

# PEI COALITION FOR WOMEN IN GOVERNMENT

*Submission to the Special Committee on Democratic  
Renewal for the Legislative Assembly of Prince Edward  
Island*

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## Introduction

The PEI Coalition for Women in Government thanks the Special Committee on Democratic Renewal for the Legislative Assembly of Prince Edward Island for the opportunity to make this formal presentation.

It's important to state first that the PEI Coalition for Women in Government recognizes Proportional Representation as a best practice for electing women. As a result, we are a member of the Coalition for Proportional Representation established earlier this year and will echo their recommendations.

## Background

The PEI Coalition for Women in Government is a non-partisan coalition of individuals and organizations which came together in February of 2004 to develop strategies to increase women's opportunities to be elected to all levels of government in PEI. With financial support from Status of Women Canada, part of the initial strategy of the group was to research PEI election data and international best practices for electing women, as well as to conduct focus groups with PEI women. Based on our research, the Coalition came to a number of conclusions and recommendations which have been presented to political parties and governments over the last twelve years.

The White Paper on Democratic Renewal notes that PEI has a long history of electoral evolution and change, which includes the historic 1993 election of Catherine Callbeck, the first woman premier ever elected in Canada. It would be eighteen years before another woman – Kathy Dunderdale of Newfoundland and Labrador – would lead a provincial party to government. Despite these wonderful examples of leadership, women continue to be under-represented at all levels of government across Canada and in PEI. Closer examination of the statistics reveals that women make up 52% of the Canadian population, but only 26% of Members of Parliament (a slight 1% increase over the 2011 federal election). At the provincial level the numbers are even more concerning. After the 2015 provincial election, women make up just 18.5% of Members of the PEI Legislature, placing PEI among the lowest in the country in terms of gender parity in government.

Democracy is intended to be a form of government in which citizens elect officials to represent them to make political decisions, formulate laws, and administer programs for the public good. When half of our population is missing from the arena where decision-making takes place we do not have a democracy that is truly representative of the population.

While our submission focuses on the need to increase the number of women in government, we recognize that women's identities are intersectional including Aboriginal, Francophone, racialized women, newcomers, LGBTQ and women with disabilities etc., who are all under-represented in government. Despite the best efforts of elected officials to represent all people, men and women have different experiences and perspectives that must be represented within a democracy.

In order to enhance and strengthen democracy we need to increase the number of women in government so government adequately represents our population. And the majority of Canadians agree: a 2008 poll by Equal Voice revealed that 85% of Canadians (men and women) supported efforts to increase the number of women elected in Canada.

International research indicates that increasing the number of women in government increases attention to issues such as violence, health care, childcare and corporate accountability. Having more women elected will bring more diversity of experience to government decision-making tables, increasing the potential for policy and programs that speak to women's experience and lives. In other countries as well as in Canada's and PEI's past increased diversity has led to decision making with a major impact on equality. For example, childcare and violence prevention programs, which have also had a positive economic impact on societies, have all expanded as the number of women in government has grown.

Another benefit of having more women in government is supported by recent research presented by Dr. Margaret-Ann Armour at A Bold Vision: Women's Leadership Conference in Brudenell, PEI, which demonstrated that when gender parity is achieved women and men tend to work more collaboratively, generate more creative ideas, draw from multiple perspectives and devise robust solutions to problems. Undoubtedly, our government and society would benefit from greater gender parity in government.

You might ask, what's the problem? Women can run if they want to. But, our work over the past decade has revealed that women face barriers and challenges to political leadership because of their gender. History and examples show the number of women in government will not rise naturally on its own. In fact, Equal Voice predicts that given the rate of change over the last five elections, it will take 89 years before we reach parity at the federal level. At the provincial level, the number of women elected has decreased over the past two elections. In total, only 26 women have ever been elected to the Legislative Assembly of PEI in comparison to the hundreds of men.

Research by political scholars, Trimble and Arscott reveals that women can only make a substantial difference to political discourse when they are present in more than token numbers. The UN has identified the critical mass needed for meaningful change as one-third (33.3%) women. A concerted and sustained effort is needed to increase the number of women elected and must include a combination of approaches that focus on addressing not only the individual barriers but also the structural and systemic barriers.

Efforts by the Coalition for Women in Government to increase the number of women in government have included addressing individual barriers such as encouraging women to run, holding skills-building workshops and campaign schools. Interestingly, research from the Coalition for Women in Government reveals that voters in PEI are not discriminating against women at the polls. The biggest barrier to electing women lies with getting women's names on the ballot in the first place.

Political parties are not nominating women at high enough numbers to make change. For example, in the recent provincial election women candidates made up just 29% of the total number of candidates for political parties. There is also significant variation of women candidates between parties. Historically, the NDP and Green Party have nominated more women, however, that has not translated into electing more women within the current first-past-the-post electoral system. This is not unique to Prince Edward Island, Equal Voice, a national organization dedicated to electing more women, notes that the barrier to nominating women occurs across the country and at the federal level, where first-past-the-post electoral systems exist.

While our work has focused on collaborating with individual women and political parties, it has always remained clear that the whole electoral system requires a major overhaul to ensure a truly representative democracy, in which elected representatives reflect the diversity of the population.

The Coalition for Women in Government is pleased that the White Paper on Democratic Renewal and the Special Committee present here tonight are focused on the potential for an improved electoral system for Prince Edward Island. However, we must note that the timeline for public consultations is constrained, making it challenging to update our gender-based research and collaborate with our members in a timely manner. While we are not experts in specific models, we have drawn from our past research as well as national and international research to support our position that proportional representation is a best practice for electing women.

The White Paper on Democratic Renewal highlights two electoral systems, first-past-the-post and proportional representation as well as preferential balloting as a balloting structure. It is important to note that the current first-past-the-post system was designed at a point in time that excluded the voices and experiences of women. Long before women were considered persons under the law or had the right to vote, first-past-the-post was utilized solely by men. The White Paper on Democratic Renewal acknowledges that within the first-past-the-post system, "parties tend to select the candidates that they see as most likely to win, and historically these have been male." It is not surprising then that this system has failed to meet the needs of women candidates and voters.

When we look at the democracies with the most balanced proportion of women, we find that most of these have some form of proportional representation. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, which ranks national parliaments of major democracies according

to percentages of women elected, Canada places 48th out of 190 countries. Almost all of the top ten countries outlined by the Inter-Parliamentary Union use some form of proportional representation, quota system or a combination of both.

Proportional Representation is an electoral system where the percentage of seats that a party wins is equal to the percentage of popular vote that party receives. So if a party receives 40% of the popular vote, they receive 40% of the seats. Proportional electoral systems contribute to the election of more women because each major party gives voters the choice of more than one candidate on their ballot. Parties are responsible to develop a list, either open or closed of candidates.

When developing a candidate list, parties are more likely to look at the list holistically for geographic, gender, ethnic and diversity balance. *Women in Politics: Beyond the Numbers* notes that a “contagion effect” is more likely within proportional systems. Contagion is a process by which parties adopt policies initiated by other political parties (*Women in Politics: Beyond the Numbers*). Proportional electoral systems are more likely to include smaller parties, with more diverse candidate lists, which inspire other parties to ensure their lists are also representative of the population. This would be true of PEI, where smaller parties have historically nominated more women candidates, which would have a positive impact on other political parties.

According to research by world-renowned political scientist, Arend Lijphart (2012), proportional representation has a positive impact on the number of women elected to government. “In his landmark study – *Patterns of Democracy* – Lijphart compared 36 democracies over 29 years, and found that in countries using proportional systems elected women to parliament 8% more than majoritarian (FPTP) systems” (Fair Vote Canada).

Furthermore, Dr Joanna Everitt, Dean of Arts at the University of New Brunswick in Saint John and a Professor of Political Science specializing in women and politics, notes that if Canada were to switch to a Proportional Representation voting system, then in the very next election our percentage of women MPs would jump by at least 10% (Fair Vote Canada). In comparison, the recent provincial election saw a disappointing 3% decrease in the percentage of women elected. A 10% jump in the number of women elected would bring PEI much closer to gender parity.

When we look at democracies around the world, we find that the more women there are in government, the more likely a jurisdiction appears to enact policy which supports women's everyday lives and reflects their lived experiences. When we look at the democracies with the most balanced proportion of women, we find that most of these have some form of proportional representation. PEI has a unique opportunity to develop a new proportional electoral system, designed with a gender and equity lens to meet the needs of our increasingly diverse population.

## **Recommendations**

The PEI Coalition for Women in Government recommends the following:

- that the Special Committee on Democratic Renewal request that a gender and diversity lens be applied to the electoral renewal process moving forward.
- that the Special Committee on Democratic Renewal request that a gender and diversity lens be applied to preferential balloting as a tool for either first-past-the-post or proportional representation electoral systems.
- that the Special Committee on Democratic Renewal request that the Government form a Citizens' Assembly as one way for government and citizens to consider a way forward for electoral reform.
- that the Special Committee on Democratic Renewal request that Government work together with all political parties and the electorate to explore and implement Proportional Representation for Prince Edward Island.

In closing, we would like to thank you for this opportunity to provide input into your process. Yours is not an easy task but legislation, plans and policies which not only ensure the equal involvement of women but encourage it are essential if Prince Edward Island is to ensure its future economic and social development.

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