

## Canadian politics needs a commitment to gender parity

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Kathleen Wynne's election on the weekend as leader of the Ontario Liberals means that 87 per cent of Canadians now reside in provinces and territories led by women. As someone who remains disappointed, 20 years on, that I've still been the only female prime minister, rather than just the first one, I celebrate this important democratic milestone.

Half a dozen female premiers reinforces the message that women belong in politics. Their visibility will change the landscape of Canadian politics and our sense of what is "normal" in public life. But having six female premiers should not make us prematurely complacent. They are still only the tip of an iceberg, the main body of which (75 per cent at all levels of political representation) is unfortunately still overwhelmingly male.

Why should we care about the representation of women? Women's lives reflect a different set of experiences that need to be represented in our democratic deliberations. Moreover, a growing body of research reveals the importance of diversity in decision-making. All-male organizations can breed a hierarchical, testosterone-infused social dynamic that requires displays of machismo and the kind of risk-taking that helped fuel the financial collapse of a few years ago. Women are not better than men, but there is overwhelming evidence of the value they add in business and government when they have a chance to lead.

Globally, the empowerment of women is more and more recognized as the sine qua non of social, political and economic progress – even in domains traditionally seen as the province of men. UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and its follow-ups call for the participation of women in postconflict negotiations, not out of political correctness but to ensure successful peace processes.

In legislatures where women work across party lines, there is a clear effect on the legislative agenda. American research suggests that the presence of even one woman on a court can influence its culture toward greater openness. In Canada, the presence of female MPs – including myself as Justice Minister – not only facilitated the revision of sexual-assault legislation but contributed to a more balanced culture in the House of Commons, making it possible for our male colleagues to stand up with us and speak with sensitivity about the issue, precisely because Parliament was no longer a men's club.

For these and other reasons, we need to join the increasing number of countries that see gender as a basic default category of society. In polities with proportional representation, parity is often achieved simply by alternating male and female candidates on the party lists. This has enabled many countries to far outstrip Canada in creating gender parity. Our single-member, first-past-the-post electoral system



presents a greater challenge for achieving this goal. When Equal Voice, an organization dedicated to electing more women in Canada, honoured me with its EVE Award four years ago, I proposed a redrawing of electoral boundaries so that every constituency in Canada would become a two-member constituency. (I was elected to the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia from a two-member riding, so this is not an untried approach.) If each redrawn constituency were to be tasked with electing one man and one woman – each elector would have two votes – we would have instant parity in Parliament. It would simply and fairly solve the problem.

Committing to gender parity would also change the sense of what is just in Canada and what is possible for Canadian women. It would be an example to the rest of the world – an ingenious way, without quotas or affirmative action, to address the gender balance. It would also challenge women to step up and run for office, to present Canadians with the broadest set of options and to help populate the rest of the iceberg with more balanced perspectives and experiences.

*Former prime minister Kim Campbell is a member of Equal Voice's National Advisory Board, an honorary patron of Informed Opinions and actively involved in numerous international organizations promoting effective governance and democracy.*