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THE PROVINCES

TOM FLANAGAN
IN ALBERTA

The ladies of the Calgary Seven

In the middle of August, Alberta's Minister of Learning took the unusual step of dissolving the Calgary Board of Education, which was elected less than a year ago. He appointed a retired city commissioner as a caretaker for a few months until a by-election could be held to elect a new board.

This is only the fifth time that the provincial government has dismissed a school board and the first time it has dissolved a major metropolitan one. The minister acted only after chairwoman Teresa Woo-Paw told him the board had become "completely dysfunctional." What makes the story particularly interesting is that all seven members of the board, as of the preceding one, were women.

One of the enduring myths of feminism concerns the alleged moral superiority of women in politics. The "maternal feminists" of the early 20th century, exemplified by Alberta's "Famous Five," who fought long and hard to get women into the Canadian Senate, believed that giving women the vote and electing them to office was the key to social reform. They reasoned that once women held political power, they would help clean up politics and add momentum to worthwhile causes, from the prohibition of alcohol to the attainment of world peace.

The contemporary feminist version of this belief is that women in politics are more co-operative and consensual than men. The election of one woman may not make much difference, they argue, but wait until women achieve the "critical mass" — often said to be about 40 per cent of the positions in an elected body. Then their will start to reduce the conflict generated by male competitiveness and dominance displays.

If this feminist theory had any validity, the all-female Calgary Board of Education should have been a model of harmonious co-operation. In fact, it became the setting for some of the most ruthless politics I have ever witnessed.

A little history: The previous board, dominated by Liberal supporters, harassed the Conservative government by criticizing, sometimes even sabotaging, its educational policies. The balance changed after the 1998 election, when two candidates with strong ties to the federal Reform Party won seats. The Reformers quickly cemented a tactical alliance with two non-aligned members in order to depose the three committed Liberals. The non-aligned got the positions of chair and vice-chair, the Reformers got a voting majority for at least some of their policies, and the Liberals got very angry.

The Liberals, all veterans of the previous board, devised cunning procedural manoeuvres to embarrass the Reformers, both of whom hold other jobs and were sometimes absent from committee meetings held during the day. The anti-Liberals fought back with press leaks, ultimately to devastating effect.

The coup de grâce was delivered when someone retrieved from the wastebasket and gave to The Calgary Herald the torn fragments of handwritten notes the Liberals had passed among themselves at meetings. Publication of these gems of insight (e.g. that one Reformer had "crappy hair" and the other had only "half a brain") revealed how bitterly divided the board had become and showed that reconciliation was impossible. Hence the minister's dissolution of the board.

The note-passing and hairstyle comments that received so much publicity may have been quintessentially feminine, but men in their own way make equally vicious personal comments about political opponents. In any case, the content of the notes was a peripheral matter.

More interesting to the political observer were the conflicts of interest and world view, the coalition formation, bloc voting, tactical alliances, procedural manoeuvres, leaks to the press and personal attacks. It was the stuff of politics, and the women played the game as well (or as badly) as any group of men, and certainly as single-mindedly and ruthlessly. Co-operation and consensus were conspicuous by their absence.

Although one episode cannot prove a general proposition, it suggests that feminist ideas about the moral superiority of women and the importance of the "critical mass" are wrong, at least as they apply to politics. Political behaviour is human behaviour. The entry of women into public life — one of the truly epochal developments of our century — may have enlarged the political arena, but it has not changed the nature of the contest.

If folks still believed differently after Indira Gandhi and Margaret Thatcher, the Calgary Seven should change their minds.

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Tom Flanagan is a professor of political science at the University of Calgary and Seagram visiting professor of Canadian studies at McGill University in Montreal. He adds this disclosure: "Danielle Smith, one of the Reform-oriented board members, is a friend and former student of mine. I did not consult her about this column."