

The One That Got Away

POLITICS

Or why the best person I know in politics isn't interested in leading her party. BY JUDY REBICK

Everyone who knows Libby Davies loves her. Davies is an NDP member of Parliament from one of Canada's poorest ridings, the downtown east side in Vancouver. Somehow she manages to work closely with social movements, maintain her principles, function effectively in Ottawa and represent her riding, including the poorest and most marginalized of her constituents. In a year of working with me in the New Politics Initiative, she has never pulled rank or used her position as an MP to push for a particular position. She is, in short, an extraordinary politician, just the kind we need to see governing this country.

Plenty of people asked Davies if she would run for the leadership of the New Democratic Party but she just shrugged them off. "First I thought that every MP gets these kinds of questions. Then I thought, I am better off where I am. I have more independence," she told me. "It was only when you and a couple of other women really started to push me that I realized that I was doing what a lot of female politicians do. I was discounting myself in that kind of leadership role."

Davies and I both shocked ourselves. With as much respect as I had for her, I too discounted her at first. She is not strong in the male leadership skills: debating, bravado, one-liners and total self-confidence. The media won't take her seriously, I thought. Then I realized that I was using male leadership qualities to judge the best politician I've ever known.

A lot of us got excited about Davies running for leader of the NDP. She was a politician with a difference, not only because she was female but because politics, not personal ambition, is what drives her. People who had shown little or no interest in the NDP said they would change their minds if Davies ran. With the leadership convention coming up in January and because she works collectively, there was just not enough time for a thorough decision. I should have started convincing her earlier.

So how do we change political culture so that women like Davies can feel that they belong in leadership roles and other women believe that they belong in politics? The problem is that our political structure is fundamentally patriarchal. Powerful men dominate and it's getting worse, not better. The disgraceful struggle between Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin is just the latest and most pathetic display of cockfighting masquerading as politics. This is what we call leadership, and women are not very good at it. We have to stop trying to be like men and promote other kinds of leadership. This is what Davies would have done. This would ensure more women in politics and encourage the



return of those who've turned their backs on electoral politics.

I used to believe that reforms like proportional representation would make a difference. And while PR may help, it would not be enough. What we need is a different political system with another set of values. I've always felt that if we could get a critical mass of women in Parliament, we could change the culture. Now I see that unless we change the political culture, we will never get that critical mass.

Naomi Klein, the author of *No Logo* and one of the most important thinkers of the anti-globalization movement, has been working on a documentary on participatory democracy. She says that wherever people are organizing around the world, women are in the leadership. Whether in neighbourhood assemblies in Argentina or anti-globalization actions in North America, women are playing important roles. "But as soon as there is a podium," says Klein, "as soon as there is formal political power, men start to dominate."

In her book *Unless*, Carol Shields says that women have embraced goodness because we have not been permitted greatness. She says we have to choose between the two. Maybe we have been trying too hard to achieve the greatness of men, almost always won at the expense of others. What we need to do is to challenge the male-dominated political culture that values ego, ambition and self-importance above all other qualities. Today, with two generations of independent women combined with an anti-authoritarian youth movement, maybe such a challenge could finally succeed. ■

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