

Women in parliament a broad issue

From Canada to Afghanistan, proportional representation still a long way off



PATRICK ROSS

Nothing inspires political debate like the visit of a controversial foreign ruler. Case in point: Afghan President Hamid Karzai's recent visit to our country has brought many issues to the forefront of Canadian politics. Along with predictable discussions about Canada's military engagement in Afghanistan, Karzai's visit has also fuelled debate about an unexpected topic: gender equality.

During a speech to Parliament on 22 September, Karzai noted that Afghanistan's own Parliament includes a healthy proportion of female representatives. Of a 351-seat Afghan Parliament, 68 seats (about 19 per cent) are held by women—a representational proportion mandated in their constitution. Compare that to Canada's where, out of 308 Parliament seats, 64 are held by women (about 21 per cent).

This doesn't seem like such a big difference until one considers that Afghan women haven't had the freedom to run for office until recently. Under the previous Taliban regime, women weren't even permitted to be educated, and were required by law to wear the infamous *burkhas* considered by many to be symbolic of

the status of women living in Islamic theocracies.

By comparison, Canadian women have had the vote since 1916, when the government of Manitoba passed legislation allowing women to vote in provincial elections. By 1940, all of Canada's governments, including the federal government, had passed suffrage bills allowing women full participation in Canadian politics. In 1982, universal electoral rights were entrenched in the Canadian constitution.

Equality in law and equality in reality are two very different things, however. While considered equal under law, women clearly aren't considered equal in politics. And despite legal enfranchisement, they remain a minority in Parliament.

When Sheila Copps—one of Canada's most outspoken and accomplished female politicians—was elected to Parliament in 1984, she was one of only 27 women in Parliament (out of 282 seats at the time). Women held just short of ten per cent of Parliamentary seats. Years later, the picture is very different. While still falling far short of the oft-cited 52 per cent goal, 20 per cent is better than ten per cent, and still much better than zero.

Canadian political parties have expended a tremendous amount of energy in getting women elected, but for many years, this was not a fruitful endeavour. The 1970s and '80s are illuminating examples. Prior to 1980, of the 6845 people elected to Parliament, only 68 were women. This was reflective of the difficulty in

finding women willing to seek office. In the 1974 election, for example, the Liberals and NDP combined to nominate 139 women—nine of whom won—while the Conservative party was able to nominate eleven.

According to Copps, running for office is extremely treacherous for women. In her autobiography *Nobody's Baby*, she writes, "If you are a woman, the road to the House is not an easy one. You will have to fight like a man—to be forceful, aggressive, and to the point. You can't afford to pull your punches. You are breaking into a man's game when many men are struggling to maintain their hold on the country's power structures."

Unfortunately, women are still faced with these stereotypes and expectations—the attention currently being paid to Belinda Stronach's love life being recent proof of this. "Women bring a perspective to politics which allows them to break away from stereotypes," Copps writes. One finds a similar sentiment among the Afghan people who have voted women into their parliament, the perception being that these female candidates are untainted by past political strife.

As is the case for their Afghan counterparts, the future looks very bright for Canadian women. To prove this, one needs look no further than status of women on university campuses. On this very campus, the University of Alberta Students' Union features two female members on its five-member executive, including its duly elected President, Samantha Power.

'Shrimp Challenge' a tall order

The best-laid schemes of rice and men go oft awry—or just get regurgitated



CONAL PIERSE

For those of you who are eating or have a weak stomach, turn back. Stop reading. This is an account of an experiment into the grotesque and will only upset you. No? Well, at least I tried.

Like all men, I have always been fascinated by the extents of my gastrointestinal fortitude. What started innocently in youth as eating sand and previously enjoyed gum (or "road candy") eventually lead to the "Challenge"—the blank being whatever food you have on hand whose lethal dose is still a mystery to you. The following was prompted by Red Lobster's "Endless Shrimp" event, which is basically just a big, "I fucking dare you."

While discussing with a friend of mine the finer points of monkey knife-fighting, we got onto the topic of eating. Then, to my horror, I agreed to a challenge: to eat shrimp until I could eat shrimp no more—and then some. That night I wept relentlessly as I realized what I'd done. At one point, I was absolutely convinced that I was going to die at Red Lobster, surrounded by shrimp tails and cocktail sauce.

You see, as a kid raised in the suburbs, I've spent my entire life convinced that anything new I try will kill me. In my mind the "trick" on Halloween would be a vicious raping

from a stranger who gave me razor-blade-filled candy.

On the day of the event, my friends who'd witness my shame decided that Red Lobster wasn't "people food" and that we should go to a buffet place instead. I figured, "Sure why not, the end result would still be the same—what difference does scenery make?"

My first impression of the joint was that it was a place where people came to die. And despite the restaurant's name, nobody was smiling. We were all like hyenas, furious about having to settle for seconds.

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The buffet spread was mainly Chinese food, though they did have mashed potatoes and onion rings for the all-important WTF factor. I tried to stick to what I knew, taking some spring rolls, onion rings and chicken balls for the first plate. I started on the onion rings, which were quite good, but this would be the only high point of the meal. Biting into the spring rolls was reminiscent of the snake full of snakes in *Indiana Jones* and

the *Temple of Doom*, and the chicken balls contained no discernable meat.

As I ate, I couldn't help but feel like somehow this was bad karma for all the evil I had done in my life. Each terrible bite was a time I purposely clotheslined a kid in Red Rover. Everything new I tried was worse than what came before it. My tongue was Apollo Creed getting murdered by the Russian. I kept saying, "Fuck this game I'm done," but peer pressure won out, and I kept lifting that fork. Since there was a charge for wasted food, I spent time looking for ways to hide it—but the salt shaker half-full of rotting rice told me that some poor bastard had beaten me to it.

One of my main problems was that I made the rookie buffet-eating mistake of loading up on large amounts of food instead of making a sampler platter. And just like a hotel heiress, everything I swallowed was too salty. Eating the ginger beef was like chewing through a Kevlar vest, and the lemon chicken looked suspiciously like it was covered in snot. Despite all this, I continued to force myself to eat until I reached maximum capacity and peak revulsion levels, though out of respect for the establishment I decided to finish my escapades outside.

My detonator was a mussel that my friend assured me was the "worst fucking thing [he'd] ever eaten." This thing was putrid even at arm's length and gave you the sensation that you were trapped inside a whale's vagina. I got it as far as my lips when my body said "no dice" and shot off a good two litres of pink vomit as an exclamation point—and I've gotta say, it actually tasted better in reverse.

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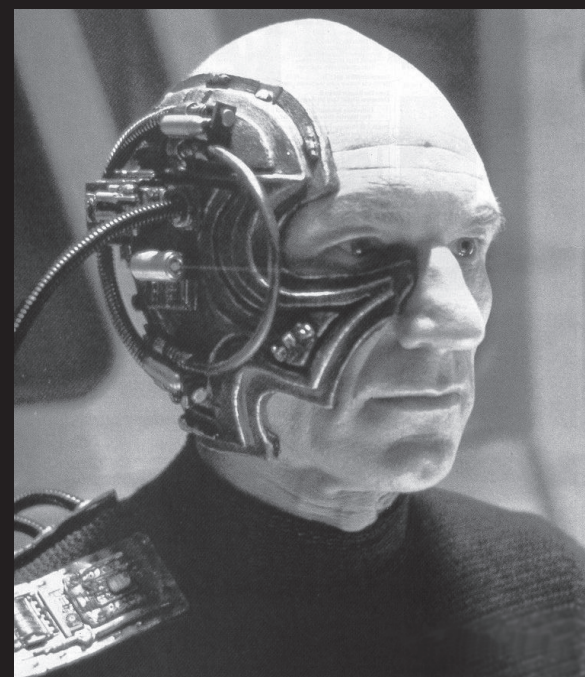
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