



Holding Half The Seats

Political quotas help guarantee that women leaders become visible.

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In virtually all societies, leadership is gendered masculine. Where women do get a chance to lead, they are often seen as ersatz men—Margaret Thatcher as the "Iron Lady" or Golda Meir as "the only man in cabinet." Many women leaders are forgotten when they are seen as anomalies and not part of a pattern. When I served on a panel at the 2004 International AIDS Conference in Barcelona, I was introduced as the only woman of the Council of Women World Leaders, an organization of present and former female presidents and ministers. I offered to give \$100 to anyone who could name all 34 of our members. One prominent man, known to be supportive of women's political aspirations, started to write. He could list only 17—and was unable to recall all the women who were in office when he was. Why is that an astute and engaged leader could readily recall only 50 percent of this small group of his peers? Was it a problem of memory—or of memorableness?

Studies have shown that by the time children start school, they already have a deeply imbued sense of what means to be male and female in their society. If these views support traditional gender roles, education can be hard-pressed to supplant them with something more conducive to gender equality. If we want to create more opportunities for women in public life, we have to address the landscape from which people derive their ideas of the way the world works.

Does it matter whether women are in public office?

Aside from questions of justice and fair representation, there are important qualitative reasons why women need to be present in our governing bodies. We can argue that there are as many differences within the sexes as between them, but institutions dominated by one sex or the other display distinctive cultural characteristics. In all-male environments, men tend to take greater risks. This can be a good thing or a disaster—as the recent behavior in investment banks has shown. In addition to different agendas, single-gender bodies operate differently. On a recent trip to Skopje, Macedonia, I met the women M.P.s—40 out of a total of 120—who have formed a



political "club," which is the only parliamentary group working across party lines. Notwithstanding powerful arguments over issues, the members of this group from the governing and opposition coalitions refuse to let their disagreements drive them away from dialogue. They have achieved real policy results through a committee on equal opportunity for women and men that has produced laws on child welfare support to working mothers, and domestic violence.

The critical mass of women in the Macedonian Parliament is a result of party quotas. In many countries, quotas ensure that women play a part in political life. Just as the role of women in World War I paved the way for their enfranchisement in countries like Canada, the U.S., and Britain, the role of women in the struggles in Africa has resulted in their greater representation in countries like Rwanda, South Africa, Mozambique, and Uganda—a level guaranteed by quotas. The Nordic countries have long embraced quotas that guarantee a high number of women in parliaments, which in turn has led to their almost equal share of cabinet posts. Even traditional Spain has seen a 50-50 representation in the cabinet. But of all the mechanisms to promote gender parity, quotas are the most controversial. In countries like the U.S. and Canada, they are not only difficult to implement but are often regarded as unfair because they appear to privilege one group over another.

Quotas address the problem of visibility. They ensure that women are there. How do we make our governing bodies look more like the people they govern, and thereby deliver the message that it is every citizen's right to aspire to public office? Most experts will tell you the quotas that work best are voluntary ones—those who recognize the importance of women's roles, and seek to recruit them as candidates and get them elected.

Last year in Toronto I proposed a measure that could achieve gender parity in my country without quotas in the traditional sense. If we elected two people from every electoral district—one man and one woman—we could have instant parity. Each party would nominate two candidates for each district and voters would choose one from the male list and one from the female list. Of course, electoral boundaries would have to be revised to accommodate the consolidation, but Canada is in the process of redistricting and it might be the time to do something radical.

In 1997 a group of former women heads of state and government formed the Council of Women World Leaders to make visible the fact that women can and do lead their countries. We must find ways to demonstrate the naturalness of women in politics. Quotas have changed the way many cultures see who govern them. Wouldn't it be great if we couldn't remember the names of all the women leaders because there were too many of them?

Campbell was the 19th Prime Minister of Canada. Her blog, bitesizechunks.org, addresses the preeminent issues of the day, including climate change, poverty, and women's rights.

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