



SUITING UP FOR SUCCESS Left to right: Blakeman, Mather and McLellan all want to see more women in public office.

Trio urges greater involvement of women in all levels of politics

Working across party lines and battling hostile atmosphere key to bringing more women into Alberta's government, according to three female politicians

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Managing Editor

Men may dominate government in Alberta, but this trend won't change until women themselves start playing a more active role in politics. This was the message delivered by three female politicians when they addressed a small crowd at the University of Alberta on 22 November.

Drawing from their own personal experiences on the campaign trail and from debates on the floor, former federal minister Anne McLellan, along with current Alberta MLAs Laurie Blakeman and Weslyn Mather, said women need to start choosing politics as a vocation if they want to effect change.

McLellan, who served as Liberal MP from 1993–2006 in Edmonton Centre—and held a handful of Cabinet positions, most recently as deputy prime minister—is now chair of the Liberal Task Force on Women, working to examine the lack of gender balance in politics.

"I firmly believe that public legislatures must be a mirror of the society they claim to represent," McLellan said.

Currently, only 13 of the total 83 MLAs in the province are women, while a mere two of the 28 federal ministers representing Alberta are women.

Still, McLellan acknowledged that the use of affirmative action, which would effectively reserve places in Parliament and legislatures for under-represented groups—including women—in politics, has developed a negative reputation, especially among younger women.

Instead, she advocated the use of "active measures," which would see parties identify capable women to run for office, and then recruit and train them, offering resources and financial support for their campaigns.

Blakeman, a Liberal MLA in Alberta since 1997, agreed women need to become more involved in politics.

"We keep putting the chicken before the egg, and I think we need to roll that around. We need to get out there and do it ourselves," Blakeman said. "If we want more women in politics, we have to either run, or we have to

put them there."

Mather, who is currently in her first term as Liberal MLA for Edmonton-Mill Woods, brought a different perspective to the discussion with her background as an elementary school psychologist. She said that while she was used to consensus building in the school system, politics is often more about squabbling than problem solving.

"We're back to the battles, it seems, of the sandbox, or the war games," she said.

"There's an idea out there that somehow women are delicate flowers—people are snickering already—that somehow we can't hack it and that we are broken by this, and frankly, that's just bullshit."

Laurie Blakeman,
MLA Edmonton-Centre

She also described her experience during question period in the Legislature.

"It has nothing to do with asking and answering questions. If you're on the government side of the house, the purpose is to avoid answering whenever possible. If you're on the opposition side, the purpose is to make the government look bad," Mather said.

She went on to say that a greater diversity in the Alberta Legislature—including more women—could go a long way to change the state of politics in the province.

She pointed out that the political culture in Alberta is characterized by a one-party state that stays in power unchallenged for long periods of time. Indeed, the Progressive Conservatives have held power in the province since 1971, and before that, it was the Social Credit party's reign, beginning in 1935.

McLellan said that while women do hold leadership roles, citing their

involvement with school boards, community leagues and non-governmental organizations, they choose not to enter public life because of its confrontational tone and the manner in which the media reports on politicians.

"[Liberal MP Belinda Stronach] has become the paradigm example of what is wrong with politics for women in terms the way the media—in her case, even some of her own former colleagues—treat women."

In October, Foreign Affairs Minister Peter McKay allegedly referred to Stronach as a dog in the House of Commons. Stronach and McKay were a couple before she crossed the floor to join the Liberal party.

"And then you have our own Premier making probably one of the most distasteful jokes. And I'm not a prude, I swear, but there's a level of coarseness that is injecting itself into public life that I think will simply make it more difficult to attract women," McLellan said, referring to Ralph Klein's recent comments about Stronach, when he said, "I wasn't surprised she crossed over. I don't think she ever did have a Conservative bone in her body. Well, except for one."

Blakeman argued that this type of crass commentary would continue until more women became involved in politics.

"There's an idea out there that somehow women are delicate flowers—people are snickering already—that somehow we can't hack it and that we are broken by this, and frankly, that's just bullshit," she said. "We're just as tough as everybody else if we want to be."

Blakeman went on to say that women of different political persuasions need to continue to work together to get more women elected—something that McLellan said was crucial in her past campaigns.

"Women work across party lines. I had a lot of women—Conservative women, New Democrat women and Liberal women—working on my campaign because they thought that it was important to have a woman elected, and I appreciate and appreciated that support," she said, adding that it was women who encouraged her to run for office in the first place.

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