

Women and other party animals

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MacBeth is the latest in a short line of losing female pols

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It was a bad night for the Alberta Liberals. In 1997, they won 33% of the popular vote and 18 seats; this time they got just 28% of the vote and seven seats. Mercifully, their leader, Nancy MacBeth, lost her own seat in Edmonton, thus sparing herself the torment of having to look at Ralph Klein's smug face every day in the legislature for the next four years.

Since Thérèse Casgrain became leader of the Quebec CCF in 1951, 20 women have headed Canadian political parties. They have led their parties into 27 elections, of which they have won only two. In 1993, Prince Edward Island Liberal leader Catherine Callbeck became the first, and still only, woman leader to win a provincial election (her main opponent was another woman, PC leader Pat Mella); and in 2000 Pat Duncan led the Yukon Liberal party to victory.

Two wins in 27 tries — 7% — is not an encouraging record. Given most elections in Canada are three- or occasionally four-party contests (with five-party federal races in the 1990s), the comparable figure for male leaders would

be around 30%, about four times higher than for female leaders.

Like male leaders, female leaders experience both successes and failures. But not only do women leaders fail to win as often as men, their average performance in campaigns is not as good. For the 16 elections in which a woman has led a party that had been led by a man in the previous election, the mean result is a decline of three percentage points in popular vote.

The two victories achieved by women leaders came in the very small jurisdictions of P.E.I. and Yukon, basically glorified municipal political arenas. Two other relative success stories also took place in small provinces — Manitoba and Saskatchewan — when Sharon Carstairs and Linda Haverstock led moribund provincial Liberal parties back to the status of official opposition.

Women leaders have been involved in three catastrophic losses. Much worse than Nancy MacBeth's defeat were the reversals suffered by Rita Johnston as B.C. Social Credit leader in 1991 (from 49% to 24% of the vote); Kim Campbell as federal PC leader in 1993 (from 45% to 16%); and Audrey McLaughlin as federal NDP leader in the same year (from 20% to 7%). Rita Johnston may not bear all the blame for failing to undo the damage Bill Vander Zalm had done to Social Credit's prospects. Kim Campbell, however, started the 1993 campaign vir-

tually equal in the polls with Jean Chrétien; and when Audrey McLaughlin took over from Ed Broadbent as NDP leader, that parity was in its best condition ever.

The facts are clear enough, but how to account for them is less clear. One line of explanation would emphasize that the phenomenon of female leadership is new. Thérèse Casgrain was far ahead of her time; female leadership only became common after 1980, the year when Alexa McDonough took over the Nova Scotia NDP. Much has been accomplished in two decades, and the passage of time is bound to make voters more comfortable with parties headed by women, while more numerous and more capable female leaders will emerge as women get more experience.

This line of argument may eventually prove correct, but there is little indication progress will be rapid. There was far more buzz about women in politics in the 1980s and early 1990s than there is now. The proportion of female MPs is stalled around one-fifth and actually decreased after the most recent federal election — the first decline after three decades of steady growth. The feminization of politics has lost its momentum.

The evidence thus far is consistent with interpretations of human behaviour derived from evolutionary biology. In species in which males are physically larger than females, the pattern is for males to compete vigorously with one another for reproductive rights. Among human beings, as among lions and chimpanzees, such competition is political; that is, it involves forming coalitions of support in order to attain hierarchical rank.

The standard view is that evolution has inclined male behaviour more than female behaviour in this direction because males have more to gain. Using rank and

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power to obtain access to more sexual partners enormously multiplies male, but not female reproductive potential.

This is a theory of ultimate, not proximate, causation. A man doesn't aspire to lead political parties because he wants to be a daddy again. Rather, differential reproductive success is thought to have genetically entrenched male power-seeking behaviour, which makes men compete more strenuously than women for alpha positions.

Evolutionary theory's long-term prediction is that women are unlikely to attain top power positions as frequently as men. Fortunately, however, a free society allows women with the inclination and ability to compete and succeed when they can. I continue to fantasize about the Second Coming of Margaret Thatcher, this time in Canada.

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