# THE INTEGRATION OF WOMEN IN POLITICAL LIFE IN CANADA: FROM REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY TO PARTICIPATIVE DEMOCRACY

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The persistence of gender inequalities often stirs up debates on the capacity of contemporary democracies to set up egalitarian and inclusive systems. Women's emancipation movements that have punctuated the western world in the 20th century and which have culminated in the 1970s are a testimony to women's repeated attempts to change power dynamics in order to have their rights recognized. Their history, which is relatively well-documented today, has enabled us to recognize the diverse forms that discrimination can take and to associate feminist triumphs with their female heroes, and their history is far from being one about victimization. However, beyond promises of equality, the significant issue remaining concerns the symbolic equality that was conquered by women while discrimination continues to persist in power dynamics as well as in the work place. In other words, how do we escape this dual history, or the contradictions of a unique gendered history? How do we restore the complexity of social gender relations, both in terms of political and social change? Because if there is a cultural/sexual revolution that needs to be understood, it is the one that has radically transformed relationships between women and men, between generations, religions, within families, overturning the established order in order to bring to the forefront our problems of integration. How do we, as a matter of fact, tackle the issue of the integration of minority groups in societies that are being completely transformed by globalization, which is in turn the epicentre of recent reconsideration in advanced societies. In Canada, where multiculturalism thrives everywhere but in Quebec, there remains a strong imagined fear surrounding massive immigration, whose embodi-

ment possesses origins that are radically foreign (to our "national" values) and who we imagine would destabilize established rules; this fear is, however, a lot less potent here than in the US and in Europe. Heated debates took Quebec by storm in 2015 and resulted in a failed attempt by the Parti Québécois in power at that moment to adopt a "Charter of Values".

The case of the integration of women into contemporary democracies enables us to better identify the strategies implemented by feminist movements in order to obtain recognition and access to positions of power. The integration of women to (political) citizenship brings up various issues related to the processes by which liberal democracies transform, especially the processes associated with political representation. The emergence of western democracy, which excluded women from political representation, had to hence find ways to progressively and fully integrate groups that wished to be integrated. To that effect, the role of feminist organizations is central.

The first wave feminist movements of the turn of the 20th century wanted to extend women's rights (suffrage, social and civil rights) and their contributions are exemplified by organizations such as the Fédération Nationale Saint-Jean Baptiste. Despite their exclusion from the partisan sphere and focusing exclusively on their role in the private sphere, which should have kept them away from elected and representative positions, these women put into action complex strategies in order to obtain political recognition for their social contribution. Among those strategies are alliances between different feminist factions and movements, and with the political parties best suited to represent them. The history of women's suffrage in the western world is hence a long history of past compromises between liberal, radical, Freemason, free-thinking, maternal, reform, Protestant, Jewish, etc. feminists and the elected political parties or the ones wishing to remain in power. This unlikely coalition found a large base after the First World War, mostly formed by maternal feminists, through which to achieve this compromise. More than ever, women were needed.

## WOMEN'S ACQUISITION OF THE RIGHT TO VOTE

Suffrage is hence achieved in the 1920s in numerous countries (Canada included) in exchange for the services provided by mothers, nurses, widows, during or just after the First World War. In Quebec, feminist demands for the right to vote, achieved at the municipal and federal levels during the same period, garnered resistance mainly from the Catholic episcopacy. Those demands are obtained twenty years later at the provincial level, thanks to strategic alliances between radical and reform feminists and the Liberal Party.

In 1938, under the pressure of Thérèse Casgrain and the forty or so representatives that gained entry to Congress under her guidance, the provincial Liberal Party adopted a resolution that made suffrage an item on their program. Defeat at the hands of Maurice Duplessis' Union nationale in 1936, a change of leadership in the liberal camp after Alexandre Taschereau's departure, and the need to obtain women's support for the grand social reform projects by his successor Adelard Godbout hence lead to this first formal engagement of a provincial party in favour of women's suffrage. A liberal win in 1939 lead to women obtaining the right to vote in 1940

at the provincial level.

Hence, extending the right to vote to women was intrinsically linked to a process of inclusion of social issues within the new responsibilities of the State. Based on a similar model to the one in English Canada, the right to vote was granted to women for the services they provided to their nation. It rewarded the contributions of women to society. In his House address, Godbout mentioned the reasons which pushed him to introduce a bill to help "those young women who, working in our charitable societies and organizations, are wholly devoted to us. I ask you that we banish all barriers for those benevolent women in our society." The Act Granting to Women the Right to Vote and to be Eligible as Candidates (bill 18) was finally passed on April 25, 1940.

Even though the episcopacy succeeded for a while in hampering the FNSJB suffragist, they rebuild themselves quickly outside of the Federation, through networks that were closely associated with the Federation. The provincial Liberal Party hence became the only political party where suffragist demands were taken into consideration. Most of the militants identified with the Liberal Party's positions: the need to democratize institutions, to reform education and to confine the Church to its religious function. As for the Conservative Party, none of the three consecutive party leaders between 1920 and 1930 (Arthur Sauvé, Camilien Houde and Maurice Duplessis) supported suffrage at the provincial level, and their electoral base, which was mainly rural, was less likely to support the idea than the Liberal's base. Even if both Liberal ministers in power in Quebec for 31 years, Lomer Gouin (1905–1921) and Alexandre Taschereau (1921–1936), were personally opposed to women's suffrage, their caucus and their electorate were increasingly composed of supporters of the women's movement, and the main leaders of the suffragist movement overall maintained excellent relationships with Liberal leaders, often being themselves personally involved with the province's Liberal elite.

As we can see, there had to be a collaboration between different feminist groups, between maternal feminists and equal-right feminists, as well as a solid partisan capacity from women's associations, for their demands to finally be heard and for this last barrier to be lifted and for women to be represented at the provincial level. Everyone in this context agreed that the need to value equal rights is one of the guiding lights of representative democracy.

## AND REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY

Gender studies applied to citizenship enable us to put into perspective the actions of militants and their impact on public institutions and political life in a democracy. Women's agency is highlighted and their diverse roles in public life are identified. We have seen that in Canada, women also rapidly learned about partisan politics, and this, even before having the right to vote.

The feminist fight for suffrage in Canada has thus slightly opened up our liberal democracy with women gaining the right to vote at different levels of government. These new rights, obtained at different times depending on the provinces, enabled the coexistence of different citizenship systems and the extension of democracy through the recognition of women's equal rights.

However, what the history of suffrage also shows us, besides the numerous forms of resistance that movements for the integration of minority groups are faced with, is the relative homogeneity of the groups engaged in this process, namely a small elite of Anglo-Protestant men and women, and, to a lesser degree, the French-Catholic elite. For those elites, we could say that the democratic process was able to feed on citizen participation. But the glass ceiling with which women struggle to this day is resistant to the large waves of women belonging to other social categories, other ethnoreligious origins and other regions. In other words, as long as the conquest of equal rights for all women does not destabilize the patriarchal order of domination, other civil and political rights cannot be acquired. As it is evidenced, the fact that women obtained the right to vote has not led to an equal participation of women in politics, and even less to an equal division of power between women and men, far from it.

## AND NOW

Almost a century later, during a debate organized by the Council on the Status of Women in Quebec, debates emerged around why more women do not enter politics and become party leaders, and why in general so few women (32.8% of representatives in Quebec in 2012) can be found in elected positions and in positions of power. We should be proud of the significant increase of women in the Assembly. After the great feminist uprisings of the 1970s in favour of greater female representation in politics, we saw an increase of elected women, going from 6.5% in 1981 to 14.8% in 1985, and then to a sharper increase of 23.2% elected female representatives in Quebec and to the (snap) election of Kim Campbell as Prime Minister of Canada. Surely, we also have to note that six women have been elected as provincial ministers in Canada recently. Does this fact attest to a major breakthrough in this area and reflect a decline in gender stereotypes associated to women and politics, or is this simply a small victory that distracts us from the inequalities that persist between men and women in this as in many other areas? As we know, Barack Obama's election to the US presidency did not dispel all racism against blacks.

Curiously, one of the recommendations that resulted from this debate was that we need to tackle women's lack of self-esteem, something that purportedly prevents them from entering politics. This diagnosis seems slightly problematic, since, as we all know, it is the close-knit and male-dominated networks that lead one to the halls of power. In order to change this situation, we could provide support, networks and money to aid in the recruitment of the women that want to enter politics. But women are also confronted with the dominant political culture, a culture that does not reflect right now their values nor their preoccupations. Furthermore, the disastrous image that is associated with the political milieu nowadays does not attract good candidates, either male or female.

Did the greater number of women representatives, mayors and prime ministers succeed in creating change in this culture? Does this fateful threshold of equality between women and men in the National Assembly enables us to consider that women's integration is henceforth complete? And, it seems that at this moment, it is alternative forms of politics that seem to appeal to women more, the networks that they established in volunteer associations, in

charitable organizations and even in small parties where they felt they were making a difference and where they are numerous; those are the training grounds preparing them to take the great leap to politics. This a symbolic and necessary transition, which will change the dominant political culture and which results' we can get a glimpse of in recent sexual revolutions (marriage for everyone, recognition of the rights of LGBTQI people, etc.).

If there is something to be learned from the acquisition of political rights by women, it is the importance of networks and civil society in those democratic transitions and that great changes are preceded by transformations in the personal politics of everyone involved. Our political culture, which is infused by divergent conceptions of multiculturalism and interculturalism (in Quebec) is still, however, dominated by an us/them dualism that continually reproduces exclusion. One of the ways to resist such mechanisms is, to my belief, to change the parameters of how our democracies function in order to achieve an equal society within the framework of a participative democracy.