# UNDER-REPRESENTATION IN CANADIAN PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS:

## Canada's Challenge

**ABSTRACT**

In the years to come, Canada's success will largely depend upon its ability to maintain an environment in which each Canadian, regardless of colour or gender is able to realize his or her full potential and make the greatest possible contribution to our society. Canada must demonstrate an ability and willingness to adapt its most important institutions if it wishes to preserve its notion of itself as a tolerant, multicultural society. However, left unchecked, current levels of under-representation of ethno-racial minorities, Aboriginal peoples, newcomers and women in our public institutions calls in to question our ability to realize this vision of Canada's future.

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Canada is one of the most dynamic places on earth. Our changing population is a case in point. In the past ten years, the visible minority population has increased to almost 14% of the general population. Immigrants now make up almost 19% of the Canadian population, and it is estimated that this group will account for all of our labour market growth by 2011. In our urban centres, this demographic dynamism is even more on display. For instance, in Toronto, more than 40% of the population was born outside of Canada, and visible minorities make up just under 50% of the population. The rapidly increasing diversity of Canada presents a tremendous opportunity for our country. However, it also presents its own unique challenges. Foremost among these challenges is how to harness the potential of our diversity in our public institutions. The truth, the dynamism on display in our population growth is almost completely absent here. As a result, there is a severe and persistent under-representation of visible minorities and new immigrants in our public institutions.

The under-representation of newcomers and visible minorities is particularly acute in provincial and federal politics. For instance, in Ontario, visible minorities constitute more than 19% of the population but less than 5% percent of the Members of the Provincial Legislature. There has been little improvement in Canadian visible minority representation in Canadian legislative bodies for over thirteen years.

Little official information is gathered on the representation of visible minorities, Aboriginal peoples and newcomers on City Councils and locally appointed and elected agencies, boards and commissions. However, what research *is* available indicates that all of these groups are significantly under-represented. For instance, in Toronto, visible minorities make up almost 50% of the population. The city also has the largest Aboriginal population in Canada. However, visible minorities represent only 11% of City Council and there has never been an Aboriginal councillor. In Halifax, there is no visible minority or immigrant representation on council.[1]

In the executive levels of the civil service, visible minorities account for only 4.2% of federal government executive employees and only 7% of new executive hires. Only Aboriginal peoples have enjoyed a significant upswing in executive public service representation, accounting for 10% of new executive hires.[2]

### Under-representation of women

While women represent 52% of the Canadian population, they only hold 21% of the seats in the House of Commons. This level of under-representation has persisted through three election cycles, with female representation rising only slightly from 18% in 1993. Women hold only 21% of federal seats and fewer than 18% of provincial seats. This is in spite of the fact that in national polls, Canadians have consistently indicated a willingness to vote for women candidates and have identified under-representation as a problem.

It is difficult to over-emphasize how deeply entrenched we are in the under-representation of women in Canadian electoral politics. For instance, as a result of our poor showing, Canada ranks

37th internationally for female representation in parliament, down from 31st in 2002 and far behind many less robust parliamentary democracies. In fact, at the current rate of progress, it would take 4 more generations of Canadian women to come and go before gender parity is achieved in the House of Commons.

Women also continue to be significantly under-represented in the executive ranks of the federal government and in politically appointed positions. While women represent more than 54% of the federal public service, they account for only 33.8% of federal executive employees. In 2002-2003, women only accounted for 44% of new executive hires within the federal government.

### Reasons for chronic under-representation

Under-representation arises from a variety of barriers that women, visible minorities, newcomers and Aboriginal peoples face when pursuing public leadership positions. These barriers will continue to contribute to the significant and persistent under-representation of these groups in public office and include:

1. Individual resources: such as age, marital status, education and income (Junn, 1999)
2. Where an individual places on the trajectory of settlement and integration, including:
   - length of residence
   - language proficiency,
   - acquisition of knowledge of the political system,
   - acquisition of knowledge of the different political parties, and
   - acquisition of knowledge of the different tactics being used in the country for political influence (Junn, 1999)
3. Ability to translate social capital into political capital (Fennema and Tillie, 1999, 2000).
4. The persistence and reproduction of racial oppression and discrimination (Saloojee 2002).

Other factors include poverty, discrimination, institutional non-acceptance or the group's own limited social capital. New immigrants, who are increasing also people of colour, continue to face a host of additional, particular challenges including language, information, social adaptation and credible credentials.[3]

In provincial and federal electoral politics, women and visible minority candidates have less personal wealth to seek party nominations and often have difficulty raising nomination funds. As recent entrants into Canadian politics, women and visible minorities are often not part of the networks used to support nomination bids.

In the public service, women, visible minorities and Aboriginal peoples continue to report facing negative attitudes and stereotyping and consistent undervaluation. Visible minority women still feel that they face the "double jeopardy" of being women and people of colour. Left unaddressed, the predictable result of these barriers has been the persistent under-representation of women and ethno-racial minorities in Canadian electoral politics.

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### Implications of under-representation

The implications of under-representation extend far beyond the affected groups and are both symbolic and substantive in nature. Substantively, the true harm of under-representation is that the Canadian public is largely deprived of the significant contribution that a greater diversity of representation could have on the formulation of public policy at its highest levels.[4]

Symbolically, there is a growing sense among Canadians that a chronic under-representation of the large segments of our population is a serious threat to our shared notions of participatory democracy. For instance, 90% of Canadians support increasing the number of women in public office as the most important change needed to our political system.[5] A lack of diversity in Canadian elected officials has also contributed to a decline in voter turnout, particularly among youth.[6] At a time when voter turnout is at historical lows and the public's disillusionment with politics is at all-time highs, the message of inequality that under-representation transmits is one which our country can ill afford.

### CCPL Mission and Objectives

The Canadian Centre for Political Leadership (CCPL) was created to promote the participation of visible minorities, new immigrants, women and Aboriginal peoples in public leadership with the goal of ultimately increasing their representation in Canadian public institutions. To that end, the CCPL provides its target audiences with non-partisan training and resources to assist them in successfully pursuing public leadership. As the first permanent centre of its kind, the CCPL also provides a forum in which strategies for the benefit of female, visible minority, newcomer and Aboriginal public office seekers may be developed and shared.

### CCPL Target Audiences

The CCPL provides resources, education and training to visible minorities, newcomers, Aboriginal peoples and women with a:

- Demonstrated commitment to one or more community issues
- Strong interest in public leadership and civic participation
- Willingness to actively investigate appropriate public leadership opportunities

- Willingness to complete pre-training and post-training exercises and activities

### Activities

The CCPL was established in 2002. Over the past 3 years, it has launched a series of innovative programs and materials, focused primarily on the Greater Toronto Area. The Municipal Participation Project, which ran from February 2003-July 2004, was aimed at preparing visible minority, new immigrant and Aboriginal community leaders, including youth, for participation in municipal public leadership in the GTA. Forms of public service included serving on municipal agencies, boards and commissions, running for City Council and school boards and serving on significant community boards. Participants now sit on the Toronto Board of Health, the Toronto Workers Health and Safety Legal Clinic. Participants also ran for Council in 2003 in the Cities of Toronto and Markham respectively and for Toronto District School Board Trustee.

In 2003, the CCPL created 4 original case studies as a complement to the Municipal Participation Project. Using community members as examples, these case studies permitted participants to explore issues surrounding municipal public leadership and political participation.

In 2004, the CCPL launched its website – www.theccpl.ca. The website includes information about the Canadian Centre for Political Leadership and information on existing CCPL programs and planned CCPL activities. It also includes facts on women and visible minorities in Canadian public leadership, research and links to other civic and political participation organizations, and a listing of national civic and political participation activities and events.

This year, the CCPL will be hosting a GTA Public Leadership Summit. The goal is to provide training to 200 visible minorities, Aboriginal peoples and newcomers from the GTA who wish to pursue public leadership positions, including elected office, campaign staff, public agencies, boards and commissions, and senior positions within the civil service.

Through its programs and activities, the Canadian Centre for Political Leadership hopes to focus attention and to bring creative solutions to the issue of the chronic under-representation of women, visible minorities, Aboriginal peoples and newcomers in Canadian public leadership positions.

### Steps toward addressing chronic under-representation

Through our training, activities and research, the CCPL has gleaned a number of important lessons about what motivates individuals from under-represented groups to enter public life and what makes them effective once they have assumed positions of public leadership. Some of the lessons we have learned are the following:

*Personal passion is what leads to involvement* – Public leaders identify a personal passion as the root of their public involvement. Almost all of the public leaders that the CCPL has worked with trace their beginnings back to the grassroots level and their pubic leadership flows from that involvement.

*The importance of thoroughly investigating opportunities* – Public leaders take the time to research the public office opportunity to determine whether it will allow them to promote the public policy issues they are committed to. They also determine whether they will be able to serve effectively by making inquiries through community networks and by questioning other public leaders directly.

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*The importance of working with community gatekeepers* – Public leaders stress how important it is to develop, where possible, good relationships with community gatekeepers (those who are in a position to support your pursuit of office and your work once you secure the position). However, public leaders also note the importance of devising strategies to circumvent gatekeepers if they prove to be barriers to effectiveness.

*The importance of building networks and alliances* – Public leaders identify the importance of building effective networks. This includes building an effective community network that can be used to support your work. It also includes building a network of allies within public institutions willing to work with you to implement your policy agenda.

*The importance of evidence-based advocacy* – Public leaders indicate that it is important for them to go through a period of intellectual preparation for public leadership. In order to have the most impact, public leaders do their policy research and build a case for their issues. The goal is to be able to advocate as effectively as possible on behalf of their public policy interests.

*Is this for me?* – At one point or another, each public leader asks themselves, "is this for me?" That is, does this work reflect my values, does it play to my strengths? Is this where I have the best opportunity to make a significant impact on the policy issues that are important to me? For some the answer will be yes, and others no. For those for whom the answer is no, the challenge then becomes pursuing other avenues to achieve public policy impact.

### Role for the gatekeepers in reducing under-representation

While women, newcomers, visible minorities and Aboriginal peoples clearly need to go through their own rigorous process of self-examination and preparation, it would be misleading to suggest that this in and of itself

will lead to a significant increase in the representation of these groups in public leadership positions. As previously noted, there continue to be a large number of structural barriers faced by racialized communities and women as they seek to enter the public arena. These include a recruitment process that works to confer advantages on established groups and public institutions and political social groups that are reluctant to share power. Therefore, it is essential that public institutions, political parties and community gatekeepers make an explicit and sustained commitment to eliminate the systemic causes of under-representation for which they bear responsibility.

### Electoral politics

Political parties are the gatekeepers to political office. It is they that ultimately decide who will secure nominations, who will be awarded the most winnable ridings and who will receive the financial backing and human resources needed to mount successful campaigns. Without the support of the political parties, under-representation becomes much more difficult to eradicate. Research has shown that the countries which achieve the greatest success in increasing the representation of diverse groups in their national assemblies are those in which political parties have adopted explicit measures toward that goal. These measures have at times been combined with legislation or constitutional reform, but often, political party reform has been sufficient and more effective in dramatically increasing the results for under-represented groups.

Political parties could insist that candidates from under-represented groups be identified and nominated in the most winnable of those ridings. The executives of political parties could direct riding associations to become proactive in recruiting diverse candidates and combine this with an accountability mechanism requiring riding associations to demonstrate that they have actively sought out women candidates. The political parties can also set an explicit goal regarding the percentage of women, visible minority and other candidates from under-represented to be run in the next election. A minimum of 33% would be an ideal goal as research has identified this as the critical mass needed to produce substantive public policy results.

### Public Appointments

All three levels of government can make simple adjustments that have the potential to produce significant results in public appointments. For instance, there is a push on by citizens and governments alike to make the appointments process more transparent and accessible. To this end, the CCPL and other organizations are promoting the creation of community rosters/talent banks. These talent banks would provide public institutions with almost instant access to a diverse pool of individuals who are ready, willing and qualified to serve on government agencies, boards and commissions and in the executive ranks of the civil service. Talent banks have proven to be very successful in the deployment of Canadians internationally and in diversifying institutions in other jurisdictions, including the United States.

Canadians have the ability to create a real moment in our collective history. By implementing proactive initiatives, we have the opportunity to lead our country to its first breakthrough in under-representation more than a decade. This would transform the face of Canadian public leadership and will have the full support of many Canadians.

#### Notes

[1] *Diversity in Canadian Governments: Preliminary Research on the Numerical Representation of Women, Minorities and Immigrants in 7 Cities,* Political Participation Research Network, Metropolis, September 2003.

[2] All statistics from: Public Service Human Resources Management Agency of Canada, *Employment Equity in the Federal Public Service 2002-2003*

[3] *Ethno-Racial Political Representation in Toronto: Patterns and Problems,* Myer Siemiatycki, Anver Saloojee Ryerson University.

[4] Research show that legislative priorities differ with female representation over 33%, Sylvia Bashevkin, Uof T.

[5] November 2004, Environics poll for Centre for Research and Information on Canada

[6] Explaining the Turnout Decline in Canadian Federal Elections: A New Survey of Non-voters, Elections Canada, 2003