

Commentary

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Back in 1974 when Muriel Duckworth ran for the Nova Scotia legislature, I was relatively new to the NDP [New Democratic Party]. This surprises some people because my parents went to a CCF [Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, the federal predecessor of the NDP] convention on their honeymoon in 1939, setting a very definite pattern in their lives together. But I became inspired by the Trudeaumania of the late 60s. I never actually joined the Liberal Party, but I worked for it. There was no electoral presence of the NDP in Nova Scotia at that time, federally or provincially. I wrote the social policy platform for the Liberal Party in Nova Scotia in 1970. By 1972, I had left the party in a rage, with two driving passions for the political pursuit of social justice: women's employment opportunities and working conditions, and childcare. Both these issues were in the 1970 platform, and by 1972 they hadn't done a thing about either one. So I started demonstrating on the steps of the Legislature with other women who, by 1972, were concerned about those issues.

My first bid for public office was in the 1979 federal election, and again in 1980, without a hope in hell of getting elected. The previous all-time high NDP vote in Halifax had been nine percent. There was quite a gap to close and, frankly, had I imagined that I would have been elected when I ran federally in 1979, I would not have had the courage to run. I had two children, aged seven and nine, and that would have been considered to be a horrendously irresponsible thing for a woman, with children that age, to do - to run and get elected to federal parliament and abandon my children. That attitude pursued my children through most of their years in school. I remember my son coming home in grade five, just furious at his teacher. He said to me [spoofing the teacher], "Funny that you don't have your homework done again, I saw that your mother was off at that NDP convention in Winnipeg." And he said, "Imagine her trying to blame you; it was my fault that I did not have my homework done." I thought, "Yes, that is why women should enter the world of work as men do. Women should be no more responsible

than men for why children get their homework done or not."

[I owe so much to] one woman who fought really hard over a long period of time to break down barriers, to build structures. Rosemary Brown had the guts to run for the federal leadership of the NDP in 1975 and came in a strong second against five other candidates. That really changed people's perceptions about what is possible. Rosemary Brown was a huge influence on my decision to run. She was pushing and pushing me to run federally in 1979 and I said, "I can't do that, Rosemary; I have two small children." She said, "That is not a good enough excuse; I had three when I ran." I said, "I can't run against my husband's Tory law partner," and she said, "Why not? I ran against my husband's Liberal medical partner." I said, "I don't know enough; I am not ready." She said "Don't you dare say that. I ran in an urban community where there is almost no Black population, so don't use that excuse. You are thirty-five and have lived here all your life. What other excuses have you got?" "Okay, all right, I give up; I'll run." Compared to Rosemary, I had a free ride.

I have spent my years in politics often haunted by the question: if you are really in favour of electing more women, why do you run against political parties that will have, not just the potential, but the actual results of electing more women? And why do you ever run yourself or run women candidates against other women, especially when those other women may be incumbents or more likely to win than yourself or any other women that you have persuaded to run for the NDP? The way that I answer that question for myself and the way I try to discuss it with other women that are struggling with that decision is this: I actually don't believe that electing women to essentially conservative political parties changes very much for women. When we think about somebody who is working to advance a better life for women, we're not thinking about the women, by and large, who run for those conservative parties - the Liberal party, the Conservative party, the Alliance party. The Bloc [Québécois] is the

exception in the federal arena; they are more feminist, more activist, more inclusive, and more committed to bringing about change.

I will say without hesitation that, in my own experience, women do have a kind of humanising, a feminising, a civilising effect within those political parties. But I would also have to say that, whether it is opening the doors to the corridors of power or improving life for visible minority groups or the poor, my male colleagues in the NDP caucus were not only far more committed to advancing those changes, but were actually working with more perspective on how to bring about those changes, if we could actually increase our power. That was true of the men in my tiny little caucus provincially over the years and also true in my six years with two respective caucuses federally. It's also absolutely true that when my caucus in the House of Commons was almost equal numbers of men and women after the 1997 election, the commitment of the male members of my caucus to advancing women's interests was strengthened. I will never forget how thrilled I was when we assembled for the first time as a caucus, with sixteen new members elected of which eight were men and eight were women. The fact that the incumbents re-elected were all men tipped us away from being a 50/50 caucus. But I realised what a difference it was going to make to have eight women in that caucus of twenty-one members.

We sat around the table and talked about why they were there and what they wanted to achieve and it was absolutely thrilling to realise how clear the women were. Most had come through the women's movement in one way or another; half of them were trade union women, whose trade union activism had to do with advancing equality issues and improving working conditions for women. Several of those men in the new caucus had small children at home. They also were feminist, so the challenge for the men and women in my caucus was to balance family life, to try not to fall prey to extreme gender division of labour. My mind was boggling because in addition, two of my women caucus colleagues each have children at home who are very severely challenged, one mentally challenged and another with both cognitive difficulties and severe emotional problems. You can imagine the sensitisation within my caucus to the issues that people normally think women who get elected will be more receptive to.

It is clear to me that having more women in my caucus made the men more feminist and more sensitive to women's issues. But, in the end, it seems to me that attitude is only part of what we look at if we are really serious about change for women. We have to look at who controls the decision-making, and which political parties it affects. We could make a long list of the priorities that concern women most, but two priorities right up there would be issues of peace and issues of poverty. If one looks at who really controls the decisions that get made in the conservative parties, it is some combination of the corporate elite and the military-industrial complex. That may seem provocative but we have just been watching that combination played out on the world stage.

Surely the issue is, what are the results at the end of the day? It is difficult to make comparisons with the United States because there is not a social-democratic party there. But doesn't it just help to underscore the fact that it is an illusion of change in a way?

Let me shift to another example altogether - Sweden. Ten years ago, the child poverty rates in Sweden and Canada were the same, nineteen percent I think, and the governing parties of both countries had run on platforms to eliminate child poverty. Canada's parliament unanimously resolved to eliminate child poverty by the year 2000, supporting a motion from Ed Broadbent on his last day in the House. Ten years later, what do we have to show for it? We've got 18.5 percent of children in Canada living in poverty and two percent in Sweden. Well, you might say that Sweden has had more women elected, so didn't more women lead to a serious commitment to eliminate child poverty? Didn't more women in parliament account for a stronger peace mandate [there]? I would argue for a hell of a lot more women, but in social-democratic parties, because when you put the two together, you actually get men that will support the same thing and then you really get change. Oversimplification perhaps, but that is what years of experience in political life have persuaded me.

You are going to think I am such a major partisan when I say this (and I am glad there are other partisans that will present a different point of view) but the 1993-1997 period was just horrible for women in this country. You had significant numbers of women in the [Liberal] caucus, you had a platform which actually made all kinds of commitments to women, but there was such a

weakening of a genuine progressive opposition strength in Parliament. This was the reason that I ran for the federal leadership of the NDP [in 1996]. When Paul Martin brought down the budget, I was on national television debating with a right-wing raving lunatic and I realised that the budget was going to be a frontal assault on most of the equality gains made in this country; it was going to be an assault on most of the infrastructure that had begun to develop for women and on many other progressive causes as well.

The NDP did not exist as a political party in the Parliament of Canada from 1993-1997. There were nine members who did not constitute a caucus, who had no budget (literally not one cent of public money to function as a caucus), no questions in Question Period except once a week at one minute to three, usually on Thursday afternoon. The NDP was not speaking on women's issues because it had no voice. It had no power, no resources, and no mandate.

Would it have made a difference to have more NDP members in the House? I don't think the Liberals would have brought down the Martin budget in the first place if the NDP had been an official party with resources to raise the kind of hell that needed to happen.

Why was the presence of the Bloc not strong enough to do that? Because whatever the Bloc is for, the Liberals are against. It is a serious problem for this country because there are some very strong feminist activists within the Bloc and a lot of the Bloc men as well are engaged in the justice and the equality struggles. But the dynamic that goes on in parliament is very destructive around these issues. On the question of what happens when the number of women reaches the so-called point of critical mass - this phenomenon is one that I understand. [In the Nova Scotia legislature], I was the only women with fifty-one men and the only social democrat with Liberal and Tory men. I spoke a lot on women's issues but I sure looked forward to the day that there wasn't this sense that you have to do it from morning until night and it still isn't going to make a difference because there is only one of you.

There are all of kinds of women, we are all different, but in the current [Liberal caucus in Ottawa], there are two kinds of women: there are the ones who are in Cabinet and there are the ones who are trying to get into Cabinet. The ones in Cabinet use the excuse, "Well I am the Minister

of...,so don't expect me to do that." That's fair in a way, except that the departmental responsibilities of that woman Minister can have immense implications for women, and it seems to me to be reasonable to hope that she would use the fact that she is a woman to advance women's interests, at least in her own portfolio. It does not happen very often. Then there are a number of really good backbench women in the Liberal caucus who genuinely care. I am not nearly as sympathetic to them as probably you feel that I should be. I get tired of them passing me in the corridor or the washrooms saying to me privately, "You know, you are really speaking for me [against military intervention into] Afghanistan. Thank-you and keep doing it." But the same women never speak out publicly to support me and they never support the initiatives we take. You know, this is not a free ride, folks. I feel impatient with that.

So, am I in favour of more women? Absolutely yes. Am I in favour of more right-wing women? No. I have to fight to defeat them as much as I can because they give a kind of respectability which is not deserved and which is not going to result in any change. There are women out there who really do care, but it is an illusion to think that if we have more women from whatever party, everything will get better.

There is also the matter of a gender gap inside the NDP, among our members and supporters. I don't think there is any question at all that there is a tension between men and women inside the party. I think some of that tension has to do with shifts in the larger economy. With the increasing numbers of women in the workforce, the advancement of women into higher-paid jobs, with more women in positions of seniority and in the professions, and so on, combined with the incredible nose-diving of industrial jobs and resource-based jobs, there is no question that a lot of men have been displaced. For a male industrial worker who has lost his job and is already feeling threatened, there is a kind of threatened response to the initiatives we take: "There goes the NDP again - fighting for women." That is a problem for us; there is no question. We have lots of challenges, but that is one of our big challenges.

I want to tell you an anecdote from a few nights ago. I was walking home from a meeting, and I happened to run into a male trade union leader from Nova Scotia who was going to his hotel, and I walked down the street with him. I just

about fell over when he said that he had spent some time doing gender-sensitivity training, and had become a group leader doing training himself. He was utterly horrified by the attitude of a lot of his male counterparts; he had never imagined there was so much pent-up anger at women activists in the trade union. He said that he realised, very quickly, that the only way to talk to those guys was to ask if they had a daughter or a niece and go from there. It seems like such a simple idea, but it is an important one. It is one of these reasons that I wear this "Children First" button a lot, because if we all tried to ask people at all ages and stages, and men as well, "what kind of world do you want to create for children, and for your daughter?" then probably we could deal with some of these problems.

I actually think that by far the bigger factor in whether change will occur for women is whether there is a solid progressive left force in the political arena. So much the better if there are more women in the other caucuses, but having more women in the other caucuses without a left political force at work will not make for very much change. I think there is a lot of evidence of that. I am not so crassly partisan that I don't see that good things get done by other political parties and governments that are not NDP, but I would not be a very fit leader of a party if I were not a believer in the partisan effort that we are involved in. Because it doesn't really add up to much if you don't.

I am also a passionate believer in the importance of having progressive extra-parliamentary forces at work all of the time. Without those forces, not a lot of progress gets made. Having said that, I also believe that we are making a big mistake if more and more people are going to say: "Well, I am kind of disillusioned by politics, so I am actually not going to be involved in

the political process in any sense of advancing and strengthening political parties. I am just going to consider that as a waste of time, as hostile, or alienating. I am just going to substitute interest-based politics." You can't substitute [interest groups for political parties]. It has to be both ends; it has to be interactive. You need solid parliamentary forces and solid extra-parliamentary forces, and it is the creative dynamic that goes on between them that actually creates change. And an NDP government in power needs it even more, for the party to keep pushing for change.

The question that I end up focused on is not so much what are the different motivations, what are the different methods, what are the different strategies, what are the different attitudes, as on what are the different priorities of women as compared to men when they actually get elected to office? What real impact do women entering politics have in terms of changing the conditions of the lives of women?