

Changing the culture of politics

Women's Campaign School aims to boost the representation of women in politics

Kim Pemberton



Four months after Prime Minister Jean Chretien berated her for saying there were too few women in his cabinet, Liberal MP Carolyn Bennett is taking an active role in preparing women for political office.

Chretien gave the Liberal backbencher a stern dressing down after she publicly criticized him for not appointing more women to his reshuffled cabinet in January.

There was only one woman among the 10 new members of cabinet.

According to one MP, Chretien told Bennett at the caucus meeting, "You bring your laundry in here, you don't air it outside."

But Bennett responded she had spoken out in her role as chairwoman of the Liberal women's caucus.

Bennett resigned on Feb. 6 as Liberal women's caucus chairwoman, with some MPs saying she was upset by the failure of her colleagues to come to her defence. She was replaced by Winnipeg MP Anita Neville.

Now four months after that heated exchange, described by one colleague as a humiliation, the feisty MP is looking at the positives and is active with the recently created all-party women's caucus.

Bennett will be speaking at the opening of the fourth annual Women's Campaign School at University of B.C. at Robson Square on Thursday.

The Canadian Women Voters Congress oversees Canada's only non-partisan campaign school, which helps train women interested in entering politics or becoming more knowledgeable about the political process.

Each year, prominent politi-



YVONNE BERG/SPECIAL TO THE VANCOUVER SUN

MP Carolyn Bennett has become the flashpoint for Canadians intent on drawing women into politics.

cians and women who have previously made their mark in politics are invited to instruct 50 participants in an intensive four-day campaign training program.

Bennett, a 51-year-old family doctor and respected health activist, says the controversy "brought the issue of under-representation of women in politics back to the front pages.

"If you get more voices to the table that are representative of society the culture of politics will change.

"We need to be evolving government. This combative, 'gotcha' politics is old-fashioned and it's not moving us forward. Things are too complex. We've got to be more collaborative and less adversarial."

Like many supporters, she says that only when the number of female politicians reaches the "critical mass" of 33 per cent will government policies truly reflect

women's voices.

Chretien's 39-member cabinet has 23-per-cent women — slightly higher than the 20.6-per-cent level of women in the House of Commons.

"We had been steadily increasing the number of women in Parliament, but between '97 and 2000 we stalled. We can't seem to get beyond 20 per cent."

The 150 women who have already gone through the Women's Campaign School have come from across Canada and range in age from 19 to 76. This year, the program has been expanded to 60 participants and includes participants from Serbia and Nigeria.

Previous graduates include five MLAs, two ministers in the current provincial Liberal government, one band chief and one union leader.

"The women who come to this campaign school will work on

someone's campaign or run themselves," said Women's Campaign School chairwoman Joanne Silver.

"The real key to the success of the congress and the school is it's non-partisan. Our mandate is simply to increase the number of women participating."

Doris Anderson, former *Chatelaine* editor and longtime champion of women's rights, says the congress's work is critical in attracting and training women wanting careers in politics.

But in an interview, Anderson emphasized the numbers aren't likely to advance much until there are changes to the electoral process.

She said Canada, with its 20-per-cent female representation, fares better than the United States and Great Britain, but is far behind many European nations, such as Sweden, which has 40-per-cent representation.

"There hasn't been a democracy that has changed from dictatorship to democracy that has chosen our system.

"They always choose a proportional system [in which there is a close approximation between the number of seats held by political parties in a legislature and their percentage of the popular vote],"

[Women are] the primary caregivers and I don't know how you can run a country and a province without that perspective adequately represented.

CHRISTY CLARK



said Anderson.

"All democracies have some form of proportional representation. The only three democracies that don't have it are Canada, England and the U.S.," Anderson said.

"It's a major hurdle for women to make any more progress [in Canada] without changing the electoral process."

Anderson said Canada's system is disenfranchising not only women but young people who don't stand a chance at having their views heard.

Anderson said under our system, women must first fight for the right to run for nomination in a riding and that alone puts them at a disadvantage.

"If it's a good riding, it's stiffly contested and the riding association always wants the easiest win.

"It's easiest with a man." Anderson said she was often asked to run in elections while she was editor of *Chatelaine* but "they were always proposing I run in a hopeless seat."

"It was window dressing. They just wanted to say 'See, we have women running.'"

She believes that is still the case today.

Bennett agrees, adding that along with electoral reform, party reform is needed so the system is not run "by the old boys' network."

Parliamentary reform is also needed so "it's less like a locker room.

"People only have to look at question period to know what I mean. There is no time for a decent question or answer. It's all adversarial ...

"The huge challenge is getting everyone working together but we're not getting it done because of the squabbles."

B.C. Education Minister Christy Clark, who in the last provincial election had the job of trying to attract women candi-

dates, said she found it tough to get women to run for office. In the end, she said, the Liberals' slate was 25-per-cent female.

"I would have been happier if it was at 50 per cent," she said. "Men will run at the drop of a hat. But we had a heck of time trying to find women."

One recent study found it takes women two years to decide to run for office compared to the two weeks in which men make the decision.

She said the main reason for the reluctance is women are concerned with the impact on family life and the interruption in their careers. She said they also find it difficult to raise funds for a campaign.

"Fund raising is about making the pitch. Many of the women lack experience and lack a network. That's why the campaign school is so important."

Clark said although it was a hard sell to get female candidates in the last election, the women now in the legislature bring to it a different perspective.

The main difference, she said, is wanting to make decisions in a consensual way and caring about the impact on families.

"It doesn't mean women are all soft lefties. Women have a different background. They're the primary caregivers and I don't know how you can run a country and a province without that perspective adequately represented."

Penny Priddy, whose last portfolio was education minister in the NDP government, co-chairs the Women's Campaign School along with former Progressive Conservative member of Parliament Mary Collins, who held a number of cabinet posts while in federal office.

Priddy said she has heard the criticism that women are simply creating a "all-girls' club" with the Women's Campaign School. But she said it's necessary for change.

"We need to get to the stage where it should be expected and not the exception that we see a woman premier or prime minister.

"We're still not where we need to be."

She said an exciting aspect of the women's campaign school is that it gives access to campaign training to women who want to run for office but are not affiliated with a party.

"If you are in a rural part of B.C. you may not even have a party card, so it's very important.

"Last year we focused on aboriginal women and they tell me they are interested in aboriginal governance — not being the local MLA. So we had a chance to focus on band elections.

"Our whole goal is to get women educated enough so they feel comfortable participating and their voices are heard."

'Inspired to take on a political career without fear'

Graduates of the Canadian Women's Campaign School say the program laid the foundation for their careers in politics

The Canadian Women's Campaign School holds one intensive four-day session each year and is the only non-partisan school of its kind in Canada. The goal is to educate and mentor women with political aspirations.

Here are some of its graduates:

Pat Adams: Graduated in 2000 and was the first vice-president of B.C.'s Reform party. She ran for MLA in the last provincial election for Cariboo South. She said the campaign school was instrumental in helping her decide to seek election. "I suspected that inside this body was a politician trying to get out and the school confirmed that," she said.

Elayne Brenzinger: The Surrey mother and child-care activist had never run for political office before winning the Liberal seat in Surrey Whalley in the 2001 election. Brenzinger, who attended the school in 2000, now

serves on the government caucus committee on health. She is also a member on the legislative standing committees of parliamentary reform, ethical conduct, standing orders and private bills and education. "The school was wonderful. It gave me an opportunity to meet with women in politics, ask questions and learn how to run a campaign and know what you'll actually have to do if elected."

Yvonne De Valone: A Vancouver businesswoman, De Valone is the founding member of the Strathcona Area Merchants Society and an active member of the Strathcona Business Improvement Association. De Valone says her political activities are directed toward lobbying for the re-establishment of fundamental rights of residents, businesses and workers in the Downtown Eastside. She says

taking the class in 2000 help clarify the direction she wanted to take at the "grassroots level in order to make a difference in my community."

Jeannie Kanakos: After losing by 100 votes in the Delta municipal council election in 1999, the 2001 graduate of the women's campaign school plans to try again in 2002 in Delta. "I was most impressed by the fact that the students were able to park their politics at the door and talk about the challenges we all had in common," she says, adding she now feels she has a better tool kit to draw on in the coming election.

Kitty Chan: She worked as an aide to Patrick Wong on his successful 2001 campaign in Vancouver Kensington and is now his constituency assistant in the MLA office of Vancouver Kensington.

Delores O'Donaghey: She



Elayne Brenzinger



Valerie O'Connell



Valerie Roddick



Patty Sahota

became chief of the Boston Bar band by one vote in July, 2001 after graduating the same year from the campaign school.

Valerie O'Connell: Another aboriginal participant who graduated from the school in 2001. She ran for chief of the Nak'azdli band the same year and plans to try again in 2004. "I would never have known what to do if I hadn't gone to the women's campaign school."

Sarjeet Purewal: The 1999

graduate ran for the B.C. Liberal nomination in New Westminster in the 2001 election. She said she felt honoured to have been instructed by so many dedicated women politicians who came to the school to share their experience. "They inspired me to take on a political career without fear," she said.

Valerie Roddick: She was reelected as Liberal MLA for Delta South. Roddick won her seat after graduating from the campaign

school in 1999 and credits the school for providing the foundation for her political career.

Patty Sahota: Was elected MLA for Burnaby Edmonds for the B.C. Liberals in 2001 after graduating from the school in 1999. She serves on the government caucus committee for communities and safety. She is also a member of the legislative standing committee on health and the review of police complaints process committee.