

A party for women, a party for men?



LAWRENCE MARTIN

lmartin@globeandmail.com

[E-mail Lawrence Martin](#) | [Read Bio](#) | [Latest Columns](#)

June 9, 2008



One of the revelations in the Mulroney-Schreiber hearings was the performance of the articulate young Conservative MP from British Columbia, Russ Hiebert. Of the several interrogators on the Tory side, he topped the list in terms of poise, precision and a capacity to reduce complexities to bare essentials.

Brian Mulroney, who is on the sidelines waiting for the government to move on the calling of its promised inquiry, must have loved the guy.

Just as opposition members thought they made ground, Mr. Hiebert would reduce their arguments to rubble.

He is one of a number of impressive young Conservative MPs. There is Mr. Hiebert, there is the brilliant Michael Chong, there is James Rajotte, James Moore and the true believer who has been defending the government on the in-and-out campaign-spending controversy, Pierre Poilievre.

Print Edition - Section Front

The problem is there are no women in the group. Not a Hillary Clinton or a Flora MacDonald in sight. There are no women of great force in the Conservative cabinet and few at central command in the Prime Minister's Office. There are few women, at least compared to the Liberals, being recruited to run for the party and there are few Conservative policies, in what pollster Nik Nanos refers to as a "male-centric party," with built-in women appeal.

The situation highlights what pollsters see as an escalating political trend line: the Conservatives as the party for men, the Liberals as the party for women. The natural tendency was always there, the pollsters say. But it is more pronounced now that the word progressive is not so prominent on the Conservative side. For today's Conservatives, the appeal to women is almost 10 percentage points lower than it is to men. And it could worsen. A particular concern for them, said Mr. Nanos, is that among Canadian voters who are currently undecided, the proportion of women is considerably higher than men. This means Mr. Harper's female problem is bigger than Stéphane Dion's male problem, considerable as that may be.

Last week, Mr. Dion attempted to press his advantage with females in pledging, if elected, to appoint a federal commissioner of gender equality. The Liberal Leader has also promised that at least one-third of the candidates in the next federal election will be women. Thus far, with about three-quarters of the party's candidates nominated, 35 per cent are women.

Pollster Bruce Anderson of Harris/Decima said the gender split has become "a big number and it's more compelling still when you look at it in combination with urbanization and age." The women tilting Liberal are younger women, single women and women living in large cities.

The Harper government was doing better with women earlier in its mandate, explained Mr. Nanos, with emphasis on such policies as health care. But as the focus switched to things such as defence spending and cutting taxes and a crackdown on crime, the support drifted away. "In a way, they've amplified the problem for themselves." It's why today, he said, they're trying to put a focus on such things as consumer protection



to bring back the women voters.

The Conservatives were hurt by women going to the Liberals, particularly in the last days of the campaign after the Grits ran ads suggesting the Conservatives might restrict access to abortions.

Given the current dynamic, Mr. Anderson explained, they have room to reach out. "The question for Stephen Harper is: Has he found enough ways to articulate his agenda so that it is more appealing to women, without alienating men?"

He need not worry so much about his base, he said. "For people who care about defence spending, tax cuts, law and order, Harper has pretty much got all he can get. There is room to reach out."

The party's history is not all male-dominated. In the Diefenbaker government, Ellen Fairclough became the country's first-ever female cabinet minister. Flora MacDonald was, later, a force to be reckoned with. And Kim Campbell became the country's first woman prime minister.

But now, as women progress on so many fronts, it is hard to find them or their causes in this governing party.

[Enlarge Image](#)

More Stories

- ['Sorry' is the bridge to reconciliation](#)
- [A party for women, a party for men?](#)
- [MPs must have better things to do](#)
- [Much more than mere incidents](#)
- [New Brunswick's great idea](#)
- [Go to the section](#)

