

Women, Power, Politics: The Hidden Story of Canada's Unfinished Democracy

Sylvia Bashevkin

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Sylvia Bashevkin's latest book, *Women, Power, Politics: The Hidden Story of Canada's Unfinished Democracy*, provides a no-nonsense, lively review of, and explanation for, the persistent sidelining of women in politics, and why Canadian women's representational advances have slowly but surely retreated. She begins by systematically debunking "the view that things are moving along nicely" and indeed shows how and why it is "flat-out wrong" (3). Bashevkin declares that even though she is "by nature optimistic" the contemporary situation is quite grim because the "prospects for Canadian women who seek careers in public life seem to be getting worse, not better" (3). However, the book is by no means a doom-and-gloom account nor is it intended to be an exercise in "male conspiracy" (2) construction. On the contrary, it is a refreshingly forthright assessment of current conditions for women in politics, and one that seeks to redress representational shortfalls by revitalizing Canadian democracy in robust ways.

Bashevkin's thesis is intentionally simple, but deceptively so, because it is based on her years of expert research in the field, as well as recent frank, personal interviews with political activists. The woeful state of play for women who try to secure powerful positions in conventional politics can be explained by the brutally blunt equation "women plus power equals discomfort." According to Bashevkin, there exists a deep-rooted, collective "visceral discomfort with women and power, which comes to the surface especially clearly in competitive political environments" (xi). She supports this claim by selectively drawing on the empirical research of women and politics scholars in Canada and abroad, scouring the biographies and autobiographies of female politicians and skillfully deploying anecdotes and illustrations gleaned from her interviews and from media portrayals.

The book is structured to show how Canadian woman politician "X" will be subjected to more "grueling evaluations" than her male counterpart, and, invariably, will fall significantly "short on each and every metric"(x) of political leadership. And so chapter 2 examines "our collective unease, and particularly the unease of political journalists" (10) with women in power. This amounts to a situation in which women political leaders are portrayed (by both male and female journalists) as, or presumed (by the general public), not able to "get things right: whether [the female politicians] are assertive and confident, or consensual and team-oriented, they are found to be lacking in whatever it is that constitutes the 'right stuff' of public authority" (10). This critique extends beyond women's leadership styles and encompasses their speech, appearance and personal lives.

Women are not only more intensely scrutinized and harshly reflected, but this also serves to deflect attention from their political views, visions and contributions. When this is combined with the fact that women have often been asked to run in unwinnable ridings and continue to be cajoled into leading parties with waning electoral fortunes (for instance, Kim Campbell), a "loser syndrome" (44) vis-à-vis women in public office is created and perpetuated.

The next three chapters provide detailed illustrations, with chapter 3 focusing on the disproportionate attention paid to female politicians' physical attributes and dress, and, in chapter 4, the often scurrilous scrutiny of their sex lives. Chapter 5 provides a scathing assessment of the current political status quo in terms of both formal and informal politics but it is then followed by a prescriptive discussion in Chapter 6 which offers a series of specific suggestions for making politics more inclusive and participatory for all Canadians.

While the book covers familiar ground for students of women and politics, there is much to be commended in how this is done. For instance, Bashevkin's lucid writing style is a real plus. In an informal, almost conversational, tone she seamlessly interweaves droll turns of phrase with evocative illustrations and serious scholarly references in ways that render the work both widely accessible, and academically credible.

To be sure, there are also new and important contributions, especially in how linkages are made between the plight of women in public office and the conditions and forces that have resulted in a cynical, disaffected and, in some cases, de-politicized citizenry. Bashevkin advances the debate by, first, calling into question the debasement of both formal and informal politics and, second, by providing a number of explicit recommendations as to how the two could be strengthened in ways that would be mutually beneficial. The book takes direct aim at discourses and practices that have served to delegitimize formal politics. Here Bashevkin bravely takes on both left and right and describes their "two-pronged, pincer-like devaluation of mainstream public engagement" (120). Similarly, she takes to task forces within and outside of the women's movement that have contributed to the demise of parliamentary-focused feminist organizations. However, Bashevkin does not stop at critique and instead forges ahead with her views on democratic and representational reconstruction ranging from electoral reform, quotas and mandatory voting, to building a new national movement/network/coalition, the Canadian Organization for Democratic Advocacy (CODA).

While the focus is on women in general, the book also addresses how intersecting identities can complicate matters further, whether in the form of the media's sensationalist preoccupation with Allison Brewer's sexual orientation after winning the leadership of the New Democratic party in New Brunswick, or the race, ethnicity and class conjectures that led to the public sense that Rosemary Brown and Belinda Stronach were just too stylish and too well dressed to be political contenders! However, perhaps a few more illustrations could be given of the politics of race at play. For instance, it is no coincidence that the height of the representational critique of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (from within and without) coincided with women of colour holding the presidency of the organization. Moreover, the book does not include the fact that two of the highest profile political women in Canada, of late, have been appointed to their posts and come from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds: Adrienne Clarkson and Michaëlle Jean.

Overall, *Women, Power, Politics: The Hidden Story of Canada's Unfinished Democracy* is a quick albeit quality read, one that covers substantial ground in a succinct, savvy and sometimes saucy manner. The book will be particularly useful for shaking up a complacent status quo, especially undergraduate students who are often all too skeptical of the claims of women and politics professors. At the same time, the style and content is such that it will also engage students at other levels (upper and lower) as well as the general public. Even seasoned scholars in the field will still find themselves shocked and appalled at some of the double standards outlined in this book, and will continue to be impressed with Bashevkin's straightforward, highly informed discussions of Canada's representational and democratic ills and remedies, with respect to gender and beyond. As a result, this book will be a must-read on political science course syllabi as well as the reading lists of a citizenry in search of more egalitarian and meaningful democratic engagement.

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