

BELINDA STRONACH

Remarks from Belinda Stronach on the occasion of the

*2010 Equal Voice/Canadian Club
Women in Public Life Luncheon*

Honouring Keynote Speaker & EVE Award Recipient Belinda Stronach

*Tuesday, November 9, 2010
Fairmont Chateau Laurier
Ottawa, Canada*

Thank you.

And good afternoon everyone.

It's great to be back in Ottawa.

And great to be in the company of so many people committed to a cause that I share.

I am very honoured to have been chosen as the recipient of this year's EVE Award and to be included in the company of such distinguished past recipients.

You know – a lot of people ask me if I miss the action in Ottawa – and I have to tell you that from time to time I really do.

If I had an unofficial motto during my days on the Hill, it was probably closest to that of former First Lady Rosalyn Carter, who had this to say: "I was going to be criticized no matter what I did, so I might as well be criticized for something I wanted to do."

As many of you know, that's pretty much what I did. I focussed on the issues that I believed in, like quality of life in Canadian cities and fairness for Canadians outside the majority. I listened to the people in Newmarket-Aurora, who had elected me to represent them – twice, from two different political parties. These issues seemed to matter to a lot of other Canadians as well. Issues that needed attention and a shot of adrenaline.

One of these was intensifying the campaign to give women an equal voice in Parliament.

When Agnes McPhail became Canada's first female Member of Parliament in 1921, one of the men's washrooms in the lobby of the House was cut in half to accommodate Agnes.

preserving one's corporate image is even more important and challenging in an era in which marketing is no longer a one-way street. With the growth of the Internet, citizens now have the ability to pass judgment on corporate behaviour. They can praise those whose efforts are progressive and socially minded, and to call out – or worse, to avoid – those who lag behind.

And it occurs to me that maybe we should think of the House of Commons washrooms as a yardstick of progress.

The more they build, the more we're moving forward!

In 1948, nearly three decades after first being elected, the same Agnes McPhail delivered a speech at the University of Toronto, and the title of that speech could have been written today: "Women in Parliament". Colon. "Why Aren't There More?"

In preparing for my remarks today, I thought "I could do the why haven't things changed speech" or I could go with an admittedly optimistic view that perhaps the tide is turning. It isn't a tidal wave, but perhaps as relentless as the Bay of Fundy.

BELINDA STRONACH

Before I talk about some other ideas, let me touch on an issue that I believe is real and does affect the number of women who WANT to get into politics.

A number of people have raised the very serious issue of whether the poisonous climate in the House today is deterring women from running for office. Preston Manning used to say he wouldn't allow school children to watch the antics that go on inside the chamber – and that was back in the good old PG-rated days!

Some might argue that the lack of civility is really just a reflection of the times we live in.

A time when female politicians and women candidates have been called bitch and whore.

I don't agree. Look at the actions of Michael Chong, who is mounting a noble effort to restore decorum by proposing actual reforms to the way Question Period is conducted.

We need to make debate in Parliament look more like discussion around an executive boardroom table or even the discussion around the family dinner table. If corporate directors behaved like some parliamentarians, the governance of the company would be in trouble and the problem would need to be fixed – stat! Shareholders would not tolerate such a situation.

Others argue that the abusiveness in the House is simply a time-honoured Canadian tradition - sort of like fighting in hockey. Look at the very architecture of the House itself. After all, the distance between the government and opposition bench is exactly two sword's lengths – the distance needed to prevent bloodshed between hot-headed MPs whose honour had been attacked.

Or consider the Speaker's mace – a softer, gentler version of the time dating back to the Middle Ages when it was an actual weapon of war topped with a spiked iron ball that could tear through chainmail.

Some will argue that politics is simply a blood sport.

They say that the hostility and verbal aggression exhibited in the House and played out in the committees are simply the nature of the beast - a system deliberately designed to pit one side against the other in a winner-take-all cage match.

But consider for a moment our legal system.

It's also an inherently adversarial system, with built-in confrontation, with a prosecution and a defence, with the probing and sometimes hostile questioning of character and motive.

And the people who engage in this adversarial system have a heck of a lot more at stake in their personal lives than whether or not they will still be able to fill out the long-form census once every five or ten years.

When it's the custody of your children riding on the outcome of a court ruling, or the prospect of a lifetime behind bars, then everything is on the line, and raw emotions run high.

And yet the tantrums and incivility that we see in Parliament would never be tolerated in a Canadian court room.

An attorney would never be allowed to behave like some MPs. They would be charged with contempt of court and escorted from the courtroom by a police officer.

Perhaps, then, Parliamentarians need to begin doing a much better job of policing their own behaviour and putting in place whatever additional rules are required to help themselves do that.

For me it is a given that restoring civility and respect in Parliament is important if we are going to encourage more women to run and STAY in politics.

But some people assume that this is the essence of the challenge – that if we have a more civil tenor, more women will enter public life. I think it is a factor, but have concluded that the problem goes well beyond incivility, and beyond providing financial resources to women candidates, as important as that also can be. There are deeper structural issues at play.

BELINDA STRONACH

To encourage more people to enter public life, I think there are two fundamental needs to be met:

- the issues have to be seen by the individual to be relevant; and,
- that individual needs to be able to participate fully.

We have of course different levels of government in this country, each with its own constitutional jurisdictions and powers. In many ways, those issues of most relevance to everyday life and family – schools, transportation, community services – take place at the municipal level. The further away we get from that level of government, the less tangible issues seem to become. At the federal level, Members of Parliament are dealing in general at the 30,000 foot level with the macro-economy, transfer payments to the provinces for health care and education, global finance, foreign policy, defence and so on. These policy questions are of course vitally important, as every student of political science could recite, but they can be perceived to be removed from everyday concerns.

So it is no accident that municipal politics is so comparatively active. The issues are in-your-face real, where the buck of all the cascading offloading to lower levels of government stops short. In campaigns for mayor, and in some city wards across the country, there will sometimes be 10 or more candidates vying for election. Contests for school board trustees are similar. And here women relate in the same way. In fact, after the recent municipal election in Toronto, 1/3rd of council is now women - the highest number ever. This makes municipal politics the frontline of the wave of change I referred to above.

If we wish to attract more women to federal politics in Canada, we need to do a much better job in explaining why it is relevant to quality of life. Then some of the costs – like toxic partisanship – become more peripheral. When I chaired the caucus of Liberal elected women, this is what we were trying to do with a policy document called the Pink Book. We wanted to distil and translate what the Government of Canada did that was, in this case, relevant to women's needs and interests. Each of the federal political parties needs to do more of this.

I think that women might be even more willing to make the personal sacrifices required of national and provincial public life provided they are convinced they can make a difference to quality of life. Women can handle the partisan sniping – no problem – but only if it is an unavoidable cost to doing something meaningful.

I remember Margaret Thatcher once famously declared: "If you want something said, ask a man; if you want something done, ask a woman."

This is what I mean when I refer to being relevant.

To serve at the federal level in politics, a woman must live and work in Ottawa for extended periods of time. She can be separated from children left at home. This can be the part of political life that is most difficult, especially when children are young or adolescents. Again, it is no surprise that municipal politics may seem more accessible because home is not far away at the end of the day.

Women with children can therefore be prevented from participating fully in the political process at the federal level by the weight of geography and distance. To confront this barrier to broader participation, I think we should consider some radical adjustments to the way Parliament does its business. We could, for example, institute video-conferencing and afford women the option to participate in committee or caucus meetings by video-conference. We now have the reliable technology and it is used elsewhere all the time for distance work. We could even put in place electronic distance voting in the House. This would allow a greater number of women to feel more able to combine and balance family and public service.

I realize of course that cultural change is never easy and takes time. There are always bugs to iron out. But a cultural shift is what I am talking about.

In conclusion, I believe we may be at the threshold of an exciting change -- the early signs of a wave of women candidates that will sweep into office in the decade ahead.

We saw a glimpse of it in the recent municipal elections in Toronto, for example.

BELINDA STRONACH

We saw it in last week's US mid-term elections, with women fighting tough campaigns to win seats in the House and Senate against veteran incumbents. It was, according to CNN, a record year for women in politics.

36 women -- more than ever before in American history -- ran for the US Senate. 14 of them won their primaries -- another record.

262 women ran for a congressional seat - 40 more than in 1992, a year that set new records for women's participation in political races.

I believe this may be the start of a transformational change.

Why am I sounding so optimistic?

We cannot stop doing all of the things we're doing -- whether it's Equal Voice or the Judy LaMarsh Fund or any number of initiatives aimed at bringing more women to elected office.

But there are encouraging signs that the groundwork that has been laid for so many years is beginning to bear results.

In one example that even surprised me, the foundation I established several years ago launched an exciting new initiative this spring called the G(irls)20 Summit. It was a forum modeled after the G20 that brought together one girl from each of the G20 countries to develop tangible solutions to some of the most pressing challenges confronting the world.

Our objective: to raise awareness of the critical role that girls and young women play in global economic development. What the Nike Foundation calls the "girl effect."

The delegates, ranging in age from 18 to 20, were selected from among hundreds of applicants and were chosen based on their responses to questions that focused on leadership and personal triumph.

We were so proud of these 21 young women. Many of them have started to meet with their own political leaders, NGOs and their peers to engage men and women on the empowerment of girls and women. I am thinking of Tanvi from India who joined us at the Clinton Global Initiative in September as a panelist, and Leah from Canada who has been representing the Girls 20 Summit delegates at meetings with the former Governor General and other groups. In short, we are sending activist-minded young women back to their own countries armed with new skills, new ideas and enthusiasm for confronting the challenges identified by the delegates.

Many of you will have seen the recent Dove ad featuring these young women. This is an amazing example of what can happen when you support girls and women.

They were such natural leaders and have since become catalysts for change within their respective countries. This includes Canada.

And let me tell you -- I have no doubt that many of these girls will emerge as political leaders in their countries. Maybe even in Canada too. Gone are the days, I think, when girls and young women doubt that they could become Prime Minister. The only question is whether they want to balance the various things they want to do. We can help them with those decisions by making bold changes to the way we conduct our politics.

Thank you everyone for coming out to take part in a discussion about women in public life.

And thank you, once again, for this special honour. It means a great deal to me.