

# Serbian women launch bid for political power

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Remember when we called it "women's liberation?" Before it became the (formless and dull) "women's movement?" Back when it seemed an entire female counter culture was marching to the beat of the same freedom drum? Back before we started bickering about things like which of us is more marginalized, and whether it's okay to sleep with the enemy?

Charlene Brisson felt as though she was stepping back in time when she travelled to Belgrade last month to meet with Serbian women's groups. She came home galvanized.

"We've lost our passion," she says. "Those women are so focused on this one goal -- to get more women elected to government. When you have that sense of purpose and a burning passion, it's amazing what you can do."

Brisson, whose day job is in marketing at Pacific Press, travelled to Serbia as president of the Canadian Women Voters Congress. The non-partisan, volunteer-run organization is dedicated to helping women find their place in the political process at all levels of government. Travelling with her was Joanne Silver, chairwoman of the Women's Campaign School -- a five-day crash course in election strategy offered each spring by the congress in partnership with Simon Fraser University.

The purpose of the trip was to share with female politicians, academics and activists in Belgrade and Nis the lessons they have learned in Canada about women and political power. "But we probably learned more from them than they learned from us," Brisson says. "Just being witness to their story was so powerful."

Their story is the stunning turnout of women voters in Serbia's first parliamentary elections, held a year ago this month. In fact, the general turnout was an extraordinary 70 per cent of registered voters -- testament to the will of the people to put behind them 13 years of war, poverty and Slobodan Milosevic's brutal brand of communism.

When the door to democracy edged open, Serbia's women were first through. About 40 per cent more of them voted than men, which is remarkable in a country where a woman's place has been in the bread lines and in the shadow of her husband.

Or maybe it's not so remarkable, for those very reasons. As a young woman named Jelena told a canvasser before the election: "Our women are strong, clever, with fighting spirit and they should be involved in all spheres of life."

The door-to-door campaign that mobilized Jelena and thousands like her was orchestrated over the course of a year by a network of 800 volunteers operating in 42 cities and towns. They canvassed 45,000 homes to get out the female vote -- a feat of epic organization, not to mention courage. The involvement of women in public life is still considered by many Serbs, and not only men, to be a violation of the natural order of things. Canvassers faced insults, abuse and the threat of violence.

They were rewarded with 11 per cent of the seats in Serbia's parliament, which only sounds low until you consider that Canada has been "liberated" since 1919 but we still only fill 20 per

cent of our federal seats with women. The United States does far worse, at 14; France is under 11.

"The Serbian women are so isolated, they don't even understand what a huge victory this was," Brisson says.

In fact, some voiced disappointment to have landed so far short of a proportionate 52-per-cent share. More modest souls had hoped to nudge the 30-per-cent line, which is considered critical mass in the science of governance.

"If you can get the number of women in an office or organization up to one third, everything changes," Brisson explains. "You have more dialogue, more negotiation, more inclusion."

The prospect of which keeps people like Brisson and Silver running. And wringing their hands, because progress toward that critical line is so slow. Year in, year out, it's the same old dance: two steps forward, one back. And lately it's more like one forward, two back.

Consider the last provincial election, in which B.C.'s female win slipped from 29 to 24 per cent of total seats. Still better than Alberta, which dropped from 24 to 20 per cent two months earlier. With the federal rate jammed for several years now at the 20 per cent mark, you've got to wonder what gives.

"Not a difficult question to answer if you had the opportunity to attend any of the all-candidates meetings," Brisson wrote in her organization's newsletter after the B.C. election. "I tried to put myself up on the stage, to imagine how I would respond to the personal attacks, pointing fingers, the screaming indignities from the audience and accusations of 'liar' from opponents.

"This confrontational, adversarial and what has become completely disrespectful method of electing our officials makes most women run for the hills," she says. "And that's just to get elected. Never mind when she is thrown into the bullpen of the cabinet to fight for her life."

The goal of the annual campaign school is to give women the tools they need to win in a man's game. It's a tough course, says Brisson, taught by "women who've been through hell." Among them: Mary Collins, Darlene Marzari, Joy MacPhail and Pat Carney. Among recent grads who've done well: Liberal MLAs Val Roddick and Joyce Murray.

Brisson plans to bring a delegation of Serbian women to the next campaign school, scheduled for April 25-28, 2002. She hopes some of their fighting spirit might rub off where it's sorely needed. After all, it only took decades of discrimination, abuse and poverty capped by 78 straight days of bombing to mobilize the women's vote in Serbia. The enemy we face is a whole lot tougher. Inertia.

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