

DEBUNKING THE MYTHS

Critics of equality for women in a new Canadian Senate have been peddling myths about our current electoral system. Let's examine some of them.

Myth 1: Women currently enjoy equal opportunity in the electoral system. If only small numbers of women get elected it's because women don't want to run or they are not the best candidates.

Answer: The Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing found that women do not currently enjoy equal opportunity in the electoral system. In February 1992 in Communiqué 13 the Royal Commission said this:

"Canadians generally accept that every voter should have an equal opportunity to seek election to the House of Commons. If this principle worked perfectly in practice, on average and over time the membership of the House of Commons would provide a relatively accurate reflection of Canadian society. That this has not occurred is evidence that some groups encounter obstacles to political participation and as a result are deterred from becoming candidates for elected office.

Testimony before the Commission and research conducted on its behalf revealed that particular hurdles for women include financial barriers and procedural obstacles within political parties."

Myth 2: Ensuring equality for women in the Senate is affirmative action. It gives women special privileges. That's bad.

Answer: Taking a step which will get rid of discriminatory barriers in the electoral system is just that: getting rid of discrimination. Getting rid of discrimination against women does not give them a special privilege, it just levels the playing field. It might, however, slightly diminish the privilege currently enjoyed by men.

Myth 3: This is undemocratic.

Answer: Ensuring equality for women in the political sphere is not undemocratic at all. 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. The fact that almost all positions of power in Canada are currently held by members of a small minority group, that is, white professional men, is a serious problem.



Myth 4: This restricts the voter's freedom of choice.

Answer: If B.C. had two person ridings and everyone could vote for one man and one woman, how could this be said to restrict the voter's choice? Choice would be enhanced: voters would have the opportunity to vote for a woman, as well as a man. If the elections were by proportional representation, voters would probably get six votes and could vote for six candidates from party lists which could be gender-balanced, as well as representative of minority groups. Voter's choices are much more restricted now than they would be under either of these options. Now voters can choose only one candidate pre-selected by party riding associations.

Myth 5: This is a quota, and that's bad.

Answer: The new Senate is based on quotas. In order to address the under-representation of less-populated provinces, including B.C., the Triple E Senate proponents argued that all provinces should get the same number of seats, irrespective of their population. So each province gets six seats. This is not called a quota, but providing equal seats for women is. But 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?

Myth 6: Premier Harcourt dreamt this up over his Wheaties last week and it's a left wing plot.

Answer: This issue has been on the constitutional table since February, 1992. The principle of ensuring gender equality and creating an inclusive Senate was endorsed by the Constitutional Conferences, by the Beaudoin-Dobbie Committee, and by most of the Multi-Lateral Meetings. Check the reports. Politicians of all stripes have recognized that women do not enjoy equality of opportunity in the electoral process.

Myth 7: This is not feminism. Feminism is a "slow and profound" revolution. This is too heavy-handed.

Answer: Ensuring that women gain access to political power has been a key element of the feminist agenda since the last century. Seventy years after women got the vote, we occupy fourteen per cent of the seats in government. Waiting forever is not feminist.

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