

"Women in Power: The Good News and the Bad News."  
by the Right Honourable Kim Campbell  
25th Annual Meeting of the Churchill Society  
Toronto, November 20, 2008

---

Good Evening. First of all, let me say how much I appreciate the honour that you have bestowed on me this evening. To be recognized in the same breath as the name of Winston Churchill is really quite remarkable.

He was the first public figure whom I admired and was inspired by. Growing up as a child of war veterans, I was fascinated by the history of the Second World War, and I admired Churchill for two main qualities—the clarity of his moral vision and in understanding the threat posed by Adolf Hitler and his ability to mobilize his countrymen and women at the darkest time by appealing to what was best in them, to what they stood for and to what they must do.

As a young woman, I did not see myself as a future parliamentarian. I actually hoped to be the first woman Secretary General of the United Nations since that seemed to me to be the best position from which to take on future Hitlers.

But Winston Churchill was a household name for anyone growing up in the years after World War II and I must say that the only other person about whom stories were told that I remember that inspired me was in fact Charlotte Whitton. All of us girls grew up with her wonderful comment, "A woman had to be twice as good as a man in order to be thought half as good, but fortunately that's easy."

She was also a great deflator of pomposity when the Lord Mayor of London visited her in Ottawa and came out resplendent in his chain, and he was very sort of condescending. He said, "Ah, Mrs. Whitton, if I sniff your flower, will you blush?" She said, "I don't know. If I pull your chain, will you flush?"

With Winston Churchill the quotations are so common and of such common currency simply because they are so wonderful that we all grew up with them, but my mother once told me a story, and I do not know if it is true, because I have discovered that some of the Churchillian quotes are in fact apocryphal, but what she described to me suggested that he once gave the most brilliant extemporaneous and perhaps the shortest extemporaneous speech ever known, because we know that when he gave his speeches in Parliament, he wrote and memorized them. There is, in fact, a convention in Parliament that you do not read your speeches, that you must deliver them extemporaneously, and Winston Churchill wanted to make sure his were really of the highest level of rhetoric, so he wrote them, memorized them and delivered them with great force in the House of Commons. But during the Second World War, my mother told me that Churchill went to some place, I am not sure what city it was, that had been very badly bombed early in the war and he arrived to see the damage and to be greeted by a very unfriendly crowd who began chanting at him, "Bomb Berlin, bomb Berlin, bomb Berlin!" and he looked at them and he said, "Business before pleasure," which, when you think about it, is one of the most remarkable responses that anyone could give to that type of a response. I also want to say how delighted I am to be able to enjoy an evening in the company of many old friends who were generous supporters of my own political career, and it really is a kind of "This is Your Life" flashing in front of you this evening because there are so many people in this room who were part of my political life as colleagues in Parliament, as supporters, as advisors, just in every possible way—Lowell Murray from whom I stole my Chief of Staff—people who really mean a great deal to

me and it is really wonderful to be here with them. Their faith in me has led me to want to use the knowledge and political capital that they helped me to acquire to continued good purpose, and it is a true debt of gratitude on my part.

Tonight you are honouring women's leadership and it is difficult at first glance to find a link between that idea and the life and career of Winston Churchill. As you heard, he was far from being a misogynist. On the contrary, he liked women and had many women friends. His marriage to Clementine was not just a domestic partnership but also a respectful friendship where her advice was sought and taken seriously. As a young Liberal Churchill supported his party's call for female suffrage. He did however have a problem with women in the House of Commons.

When the first woman, who happened to be Lady Astor, entered Parliament, Winston Churchill said, "I find a woman's intrusion into the House of Commons as embarrassing as if she burst into my bathroom where I have nothing with which to defend myself, not even a sponge." That first woman, Lady Astor, was said to have assured him that he was not sufficiently handsome for this to be a problem.

The British House of Commons was the ultimate men's club in a country that had perfected that particular form of social organization, and it took years for women MP's to be admitted into all the spaces reserved for members. Even today, it retains the character of one of those cartoon tree houses where little boys erect signs saying, "No girls allowed." My old friend, Shirley Williams, called the House "a deeply masculine place", while now she sits in the House of Lords.

Even the arrival of "Blair's babes" in 1997, one hundred Labour women, did not change this character, and it led to serious disillusionment in those women who hoped that they were part of a breakthrough. The parliamentary culture of drinking and after-hours gossip and socializing that results in the long days in the House are uncongenial to many women, and it is interesting that the Canadian House of Commons did away with regular night sittings just before I arrived in 1988.

In order to pass the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement legislation, night sittings were scheduled in December of 1988, and for a rookie M.P. it was fun to stay and dine with them in the Members' Dining Room and hear war stories from the veterans about the hijinks they got into in the old days while killing time waiting for votes.

But men and women in our House enjoyed being able to spend evenings with their families or an activity that did not lead them inexorably to drinking, and so the culture in the Canadian House of Commons became friendlier to women.

Notwithstanding the difficulty of feeling accepted in the British House of Commons, suffrage was soon followed by women M.P.'s, and they had an impact on the legislative agenda in the interwar years. A total of 38 women M.P.'s served in the British House of Commons between 1919 and 1945, and it is interesting to see the subjects that they tackled. They fought for equal social benefits for women and, although they focused mostly on family, housing, health, welfare, international peace issues, they were brave in speaking with women's voices on sensitive subjects.

As Oxford historian, Brian Harrison wrote,

"Suffragists hoped that women's influence would raise the whole tone and character of our public life, but Astor could still complain in 1936 that, 'Some Honourable Members seem to regard any question affecting women as a good joke.' The women M.P.'s did, however, carry forward suffragist Josephine Butler's achievement of the 1870's by making it more acceptable for women to discuss sexuality in public. Astor admitted that Parliament's discussion in 1922 of the age of consent had been a most uncomfortable debate for any woman, but she thought her presence would benefit young girls just as Katherine Atholl and Eleanor Rathbone thought it worth nerving themselves in 1929 for detailed speeches against the circumcision of Kenyan women. Women needed to invade

this male metaphysical space if only because the type of man keenest on women's sexual reticence often waxed most Rabelaisian when out of female earshot."

Despite their difficulties, women were appointed to cabinet—the first in 1929—in Britain. In fact, 22 of the 83 women elected after 1967 served in the cabinet, and Churchill also had women in his government.

The absence of women from many of the professions limited their access to certain portfolios where those were valued as preparation, and Harold Nicolson once uttered the Foreign Office orthodoxy when he claimed in 1943 that the special virtues of women, intuition and sympathy, are singularly ill-adapted to diplomatic life. It is interesting because today we would think they are singularly well-adapted to diplomatic life.

Women were very slow to get into the diplomatic service in Britain, and the first woman ambassador was not appointed until 1962. While they may not have been seen as foreign office material, the perspective of women led many of them to be early critics of Hitler. Eleanor Rathbone saw in April of 1933 that the rise of Hitler was "an omen for the rest of the world", and she was followed by other women M.P.'s.

In May of that year, the National Organization of Societies for Equal Citizenship, an umbrella organization of suffragists, held a meeting in the House of Commons, at which Lady Astor carried a unanimous resolution—subsequently sent to the German ambassador—expressing "dismay" as Nazi dismissals of women from government service, and pointing out that "any injury done to the women of one nation must be deeply felt by the women of all nations."

In the mid-1930's, M.P. Katherine Atholl publicized the aggressive sections of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* that had been cut out by the German authorities from the English version, and she fully briefed Churchill on them in 1935. She also supplied with him with extracts from Hitler's speeches that the German authorities had not circulated in the British press.

The point of all this is that in his post-World War I career, Winston Churchill and his values were supported by the women who joined the ranks of Members of Parliament. These women created friendships across party lines that enabled them to make real legislative change, but they also proved to be loyal partisans when the survival of a government was at stake. Even more important, at a time of great social upheaval after the Great War, they helped to keep Parliament relevant. As Harrison says, "The most important of all the women M.P.'s contributions is the fact that they entered a men's House and succeeded there, and so publicly discredited the fascist belief that women should stay at home. During the First World War, the politicians who supported women's enfranchisement and entry into Parliament had never been narrowly concerned only with women's interests. They wanted to stabilize parliamentary government in a post-war world that seemed threatening to democracy. In promoting that wider aim, the early women M.P.'s fully justified the hopes that had been placed in them."

I wish I could say that the role of women as political leaders rose steadily after World War II. In the aftermath of that conflict, women found themselves again marginalized by a strong social and economic interest to put them back in the home.

In Canada, notwithstanding their outstanding contributions to the war effort, women had to struggle for political office. We had to wait until 1957 for our first female Cabinet Minister, Conservative Ellen Fairclough.

In the 1960's, Liberal M.P. Pauline Jewett, went to speak to Prime Minister Lester Pearson to tell him that she thought she was ready for more responsibility. "But Pauline," he replied, "we already have a woman in the Cabinet."

Pierre Trudeau's female cabinet appointees did not feel enthusiastically supported by the Prime Minister, and Trudeau had to be dragged kicking and screaming to name a woman to the Supreme Court of Canada, as he was convinced that there was no woman qualified for that post.

But enlightened male leaders have always been key to letting women show what they can do, and both Joe Clark and Brian Mulroney were highly supportive of women in government. The number of women in Cabinet and the importance of their portfolios made it possible for us to speak in our own voices.

As Minister of Justice, for example, I hosted the first-ever National Symposium on Women, Law and the Administration of Justice in Vancouver in 1991, a seminal event—if I may use that expression—in bringing women’s perspectives and experiences into justice issues.

Even so, Canada lags behind many countries in the presence of women in its national government. Why does it matter? Because it makes a difference to what governments do.

Not only women are under-represented. The world has changed dramatically since Churchill’s time. Decolonization, globalization, the end of the Cold War, and the rise of the European Union have all affected the movements of people and their aspirations. Ninety percent of the countries in the world have identifiable minorities of ten percent or more of their population.

Last week I was in Rotterdam at the Club of Madrid’s Annual Conference, which this year focused on our program, Shared Societies: A World Safe for Difference. We were in Rotterdam because in the past 35 years, the City of Rotterdam has seen its population become 46% non-original Dutch origin, and the percentage for young people is over 50%. The goal of the city is to become the leading intercultural city in Europe, but the election of a new mayor, a Muslim born in Morocco, does not begin to address the challenges of economic, social and political integration.

For many experts, the status of women in a society is a key indicator of the values of modernity, and the legal and social protections for women are key to creating a society that protects the life and dignity of all. The values that Winston Churchill defended and spoke of with such resonant language go back at least to the Magna Carta in 1215, but their elaboration has taken centuries with the Enlightenment focus on tolerance and reason, and the revolutions and reforms that have created our modern view of citizenship. The process does not stop and each generation has to work to conserve what it has inherited and broaden the scope of its values.

Tomorrow I fly to Prague to chair the Steering Committee of the World Movement for Democracy where we will discuss the substantive challenges facing democracy assistance institutions. Then I am going Kiev to participate in a roundtable discussion on regional economic development and its role in economic reform. In December I will be in Sofia to speak to the Council of Europe Political School Program for Young Leaders, and in January I will attend a meeting of the Arab Democracy Foundation in Doha and participate in a program to promote women’s political participation in Yemen.

My commitment to these efforts is based on my belief that government is key to our ability to meet the challenges of our modern world. Successful governance means that institutions have to be seen as effective and legitimate. For democracies, that means that populations must see these institutions as capable of speaking for and to them.

World War II presented a huge challenge to the governments of the Allies. It is hard for us to imagine just how impossible the task of defeating Nazi Germany seemed to the British in the early days of the War.

What Churchill was able to do was to mobilize people to give of their best, to do the seemingly impossible.

In December 2006 German scholar Anatole Lieven, warned of the consequences if our governments today cannot meet the challenges of climate change. Writing in the International Herald Tribune, he said,

“For market economies in the western model of democracy with which they have been associated, the existential challenge for the foreseeable future will be global warming. Other threats like terrorism may well be damaging, but no other

conceivable threat or combination of threats can possibly destroy our entire system. As the recent British commission chaired by Nicholas Stern, correctly stated, climate change 'is the greatest and widest-ranging market failure ever seen.' The question now facing us is whether global capitalism and western democracy can follow the Stern Report's recommendations, and make the limited economic adjustments necessary to keep global warming within bounds that will allow us to preserve our system in a recognizable form, or whether our system is so dependant on unlimited consumption, that it is, by its nature, incapable of demanding even small sacrifices from its present elite and population. If the latter proves the case and the world suffers radically destructive climate change, then we must recognize that everything that the West now stands for will be rejected by future generations. The entire democratic capitalist system will be seen to have failed utterly as a model for humanity and as a custodian of essential human interests."

Harry Truman once said that there are no great men, there are simply circumstances that bring out greatness. However, we have seen that urgent circumstances do not necessarily bring out greatness. We need leaders who have a clear vision of what is happening and what is right, and the capacity to mobilize people through appealing to what is best in them, through realism, not fear. With the election of Barack Obama in the United States, I allow myself to hope that this is what we will finally see.

Brian Harrison reports,

"During the Second World War, Eleanor Rathbone and Lady Astor became alert champions of Churchill, that old anti-feminist bogey. 'My admiration for him is such that I hate to differ from him in anything,' said Rathbone in August 1945, 'because I believe that he will go down in history as the man to whom not only this country, but the whole world, owes more than to any other British statesman who ever lived.'"

It would be wonderful if in a conversation about women's leadership we could claim Winston Churchill as one of our feminist champions. But he was not. But like Eleanor Rathbone, I could not care less. Defeating Hitler is enough in my book for any leader to be seen as an ally of women whether he wanted to see them in cabinet or not. Churchill gave us great leadership that made the world safe for women and other excluded groups to dream, and now, it is up to us to move the democratic promise forward for our world and that of our children. It is up to us to create the structures and cultures that can meet today's challenges by tapping all of the strength and leadership potential in our society. If we do not do this, Parliamentary Democracy itself is in peril. We owe it to ourselves and future generations to meet this challenge. We owe it to Winston Churchill.

Thank you.