



THE CANADIAN  
BAR ASSOCIATION  
Northwest Territories Branch

WOMEN LAWYERS FORUM

June 12, 2014

DELIVERED VIA EMAIL

The Members of the Legislative Assembly  
of the Northwest Territories

Dear Sirs and Mesdames:

**RE: Proposed Women's Mock Parliament**

I write to you on behalf of the Women Lawyers Forum of the Northwest Territories Branch of the Canadian Bar Association. The Canadian Bar Association is a professional, voluntary organization representing some 37,000 lawyers, judges, notaries, law teachers, and law students from across Canada. The Canadian Bar Association promotes fair justice systems, facilitates effective law reform, promotes equality in the legal profession and is devoted to the elimination of discrimination. The Women Lawyer's Forum, as a conference of the Canadian Bar Association, is aimed at promoting the stature and influence of women both in the legal profession, and within our communities.

We thus have great interest in the recent public debate regarding Premiere Bob MacLeod's proposal of a women's parliament, for the purposes of promoting and encouraging women in politics within the Northwest Territories.

We applaud Premiere MacLeod's attention to this important issue, and while we share the concerns stated within the media that a women's parliament may not be the best way to address gender equality, we encourage our members of the Legislative Assembly to continue the debate.

Equal access to participation and representation within the legislature is absolutely crucial to the quality of democracy. In the Northwest Territories, women make up about 50% of the population, and yet represent only 10% of the legislature. There are no women in Cabinet. The Northwest Territories, along with Nunavut, ranks the lowest in Canada for gender equality in our legislature.

One might question whether a male dominated legislature might still be able to represent women within the Territories. The answer is "no". Polling data consistently demonstrates women care about different issues. The relative absence of women in territorial politics means that issues important to women receive less attention: less women are speaking about women's issues and making change to programs and policies that matter to women in the north. Even if our two female MLAs are successful in bringing women's issues to the table, that doesn't mean the discussion will result in change. The United Nations has emphasized that gender equality in legislative decision-making is essential to the empowerment of women, noting that a critical mass of at least 30% women is needed before legislatures produce public



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policy representing women's concerns and before political institutions begin to change the way they do business.

The government of the Northwest Territories is responsible for addressing the needs of the population as a whole. Accordingly, we expect that the importance of having programs and policies directed to the needs of women, being 50% of the population, is obvious. More subtly, bringing women's concerns to the table, and having programs and policies available to and for women, makes the north a more desirable place to live for women. It will assist in ensuring more people move to the north, stay in the north, and in the case of our children, return to the north after their studies.

More women within our legislature will also ensure our government is led by the most qualified and desirable leaders. Since 2008, over 60% of college and university graduates – in both undergraduate and post-graduate studies – are women. And that number continues to grow.

Finally, there is a symbolic importance of having more women in our legislature. Having a democracy that truly represents the population heightens the legitimacy of the political process: it can affect the public's evaluation of our government, the trust in our government, and the propensity of the public – both women and men - to participate in the political arena.

For these reasons, gender equality within our legislature is a crucially important issue. However, many barriers exist to prevent women from pursuing a political career. The two crucial barriers that individuals must pass to get elected are: first, they need to select themselves; second, they need to be selected by the voters.

Women are less likely than men to run for office for a number of reasons. As Canada's Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing (Lortie Commission) reported in 1991, some of the barriers to women's participation relate to broad social phenomena. For example, women continue to carry a disproportionate share of household and family responsibilities and, on average, have lower incomes (and hence less financial independence) than men. In addition, they may have been socialized to view politics as an unsuitable or undesirable vocation. These challenges are even greater for certain groups of women, such as Aboriginal and visible minority women. In addition, traditional ways of working in our legislature, and examples of discriminatory attitudes and practices, may discourage women from seeking political office. You need only scan through <http://madampremier.tumblr.com/> to get a sense of the daily discrimination and personal attacks our women in politics endure.

However, once women decide to pursue a political career, they tend fare no worse than their male counterparts in being selected. Federally, of the 64 women elected in January 2006 represented 17% of all women candidates running for office in that election, only slightly lower than the 19% success rate for male candidates.

It appears the question really centres on how to remove the barriers women face in deciding to run for office.



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We share the concerns stated within the media that a women's parliament may not be the best way to address gender equality. A mock parliament is fundamentally different from an organization such as the Women's Lawyers Forum, where women of the legal profession, having credibility within that field, are working together to effect change for others. As women lawyers, we have the experience to know what requires change, and some influence to affect it. A women's parliament, on the other hand, assumes that its members have little to no political experience. It places women professionals alongside our two existing mock parliaments – for youth and elders, who, presumably, are fractions of our community who would not otherwise actively participate in territorial politics. We are concerned that a woman's parliament sends the wrong message to both women, and to the public at large.

We would encourage Premier MacLeod and other members of the legislative assembly to continue the debate, and continue to seek ways to increase gender equality in our Legislature. Potential avenues include:

1. Actively identify, recruit and train women candidates. Training and support for women candidates is essential, and there are very little opportunities in the north for women to access training resources. In several Canadian jurisdictions, there are very successful and popular “schools” to teach women how to raise campaign funds, how to organize a campaign, how to make speeches – all aspects of getting elected.
2. Actively identify and encourage mentorship and sponsorship opportunities. Recent studies have shown that mentorship and sponsorship is crucial for career progression. Men often have an easier time acquiring and maintaining these relationships, which is especially true in northern politics, where there are very few women role models available to our potential candidates. Supporting initiatives that encourage or facilitate the mentorship and sponsorship of women candidates would be extremely beneficial.
3. Insisting on a culture of equality. This calls for special attention to the values, norms, rules, procedures and practices in our legislature to ensure that, once they are elected, women can apply their unique and diverse perspectives.
4. Offering family friendly work environments. The Legislative Assembly could consider reorganizing its work to become more gender-sensitive – for example, by instituting family-friendly hours, ending parliamentary business at a reasonable time; reorganizing work schedules to allow for “family days”; or spreading parliamentary business over a number of shorter days. While family-friendly changes to how parliament works help both women and men, women are more likely to benefit as they continue to spend more time than men providing care for children and elders.
5. Introducing measures such as proportional representation, electoral financing reforms, targets, and public awareness campaigns. Proportional representation or target reforms may not be appropriate or desirable in a consensus government. However, the government could implement public awareness campaigns that encourage women in politics and highlights the resources available to support women candidates.



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These are only some examples of measures that could be taken to support gender equality within our legislature. Premier MacLeod has highlighted this issue both within our government and within our community and has started a very important debate; we urge the members of the legislative assembly to continue the discussion, both in the legislative assembly and with the public at large, to determine the best course of action which would support increased participation of women in northern politics.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss this matter further.

Sincerely,

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CANADIAN BAR ASSOCIATION – NT BRANCH

Elaine Keenan Bengts

Cc: Colette Langlois, Clerk of the Legislative Assembly of the Northwest Territories