

## CHALLENGES TO WOMEN'S POLITICAL CITIZENSHIP IN CANADA



**Sheila Copps**

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Periodista de profesión, Shelia Copps fue elegida al Parlamento de Canadá por primera vez en 1984. Ha ocupado las posiciones de Primera Ministra Adjunta de Canadá (1993-1997), así como, en diferentes ocasiones, Ministra del Medio Ambiente, de Comunicación, de Multiculturalismo y Ciudadanía, de Deporte y también de Patrimonio Canadiense. En toda su carrera, la Sra. Copps ha sido defensora de los derechos de las mujeres y es actualmente miembro del la Junta Asesora de Equal Voice, una ONG canadiense que lucha por la ciudadanía política de las mujeres. A la conclusión de su carrera política, la Sra. Copps ha sido columnista para una variedad de periódicos canadienses y anfitriona de un programa de radio.

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**G**racias a todos los organismos que son nuestros sponsors este día. Es una oportunidad fantástica para las mujeres de todas las Américas venir aquí a Washington, que es simbólicamente la llave del poder. So, thank you very much for the invitation and I have the advantage of having spent many years in politics, a quarter century, and I'm not running for anything. If nominated, I will not stand; if elected, I will not serve, which gives me a certain amount of freedom to speak in a way that I would not have spoken were I still in politics.

Many of you who are here today are still actively working your way through the political process and I'm very happy to see a number of young women because it's the next generation that's going to seek that level of equality. I was first elected in 1981. I ran for my first election in 1977, I was 23 years old. My daughter is 24 this year and I'm sorry to say that the vision, hope, and dreams that I had in 1977 for the equality of women, have not materialized—we are stalled. And not only are we stalled, but we have failed—not we as women because oftentimes we will be the brunt of why we are not running. One of the things that drive me crazy is the idea that women are not interested in getting

engaged in politics, but if you walk into any political committee room in any country, the women are the ones who keep the system afloat. They are in the backrooms, they are doing the legwork, and they are doing the heavy lifting. But, it all comes down to power and that's why I'm so happy that this meeting is being held in Washington because for all intents and purposes, Washington is the core of the political power movement for democracy in the world.

Power is never given freely, power is taken and that doesn't mean powerful in a macro context, but even in a political party, power is closely guarded by people who want to keep it and not necessarily shared amongst those who would like to have it. So, my daughter graduated from university this year; she can expect, with the same credentials and the same degree as a male graduate in her class, to walk out into the labor force and be paid 20 percent less than a man because she does not have a penis. There are no other mitigating factors that lead to the dissonance in pay and in my country, in Canada, it's seen—and for many good reasons—as a great place to be allowed to achieve great heights. My grandmother didn't have a vote and I became Deputy Prime Minister. But the bottom line is that in the last 25 years, in my country, women have flooded the labor force, the paid labor force, and in the same period of those 25 years, the average earning power of Canadian families has increased by CDN\$25.

Journalists and economists have not made the link between the fact that the flooding of women into the paid labor force and the stalling of the family income level have occurred at the same time, but it is all tied to the fact that women provide a source of cheaper labor for doing the same jobs in the paid labor force. Nobody, nobody would say that an employer, no employer starts out to say I'm going to pay somebody less, but if you look at the sectors of power in society, and politics being número uno—politics, media, and communications, the financial sector, and the educational sector—as politics sees more women arrive, and we've seen this week; we had a wonderful presentation from women who have achieved the highest elected office in the country, from presidents to prime ministers, and that is something to celebrate. But,

at the same time, I believe, that the underpinning for the inequality between men and women lies in sexism that starts at the cradle and ends in the grave. Until we tackle and accept the fact that even in countries that have a wonderful history of democracy that we still allow an underpinning of sexism to dominate the public discourse, it makes it very difficult to change the system.

As a politician, I could not say that. Why? I was elected in the most heavily unionized constituency in my country, and every single person, I needed their vote. So, I'm not going to start off an election campaign by accusing half the people in the country or even more of being sexist. It's politically incorrect because when you are in politics, you have to be un garçon bleu, you have to be somebody who can bring everybody together and you don't bring people together by dividing lines between men and women. At the same time, until we have public institutions—it could be the OAS, it could be the CIM, it could be UN Women—who are prepared to dig more deeply into the reasons for this inequality, I fear that 25 years from now, we'll have another conference with another group of women coming together and saying why we still have not reached equality.

In Canada, we passed laws that women had to be paid the same as men. Equal pay laws were passed in 1952. That was the year that I was born and my daughter, as I said, just graduated and can be expected to be paid 20 percent less than any male graduate in her class. So, from a political point of view, I think we have to assess the fact that sexism plays a huge role and we also have to engage not just the... I think governments do a very good job at ensuring equality in commissions, and boards, and in the macro-political structure. Political parties do not. If we are honest about our own political parties, and we're all members of political parties, and we've been members of political parties, whether you run on a system of proportional representation or direct election, oftentimes power replicates itself.

When I was Minister, more than 50 percent of my appointments were women because I made that my goal and I sought it out. In the same

way, when you look at the Parliament of Canada, the vast majority of representatives tend to be white men because power replicates itself.

I'll finish on this point. In the last American presidential election, there was a Saturday Night Live skit that made fun of the President and portrayed him as a shoeshine black boy. That lasted one episode because it was so abhorrent that the cartoon was pulled off of television. At the same time, and I'm no fan of any political person who is on the right of the spectrum, but at the same time, Sarah Palin's baby was mocked and she was ridiculed, and everybody had a big laugh at her expense when she was running for the Vice President's job, and nobody pulled that off television, and Tina Fey made a lot of money out of parodying a woman leader who's got a baby hanging off her back. So, ask yourself why, when it comes to racism, we're prepared to acknowledge it, tackle it, and bring in quotas to change the inequities of several hundred years, but when it comes to sexism, we cannot even mention the word "quota" for fear of being accused of somehow being feminist.

Yo quiero que las mujeres jóvenes de hoy are proud to call themselves feminists because we should stick together, and I think this meeting is a good opportunity to get that solidarity.