

BOOK REVIEW

***Rural Women's Leadership in Atlantic Canada: First-Hand Perspectives on Local Public Life and Participation in Electoral Politics.* Louise Carbert. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006; 209 pages; ISBN-13: 978-0-8020-9125-3; \$45.00 (cloth).**

This book is essential reading for anyone interested in Canadian women's participation in formal political life. Beginning with the insight that fewer women find their way into electoral office in rural than in urban constituencies - at all levels, for all parties, and in every region of the country - political scientist Louise Carbert then focuses her attention on Atlantic Canada, the nation's least urbanized region and the one currently least likely to elect women to office, to explore this deficit of female political leadership. Her arguments draw on 14 focus group discussions conducted in 2000 with 126 women who were the mainstays of their rural communities. While their voices offer valuable evidence, it is Carbert's finely-tuned analysis, rooted in an impressive command of the larger academic literature on electoral politics, that makes this book so effective in exploding the old stereotypes that are often invoked in studies of the political behaviour of both women and Atlantic Canadians. Women, she argues, are diverted from the political arena less by domestic obligations, lack of funding, a deeply-rooted Atlantic Canadian conservatism, or even by gender bias, than by the structural contours of political life in their hard-pressed rural communities.

In seeking potential candidates for her focus groups, Carbert stumbled across an interconnected group of women, most of them well educated, employed outside the home, and active in one or more voluntary associations. They would, Carbert suggests, make perfect candidates for political office except that many of them are involved in government-sponsored development programs that have proliferated in rural areas across Canada. With the exception of teaching, public service positions tend to correlate with reluctance to enter the electoral arena and these jobs may well offer women more power in effecting community development than political office. Moreover, the slushy intersection among family, economics, and politics in small communities, characterized by face-to-face relationships, complicates the democratic process by privileging consensus over competition. Since politics really matters in rural communities dependent on government assistance, there is a tendency to support proven political networks and to elect men, who will, more likely than not, be negotiating with male-dominated bureaucratic, business, and political structures. Given these realities, it is not surprising that the strongest theme to emerge from Carbert's research is women's disapproval of political life at the community level, where every political decision is subject to close scrutiny for evidence of favouritism, patronage, and self-aggrandizement. Carbert concludes that a more tightly regulated

system that puts a greater distance between the decision-making process and the affected constituents would make a political career more attractive for women, but how this feminization of political life might be accomplished is beyond the scope of this study.

It is to be hoped that Carbert and others build upon this ground-breaking research. It would be useful to have comparative studies on other rural areas of Canada, to explore in more detail the political engagement of minority women, and, drawing on grassroots movements in Canada and elsewhere, to consider what might be done to put rural communities and their female leaders in the vanguard of political renewal in the twenty-first century.

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