

-TEXT FROM-

## **THREE FOR THOUGHT: Women As Leaders...**

By Kim Campbell, first female Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, first female Minister of National Defence, and First Canadian female Prime Minister.

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Recent elections of three female heads of state and government, Angela Merkel in Germany, Ellen Sirleaf- Johnson in Liberia and Michelle Bachelet in Chile, have drawn our attention to a the rarity of women in leadership positions. This is the subject matter of a wonderful book that I would like to recommend as my first of Three for Thought: Dr. Virginia Valian's **Why So Slow? The Advancement of Women.**

Dr. Valian is Professor of Psychology and Linguistics at Hunter College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY). The subject of her work is cognitive science, and a major portion of her research poses the question of why so few women are at the top of their professions, whether science, law, medicine, college teaching, industry, or business. In proposing an answer, Dr. Valian integrates psychology, sociology, economics, and neuropsychology.

In her book, Dr. Valian explains that human beings develop cognitively by creating mental frameworks for understanding the world. Only by building up an enormous reservoir of unarticulated hypotheses or "schemas," as she calls them, can we meet the needs of our rapid thinking processes and respond quickly and reflexively to the stimuli of our lives. Among the areas where we develop these schemas earliest and most deeply is the area of gender roles. Because our brains rely so strongly on our schemas they resist altering these frameworks. When we encounter a reality that does not correspond with what a schema leads us to expect, we try to change our understanding of what we are perceiving, rather than alter the perception itself.

In a research project, men and women of equal height were photographed against backgrounds that gave some scale to the picture. The photographs were then distributed to a group of women and men who were asked to rank the subjects by height. Uniformly, the women *and* men all ranked the men in the photos as taller than the women - as much as 3 ½ inches taller in some cases. Dr. Valian's explanation for this is that people see what they expect to see and among human beings men are, on average, taller than women. The danger of schemas, including gender schemas, is their power to override empirical reality.

When women enter new fields, they are seen by both women and men not to belong. The recent book **Closing the Leadership Gap,** by Marie Wilson, one of the founders of the White House Project, whose goal is to elect a woman to the American Presidency, demonstrates how gender schemas disadvantage women even when they do break through the glass ceiling. A White House Project study of Sunday morning news shows revealed that men far outnumbered women as guests on the most influential programs. Even when they held key positions in the House or Senate they were unlikely to be called upon for comment. Moreover, a male who formerly held a leadership position in Congress was more likely to be a guest on "Meet the Press,"

than a woman who currently held the very same position. What was most astonishing in the study was that the producer of “Meet the Press” was a woman.

Women of my “baby boomer” generation had to turn to history for politically powerful female role models. One of my childhood heroines was Elizabeth I, a gifted political strategist and one of the most learned women of her time. In his biography **Elizabeth I, A Study in Power and Intellect**, Paul Johnson demonstrates the effect of gender schemas in the efforts of her contemporaries and later historians to diminish her accomplishments and attribute her successes to others. In a world with no real Elizabeth I’s, it is not surprising that while exempting myself from the stereotypes about women, I, too, absorbed the view that women did not really measure up. In my youth I did not want to be associated with the stereotypes and so I identified with boys and men. Like the producer of “Meet the Press” I naturally turned to men as authorities - a victim of the gender schemas of my society. If women do not always support women, it is because they reflect the values of their cultures as much as men do, and many men reject gender schemas as strongly as women do.

The social science literature on gender helped me to understand many of my own experiences as a leader. Using my new found theoretical understanding as well as my practical experience, for three years I taught a course entitled “Gender and Power,” to young hopefuls at the Kennedy School at Harvard University. It is my hope that sharing what I have learned about gender schemas will help other women to understand the world in which they are making their way. I have come to believe that the only way to open up opportunities for women is for all of us to become “schema busters” through understanding why barriers still exist for women even in the face of real accomplishment and by making visible all those women who defy the stereotypes,. This means nothing less than changing the landscape from which people derive their ideas of what are normal gender roles. In the hope that you will take up my challenge, I give you these THREE FOR THOUGHT.

*Kim Campbell was the first female minister of justice, attorney-general of Canada and minister of national defence, and the first Canadian woman prime minister.*