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Description: WOMENS VOICE IN POLITICS

THE RAFE MAIR SHOW (CKNW-AM), VANCOUVER, 28 Mar 02, 08:35, Length: 00:08:00, Ref# 1B528E-1
Anchor/Reporters: RAFE MAIR, RAFE MAIR

RAFE MAIR (HOST): Yesterday's last guest, Joanne Silver, runs a course to help women get into politics, and several men were wondering why this is necessary. Well, I can tell you why. It's a Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus thing. Women by temperament are usually unsuited to the political system we men have hatched over the centuries. This is no knock on women, quite the opposite, and it explains why women do so well in local politics. there are women who have succeeded in the men's system - they're often referred to as Queen Bees - and include such people as Margaret Thatcher, Indira Gandhi, and locals like Grace McCarthy, Rosemary Brown and Grace McInnis amongst many others. But these women have succeeded by playing the game, which is a lousy game to play. Why do women do so well in local politics? Because it suits them. Women like to reason out problems, as free of cant, bitterness and partisanship as follows. This doesn't mean that women lack passion on issues, as anyone who's attended public meetings on controversial subjects will know, but their inherent talent once in power is to discuss and persuade, not fight like hell and make pacts of convenience, turning into political parties. Indeed, I daresay that upon arriving in Ottawa or Victoria, the newly elected

woman is stunned by what she learns she will do thereafter. It's enough of a shock to an idealistic man, as I once was, but men by instinct and training know how to get in with the pack and snarl at all outsiders. I say all this this morning for a reason - the system we have is keeping women from entering politics at a senior level, and that is a very bad thing. Not just bad for women and whatever issues if any can be called women's issues, but for the better governance of our province and the country. In order to deal with this question, one has to look at the system. As we all know, it's top-down. This means that unless the issue an MLA or MP brings to the capital has priority with the leader, it doesn't get dealt with. Contrast that with the School Board or most councils, where political parties either don't exist or are weak and where the chairman or mayor can't herself or himself control the agenda. There, the woman knows that even if the mayor is dead-set against her, she will have the opportunity to raise her issue, have it discussed by the chamber and get reasonable publicity for her efforts and for the cause. When she goes into a government caucus, however, it is secret, and it practices iron-clad discipline. The woman may get her point heard, but since all discussions and decisions are secret she might just as profitably have kept quiet. If she's on the government side, she may be able to lay some platitudes out in a speech in the house, but even then at the risk of breaking party discipline. It is not long before the woman sees that she must either break out of the mold or be broken by the system, and if she breaks out of the mold, well, she's broken by the system. Many women who get into politics at the local level see this in senior governments, and simply are not prepared to get into the nests of adders that parliaments, caucuses and cabinets are. And this of course creates a catch-22 where because the system is so unfriendly to women, there are fewer and fewer women in politics to force changes. The answer is that we must break the hold of the leader, and that means two things - we must take away the penalties from a lost vote, and then take away the structures that have been designed to avoid that happening. The first is simple, and is really already in effect, but leaders don't like anybody to know that. No one really suggests that a government should resign if it loses a vote, unless it's on a matter of confidence. Margaret Thatcher and John Major lost scores of votes over the years without even considering resignation, nor were resignations

called for. It really is the safeguards that needlessly remain in place that must be dealt with. Let's start with a cosmetic change - you've probably heard me talk about this before, but I hope you'll bear with me because I think it bears repeating. Let's start with a cosmetic change. Churchill once said - 'First we shape our buildings, then they shape us.' So let's end this nonsense of two warring factions starting at each other two sword-lengths away and create a horseshoe-shaped chamber with a podium for the speaker, as many other jurisdictions have. When I say speaker, I say the person who has the floor, there's be a dais for the actual speaker of the house. Then have members take their seats in alphabetical order of their constituency, and get rid of this herd of applauding seals spectacle. Next we take away the leader's statutory right to refuse to sign the nomination papers of a duly nominated candidate - this is a life-and-death power, and insures that the leader has absolute control over each caucus member. Then let's make it a rule that only back-bench members can elect members of committees, and the committees select their own chairs. This would go a long way towards seeing the committees could act independently of the government, especially if you go one step further and have committees chaired by an opposition member. Finally, not only should all votes be free votes, some on instigation of the opposition should be secret ballots. Now, I've dealt with this before, but I know that I have not got my message across - open votes accomplish very little. For the leader can always not how each member voted and reward or punish accordingly. It's the possibility, underscore that word, of a secret ballot that strikes terror into the heart of a dictatorial leader. The argument is always made - oh my goodness, we should know how our members vote, but this argument doesn't stand the most superficial of examinations, because it begs the question - it's because we always know in advance how the member will vote, namely as he or she is told, that's caused the trouble. But here is the good part - if the opposition could petition for a secret ballot, no government, however dictatorial, would dare put forth legislation or policy not supported by the back bench. I can think of a couple of votes, one in Ottawa and one in Victoria, where it would have been most interesting to have seen a secret ballot. The Hepatitis C vote in Ottawa a couple of years ago, and the Nisga'a vote in Victoria. These reforms would return to the member his or her traditional

dignity and power. It would make the art of persuasion by each member a most important commodity. This having happened, caucuses and cabinets would become user-friendly to women, and would bring more women into politics at the senior level, and that would make things in this province and country if nothing else a hell of a lot more civilized, and I believe, productive.

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