



## PRESS STATEMENT

## TALKING BACK ON THE SENATE

For release: September 9, 1992

Prominent academic women and leaders from national women's organizations today endorsed Premier Harcourt's plan to ensure that women have an equal place among B.C.'s representatives in a new Senate.

Shelagh Day, Vice President of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, said "The Premier has done the right thing. Women still hold few positions of political power in Canada. We are only fourteen per cent of Canada's Parliament and slightly less than fourteen per cent of the current Senate. Unless some changes are made, we will be only fourteen per cent in the new Senate too. In 1992, this is not good enough. Women do not agree to being on the margins any longer; we need an equal voice in the governing of the country."

Lynn Smith, Professor of Law at the University of British Columbia, stated "Our political institutions have not succeeded in producing elected bodies that are even close to representing women in proportion to our numbers in the population. Even if we assume that women's representation will increase on its own, equal representation for women will not result for many years. Corrective steps are justified now. Setting in place this new elected body creates an opportunity to take those steps. It should not be lost."

"Contrary to some recent public declarations on this point, no democratic principle is violated by this proposal," said Maureen Maloney, Dean of Law at the University of Victoria. "In fact the principles of democracy support it. The fundamental idea of democracy is government by the people. When government institutions do not reflect the population, especially when major groups are marginalized in terms of power, there is a failure of democracy. At this time in Canada," Maureen Maloney said, "there is an excellent justification for ensuring representation by gender, at least as good as for ensuring representation by geography. How can providing equal seats for women be considered a 'quota,' more offensive and undemocratic than guaranteeing the same six seats to Prince Edward Island as to Ontario?"

"Critics of the proposal," Shelagh Day said, "refuse to acknowledge that our electoral system is currently *not* a fair one. But the barriers to women and other under-represented groups in the nomination process have been well documented in the Report of the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform, among others. With no spending limits, no public assistance in financing, entrenched old-boy party networks, and a variety of criteria for selection that favour white men, nomination battles raise almost insurmountable barriers for most women, minorities, poor people and others. To assert, in the face of extensive documentation, that this system ensures that candidates are selected on the basis of 'merit' is to ignore fact," Day said. "The step proposed by the B.C. government is a modest and reasonable one in the face of this. We applaud the government's stand and trust that they will stick with it."

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Reading editorials in newspapers across the country this week you would think there are three indisputable facts concerning the debate on gender equality and minority representation in the Senate: 1) that the issue is of concern to only a fringe group of frenzied feminists who have somehow bulldozed five Canadian Premiers into compliance; 2) that gender equality in the Senate means a "quota" system which is, by definition, bad, and 3) that the very foundations of Canadian democracy are being rocked to their core. Of the three points, only the third has any substance.

From the beginning of the Constitutional discussions, NAC has argued that if we were creating a new elected institution, it should deal with the under-representation of key groups in society, not just the under-representation of less-populated provinces. The idea of broadening the meaning of equality in the Triple E Senate was embraced by the Calgary Constitutional Conference, by the Beaudoin-Dobbie Committee, and at most of the Multi-Lateral Meetings. The approach accepted, until the First Ministers got into the act, was a system of election by proportional representation specifically designed to promote gender equity and minority representation. Without a word of explanation, in August the First Ministers dropped the idea of both proportional representation and an inclusive Senate, and the Charlottetown Accord allows each province to decide how Senators will be chosen. This is not a satisfactory national solution, because it will leave women and minorities in some provinces out in the cold, but the good news is that five Premiers decided that they would champion gender equality in Senate elections in their provinces. Then came the howls of outrage.

NAC's initial position on how to achieve gender equality was that there should be two-person ridings and all voters could elect one man and one woman. How this would restrict the choice of voters more than our current system where voters can choose only one candidate pre-selected by party riding associations escapes us. Nor is it evident how this can be considered a "quota" more offensive and undemocratic than guaranteeing the same six seats to the Province of Prince Edward Island as to Ontario.

An alternative method, however, is election by proportional representation with party lists designed to promote gender

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equity and minority representation. While such a system would not guarantee 50% women, it would greatly increase the representation of women and also improve the representation of other major under-represented groups. In Norway, where such a system is used, 34.5% of the parliament is women. In Sweden 38% of the seats are held by women. Contrary to the charges of our critics, NAC has been concerned from the beginning that this new institution of government be inclusive and representative not just of women but of minorities. We would rather see an inclusive Senate, one which is racially representative, and which includes people with disabilities and poor people, with 40% women, than an all-white Senate with 50% women.

A system of proportional representation with gender-balanced party lists would not remove choice from the voters, but enhance it. In a new Senate election, a PR system could mean that voters in each province would choose from lists of six candidates from each party. Parties would be required by law to ensure that their lists were gender-balanced and representative of racial and regional diversity.

As editorialists and columnists rage about voting based on chromosomes, they ignore the reality that our electoral system promotes the election of those already in position of power, mostly white professional men.

While almost everyone agrees that the Canadian electorate is profoundly dissatisfied with its politicians, they fail to acknowledge that a significant part of this alienation is due to the fact that politicians are so removed from the daily realities of their constituents' lives. A male-dominated Parliament voting on an abortion bill, an almost all-white Parliament dealing with issues of racism, or a Parliament where most members are financially secure dealing with hunger and unemployment is surely just as abhorrent as a Parliament dominated by central Canada voting for resource taxation in Alberta. A Parliament and Senate that better mirror the life experience of the electorate by representing them in terms of gender, class, and race, as well as region, would no doubt be closer to the concerns of the people.

The observation that our current electoral system is the height of representative democracy could only be made by groups of white professional men, who dominate the editorial boards as well as the Parliament. The barriers to women and other under-represented groups in the nomination process have been well documented in the Report of the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform, among others. With no spending limits, no public assistance in financing, and a

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variety of criteria for selection of candidates that favour white men, nomination battles raise almost insurmountable barriers for most women, minorities, poor people and others. When you add to these problems a "first-past-the-post" system where riding associations choose only one candidate, the pressure is to choose someone most valued in a majority white, male-dominated society - that is, a professional white man.

NAC would welcome an intelligent, informed debate on the best way to achieve full representation for women and minorities in government institutions. There are options. But make no mistake: the outrage being expressed at the moment does not erupt from disagreement about the "hows." It is rooted in fundamental unwillingness to change at all. The debate on gender equity in the Senate is rocking established conceptions of liberal democracy to their core. It is challenging the fairness of an electoral system that results in a small minority group dominating almost all positions of power in the country.

It is no accident that women, racial minorities and people with disabilities are among those most critical of the Charlottetown Accord. Because we were not represented at the table, our concerns were not taken seriously. White male domination of the corridors of power is no longer acceptable. Our political leaders have the opportunity to make a dramatic gesture towards equality and inclusion. We applaud those who have and sincerely hope that they will not back down before the misinformed denunciations of those who want to protect the status quo. They have the chance now to deliver an electoral system for the Senate that will open the doors to the full political participation of all Canadians.

## Sidebar

### Electoral Systems

Most English-speaking countries, like Canada, use the first-past-the-post electoral system where one candidate from each party is nominated in a single riding. Of those countries using this system the highest representation of women is in New Zealand at 16% and the lowest is the U.S. at 5%. Canada currently has 14% women in the federal Parliament. The strengths of the system are that it usually ensures a majority government to the winning party resulting in more stable government, and it provides closer contact

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for the electorate in a particular geographic district with their elected member. The weakness of the system is that it distorts voter preference by invalidating all votes except those cast for the winning candidate. Because of this, it can result in a party with little more than 35% of the popular vote winning a majority government.

Most countries have the much more democratic system of proportional representation (PR). Here parties establish a list of candidates in electoral districts that can range from a large district with 4 to 6 representatives, to a province, or even the whole country. The system better reflects the wishes of the voters because the number of seats won more directly reflects the proportion of votes cast for each party. The major argument against this system is that it creates instability in government, as has been seen in Italy and Israel. But this can be countered by requiring that a party obtain a minimum percentage of the vote, such as 5%, before it will obtain seats. In Scandinavia the system is used without the problems of government instability.

Because there are lists rather than individual candidates, parties are under much more pressure to ensure that their lists are representative by gender, race, ethnicity, and region. They cannot blame the individual riding association or claim that the best person for the job was a man if they can nominate several people at once. In almost all countries that use proportional representation, the representation of women is higher. In northern European countries where parties are required to have 25% to 50% women on their lists, women have made remarkable progress in political representation.

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