reason I lost the seat basically was because we had a Tory candidate and also a Tory running as a Liberal. The Black vote is very delicate, very sensitive, very unbalanced in terms of where people's priorities are. There was also more money in that community at that time. Some of the political parties hired people to telephone and to campaign with them. There weren't so many volunteers for the other parties. All that is legal; it is just not the way we ran our campaign.

That was a problem, in terms of political parties, related to the Preston riding and how that riding came about. It was to encourage representation of the Black community. So, to my way of thinking, political parties had a responsibility to insure that Black representation would stay. So how do political parties encourage representatives of the African Nova Scotian community to participate in the parties, maybe to actually run for nominations and win? From what I understand, the political parties do not actively play such a role in Preston. The NDP has taken the lead on that; still, there are more things that they could do. The Conservative Party, I don't know if they do anything, and from my understanding the Liberal party has not tried to encourage members of the community to put forth their names. I suspect that even during an election year we have to look deep and wide to find people who could have credible funds. And now there is a great fear that they can't win anyway, so why bother.

Recently I did a presentation in front of the Boundaries Commission on the topic of redrawing the riding boundaries so that we could have better participation. I suggested that the African Nova Scotian community should actually have designated seats so that they could deal with the issues. People said it was racist etc., but what if we only had seats for White people? Because we already do.

This is what we have to deal with, and then people expect you to have the energy to actually run and be effective in a campaign when you have to deal with all that. People don't

understand. I do realize it is an educational thing, people are not purely racist.

Political parties have a role, and a very strong one. The leaders of those parties should be at the forefront, when they get an opportunity to encourage more people to participate. It is my experience that constituency associations are strong when they have a representative; that is, an MLA. When those constituency associations are strong, they have people involved. You know those riding associations will take the lead in the next election. If you don't have someone in the legislature, and I will speak for myself, then the riding association tends to be very small, you don't have a lot of resources, it is very difficult to get people involved, and so you don't have the same kind of clout. So what happens: during an election you are pushing people to run, and these people may not necessarily be qualified, they may not want to, but feel the need to have someone on the ticket, so they say they will do it because they feel responsible. So you don't always get the best out of your constituency.

When I think about inclusiveness, it means that parties should not just adopt an inclusion lens or develop policies that are inclusive of women in the community, minority women, new Canadians. They should develop an active policy that actually works to bring people into that spectrum, so that we will have a larger block of people who are willing to run.

The parties also have to look at how gender is viewed within the party. There are specific things about how men and women see the world, how they see their environment. My sister showed me an article about how men understand power through an action. That is how they understand it, to do something. Many people know that if you try to talk to a guy about a problem, they try to fix it, because it is attached to an action. Women really don't have to attach power to anything. But they know it is there, they know what it feels like, what it looks like, and how to use it.

We heard here today why women don't run: we have a different view of the world and what it looks like. I don't think we would be at war against Afghanistan today, if there were women running our country. We don't always have to take an aggressive action to change things.

So the challenges continue. I don't like to use the word "disgruntled" because it is a negative word. But if there are challenges to all women who run, there are more challenges to women of colour

because we are more marginalized. And we don't often get support within our communities because of partisan lines that are drawn. If you look at politics through a partisan lens, then you will not see the issues that you have to deal with on the ground. There are some parties that I can't imagine associating myself with because of some of their policies.

Looking towards younger people, looking how to support them and to use my expertise in any way that I can, I don't think that women like myself should blame the women who are not willing to come forward to run, to run for the nomination, or to sit on boards and commissions. I also realize that there are certain people that they look for: I am not an academic, I do not have a university degree, and if you are looking for that you are not going to get me. The whole issue around education is a problem, there are no funds to assist young women who want to finish their education, and therefore they are not going to be the ones who take the next step and become involved in politics. Even if they want to, it is more of a struggle for them.

Political parties need to look at the structures, especially the constituency associations, and they need to do things differently. I don't necessarily look any more through a partisan politics lens. When I look at the issues around the world I can't look through a partisan lens. I recently visited South Africa for two weeks and I look at the devastation in that country and the economy of those countries where people are dying every day while there are governments in a developing world that have the money and opportunities but not the willpower to assist the people of these countries. So in terms of politics I am looking for a place where maybe I could be more productive.

At the same time I also realize that we must get more women in those places who think like women, not women who think like men. Because if you find women who have the same ideas, the same views, same demeanour as men, you may as well keep the men there. Unless you can bring that part of you that says that I am different and this is how I do it differently and this is how I see it differently, then you are like a man with a female body. I have real problems with that.

It is not just about women coming to the table. It is about the engagement of self in the political arena, it is about what you bring to the table.

For me it was important to have a voice for my community, to see that I had a voice and to give younger people an opportunity to acknowledge that in spite of everything you can be part of that process. What you need is support and education and friends as I had. So I say to women, to young women in my community, and to children, that you go into politics with an agenda, not because someone pushes you or because you are a woman. Your agenda should be to make the world a better place.