

Searching for the New Liberalism

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Parliamentary Reform: Comment in Response to Senator Serge Joyal's Presentation

By Helen Burstyn

This government has made good on a few of its promises to make Parliament more relevant to and representative of Canadians. We have also seen a lot of good intentions that have not materialized, including the promise of more bills referred to committee after First Reading, giving parliamentary committees the power to draft legislation, more free votes and an ethics counsellor reporting directly to Parliament. The Prime Minister has more recently promised a new system of electronic voting that should reduce voting time by approximately 10 minutes per vote.

Efficiency measures, such as cutting down voting time, are good reforms. But they are easy reforms and not what anyone would consider truly transformational. Meaningful or *transformational* reforms, being more difficult, have long been discussed but as yet not implemented. We have yet to bring more fairness to the election laws, which confer huge incumbency advantage and favour the large, established parties. We are far from seeing fixed election dates, or fixed budget dates. And the first-past-the-post electoral model, with all its distortions, has been much derided and defended over the years, but not in any way changed.

Senator Joyal referred to the failure of parliament to represent regional interests, and those of the French-speaking population in particular. There is another community that is significantly underrepresented in parliament, and that is women.

How can you have true representative democracy when over 50% of the electorate has never had much more than 20% representation in parliament? In the 2000 federal election, out of 172 seats the governing Liberals received, only 39 were held by women. Out of 301 seats in the House of Commons, women only hold 62.

The many academics and parliamentarians who have studied this issue – both men and women – believe women need a critical mass of 30% representation to have a significant influence on policy development. Meanwhile, women have been stalled at 20% and the numbers have not budged. At the rate we are going, it will take 117 years for women to achieve equity in the Canadian House of Commons. None of my four daughters will see anything close to gender parity in their lifetime if we stay this course.

In 1999, France became the first country in the world to amend its Constitution to ensure that women and men are equally represented in elected assemblies. One year later, it also passed a bill requiring political parties to present a slate of candidates that

comprise an equal number of women and men in elections conducted according to proportional representation. These laws have teeth: if a party fails to comply with the law, its list is rejected and it cannot participate in the election. Furthermore, parties with more than a 2% difference between their female and male candidates have to pay a fine.

These constitutional and legislative reforms are working. In the 2001 municipal elections, the proportion of women municipal councillors more than doubled, from 21.9% to 47.5%.

In the absence of such legislation to balance our House of Commons, the Senate offers a pretty fair proxy for gender parity laws in France. That critical mass of 30% that eludes us in the Canadian House of Commons is achieved in our Senate, where women hold 31% of the seats. That's the highest and fairest representation of women in a Canadian political institution. Something to keep in mind as we contemplate Senate reform.

Would parity laws boost Canada's representative democracy? Yes. Would they be compatible with the kind of society, the kind of liberalism, we espouse in this country? Probably not. Pierre Trudeau described Canadians as "extreme moderates." Liberalism has its share of extreme moderates too.

But Canadians do love constitutional challenges, and we have seen a lot of good reforms come out of them. David Beatty, a University of Toronto law professor, has prepared a case going to the Ontario Superior Court of Justice challenging *the Canada Elections Act*. He argues that the Act makes it more difficult for women to secure effective representation of their views, and therefore violates women's equality rights under the Charter.

There is a very strong case to be made for Proportional Representation to address gender inequities and achieve truly transformational parliamentary reform. Most democratic, developed countries have moved to systems of proportional representation to achieve fairer representation. In countries with PR -- Sweden, Norway and Germany among them -- women have gained the highest levels of representation. And in the mixed election systems of Germany, Japan and New Zealand, more women and minorities get elected, and smaller parties are better represented.

It is not just women who get a fairer deal out of proportional representation. It is also minorities, regions and cities that stand to benefit.

There have been several presentations at this forum that have pointed to growing importance of cities. We have also heard some reference to the "peanut butter" approach to politics as a way of spreading largesse evenly across the country. That approach does not work when the bulk of our population is clumped in urban centers.

Urban regions, like women, have become another “majority minority” – that is, they represent the majority in headcount, but they are represented as less in Parliament. The fact that cities are home to most of our country’s immigrants, and there are many of them, adds another plot twist.

The immigrant population in cities like Toronto is 42%, and rising. When immigrants become citizens, they are more likely to vote Liberal than throw their support anywhere else. The Liberals have historically been and currently remain the party of everyone. It is the party that includes and represents people of different backgrounds and offers them opportunity.

But in cities across Canada, where a large proportion of the population are new Canadians, these citizens are giving us their votes, but getting representation by peanut butter in return.

When citizens vote, for any candidate or any party, it is like a contract. In exchange for their vote, expect representation. So when we look at Parliamentary reform, let us think like Liberals and act in the spirit of Liberalism to honour that contract. Citizens give us their trust; we should give them a voice.

Women in Federal and Provincial Legislatures and Federal Courts, 2000

Body	Total	Women	% Women
House of Commons	301	62	21%
Senate	105	33	31%
Alberta	83	23	28%
British Columbia	75	21	28%
Manitoba	57	13	23%
New Brunswick	55	10	18%
Newfoundland	48	8	17%
Nova Scotia	52	5	10%
Ontario	103	18	18%
PEI	27	6	22%
Quebec	125	30	24%
Saskatchewan	64	13	20%
NWT	24	2	8%
Yukon	17	5	29%
Supreme Court	9	2	22%
Federal Court	39	8	21%

Source: Canadian Parliamentary Guide, www.parl.gc.ca.