

PEI COALITION FOR WOMEN IN GOVERNMENT

*Submission to the Special Committee on Democratic
Renewal for the Legislative Assembly of Prince
Edward Island*

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Introduction

The PEI Coalition for Women in Government thanks the Special Committee on Democratic Renewal for the Legislative Assembly of Prince Edward Island for the opportunity to make this formal presentation regarding election financing and gender.

Background

The PEI Coalition for Women in Government is a multi-partisan coalition of organizations and individuals, which has been active in advocating and advancing the election of women at all levels of government since 2004. Our work has involved research with women and politicians, analysis of election data and coordination of skills-building and awareness-raising events.

Our mandate is to advocate for the support of diversity of decision making at all elected levels, and in particular, the inclusion of women's experience and voice in decision-making. This diversity is essential in ensuring that policies and programs work for the whole Island community.

Since July of 2015, we have followed the work of the Special Committee on Democratic Renewal and appreciate the opportunity to meet with you again, this time to express our interest with regard to election financing and gender in Prince Edward Island. The White Paper on Democratic Renewal notes that, "across Canada and beyond, the trend has been to reform election financing systems to increase transparency, ensure fairness and promote participation." Our main interest is to consider ways election financing ensures fairness and promotes participation of women in government.

The underrepresentation of women in government persists at all levels across the country, including here in PEI. Despite more women than ever before being elected to the House of Commons in 2015, the percentage of women MPs only rose 1%, bringing the total percentage of women MPs to 26%.¹ In Prince Edward Island the percentage of women in government peaked at 25.9% in 2007 and has steadily declined in the last two elections.² After the 2015 provincial election, women make up just 18.5% of Members of the Legislative Assembly, placing PEI among the lowest in the country in terms of gender diversity in government.

¹ PEI Coalition for Women in Government, "Percentage of Women MP's Rises Slightly," available at [womeningovernmentpei.ca](http://www.womeningovernmentpei.ca)

² PEI Coalition for Women in Government, "Percentage of Women in PEI Legislature Down," available at http://www.womeningovernmentpei.ca/content/page/front_news/id/95

Over the years the Coalition has worked to highlight and address the individual and systemic barriers faced by women in political leadership. At the individual level, the Coalition has encouraged women to run, raised awareness of gender inequality and organized skills-building workshops and campaign schools. At the systemic level, the Coalition has collaborated with political parties to nominate more women and put forward recommendations to government that encourage a healthy work/life balance for Members of the Legislative Assembly.³ Currently, we are working on increasing women's leadership with agencies, boards and commissions with the long-term goal of increasing the number of women in government.

Early research by the PEI Coalition for Women in Government revealed that voters in PEI are not discriminating against women at the polls. Despite the fact that women statistically have won more against men than the other way around, analysis of the data indicates that voters care more about a candidate's party than they do about their gender. More than 89% of the time, candidates won or lost depending on their party's overall success.⁴ We maintain that the biggest barrier to electing women lies with getting women's names on the ballot in the first place.

Political parties are simply not nominating women at high enough numbers to make substantial change. In 2013 Trimble, Arscott and Tremblay compiled research on women's representation in Canadian governments, which indicates political parties across the country are not nominating enough women candidates.⁵ History and examples show that the number of women in government will not rise naturally on its own. In fact, Equal Voice predicts that given the rate of change over the last five elections, it will take 89 years before we reach parity at the federal level.⁶

This has led some to call for legislation that provides financial incentives for political parties to nominate more women candidates. For instance, the Advisory Council on the Status of Women in Quebec, Le Conseil statut de la femme, has suggested government implement a "parity zone" where parties would recruit between forty and sixty percent of candidates from women and men. Parties that failed to reach the parity zone would be penalized financially. In addition, they recommend that each provincial party be required to publish a review of its practices regarding recruitment and selection of

³ PEI Coalition for Women in Government, "Whose Job Is It Anyway?" available at http://www.womeningovernmentpei.ca/sitefiles/File/research/WhoseJobIsItAnyway_Report-and-Recommendations.pdf

⁴ PEI Coalition for Women in Government, "Research Finding and Conclusions," available at <http://www.womeningovernmentpei.ca/sitefiles/File/research/researchfindings.pdf>

⁵ Trimble, Arscott and Tremblay, *Stalled: The Representation of Women in Canadian Government*, Vancouver: 2013.

⁶ Equal Voice "When it Comes to Gender Parity Better is Always Possible," available http://www.equalvoice.ca/news_article.cfm?id=1017

candidates after each general election. Each party should also publish an action plan to improve its rate of women candidates.⁷

At the federal level, Kennedy Stewart, MP for Burnaby South, recently tabled a bill in the House of Commons that would also legislate financial incentives for political parties to nominate more women candidates. The “Candidate Gender Equity Act” calls for amendments to the Canada Elections Act to “reduce the reimbursement each party receives for its election expenses if there is more than a 10% difference in the number of male and female candidates on the party’s list of candidates for a general election.”⁸ While the Quebec Status of Women Council and Mr. Stewart suggest negative incentives for parties that fail to meet a certain percentage of women candidates, others, including the 1992 Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing, suggest positive incentives for parties that succeed in increasing the percentage of women candidates.⁹

Following the 2015 provincial election, the PEI Coalition for Women in Government held one-on-one interviews with several women candidates from all parties to get a sense of the successes and challenges they faced as candidates. **Almost all of the women we talked to referenced finances as a challenge to political participation.** According to the 2010 Women in Statistical Review, women in PEI experience a wage gap, that while smaller than other provinces, still sees women earn only 81.8%, of what men in PEI earn.¹⁰ As a result, women have fewer finances to contribute to running for office.

As noted in the White Paper on Democratic Renewal, taxpayer subsidies provide important support to candidates and parties. One way to ensure more women are financially able to participate in the democratic process is to lower the threshold for reimbursement to allow candidates winning at least 10% of the vote, rather than 15%, to be eligible to claim election expenses. Elections Canada and Elections Nova Scotia have both lowered the voting requirement to 10% for reimbursement of election expenses.¹¹ Lowering the voting percentage from 15% to 10% would help support more women candidates in PEI.

⁷ https://www.csf.gouv.qc.ca/wp-content/uploads/avis_femmes_et_politique_web2.pdf

⁸ House of Commons of Canada Bill C-237, An Act to amend the Canada’s Elections Act (gender equity)
<http://www.parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?Language=E&Mode=1&DocId=8125430>

⁹As referenced in “NDP’s Kennedy Stewart Thinks Money Can Push Parties To Nominate More Women,” available at http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2016/02/26/kennedy-stewart-candidate-gender-equity-act_n_9331470.html

¹⁰ Women in PEI: A Statistical Review
http://www.gov.pe.ca/photos/original/Women_Stat2010.pdf

¹¹ Compendium of Election Administration in Canada: A Comparative Overview
http://www.elections.ca/res/loi/com/compoverview2015Aug_e.pdf

A quick review of the 2015 election results reveals that seventeen women candidates reached the 15% requirement for reimbursement of election expenses. If the voting percentage was lowered to 10%, an additional four women would have been eligible for reimbursement. This might sound like a small number, but these four women were more likely to be younger, first-time candidates and some had young children. Having the ability to recoup some election expenses may make a huge difference when women are already disadvantaged economically compared to men.

According to the Women in PEI: Statistical Review, women in PEI are more likely than men to spend time doing unpaid housework, caring for children without pay, and providing unpaid care or assistance to seniors. Our conversations with women candidates in the fall revealed that costs associated with caregiving are not considered an eligible election expense under the Election Expenses Act. Caregiving costs fall within the “reasonable expenses” category that are not eligible for reimbursement. This can make it challenging for candidates with caregiving responsibilities to take part in events and campaign effectively. We know the work of a candidate requires evening and weekend time away from caregiving duties, making it challenging to find affordable and available caregiving help.

Elections Canada considers personal expenses to mean “the expenses of a personal nature that are reasonably incurred by or on behalf of a nomination contestant in relation to their nomination campaign and includes; travel and living expenses; childcare expenses; expenses relating to the provision of care for a person with a physical or mental incapacity for whom the contestant normally provides such care; and in the case of a contestant who has a disability, additional expenses that are related to the disability.”¹² To summarize Elections Canada will allow candidates to be reimbursed for personal expenses incurred because of the election.

We encourage the Province of PEI to take the additional step of amending the current Elections Expenses Act to allow candidates to claim the total amount of child/elder care or care of a vulnerable or dependent adult costs incurred during an election campaign. Making changes like this would not only make it easier for women to run, but would also support male candidates who have caregiving responsibilities. Incorporating amendments like this will contribute to the fairness of the act and allow PEI to support gender equity.

Having a greater diversity of voices and experience in government is vital to strengthening democracy. Research presented by Dr. Margaret-Ann Armour demonstrates that when gender parity is achieved women and men tend to generate more creative ideas, draw from multiple perspectives and devise robust solutions to problems.¹³ Undoubtedly, our province and government would benefit from greater

¹² Canada Elections Act, available at <http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/PDF/E-2.01.pdf>

¹³ Armour, Margaret-Ann. “Women in Leadership Today: How to Keep Moving Forward.”

gender parity in government. Considering the ways election financing can better support women candidates is one way to reduce barriers to women's political participation and increase the gender diversity of candidates.

Recommendations

The PEI Coalition for Women in Government recommends the following:

- that the Special Committee on Democratic Renewal request that the Election Expenses Act be amended to provide for a subsidy to candidate winning at least 10% of the vote within their riding.
- that the Special Committee on Democratic Renewal request that the Election Expenses Act be amended to include caregiving as an eligible election expense for candidates.
- that the Special Committee on Democratic Renewal ensure a gender and diversity lens be applied to the electoral renewal process moving forward, including recommendations related to election financing.

In closing, we would like to thank you for this opportunity to provide input into your process. Yours is not an easy task but legislation, plans and policies which not only ensure the equal involvement of women but encourage it are essential if Prince Edward Island is to ensure its future economic and social development.