



Submission to the Commission on Electoral Reform

About the New Brunswick Women's Council

The New Brunswick Women's Council is an independent public advisory body on women's equality. The council's mandate is to bring issues of importance to women and their substantive equality to government and public attention and to provide government with advice on these issues.

As an independent public entity, the council sets its own policy agenda; determines its own analysis of issues; and can autonomously commission research, publish reports and recommendations, and provide public commentary.

The council's work is informed by its appointed membership, which includes organizations (represented by a woman staff member or volunteer) and individual women committed to women's equality. The council is supported by a small staff team.

Submission

Given the council's mandate, this submission focuses on strengthening New Brunswick's democracy by increasing the participation and representation of women in provincial politics, including First Nations, Metis, and Inuit women and women of colour. The suggestions included in this brief would also support the participation and representation of other First Nations, Metis, and Inuit persons and persons of colour. This aligns with the commission's mandate to assess the provincial government's 2014 commitment to eliminating barriers to entering politics for underrepresented groups.

In New Brunswick, women are consistently underrepresented as candidates in provincial elections and as elected Members of the Legislated Assembly (MLAs). Despite comprising just over half of New Brunswick's adult population, women have never accounted for more than 33% of a provincial election's slate of candidates or more than 19% of MLAs at a time.

In order to increase women's participation in provincial politics, the council recommends action on a systemic level. The council specifically recommends:

- changing the way in which members of the legislative assembly are elected from Single Member Plurality (SMP) to Mixed Member Proportional Representation (MMPR); and
- building gender-based incentives into the public funding process for political parties.

Research has demonstrated that jurisdictions with the highest number of women representatives in elected office are those with some form of proportional representation (PR) as an electoral system. A MMPR system would allow New Brunswick the benefits of PR while retaining the strengths of SMP (notably: region-based representation that ensures a local MLA for every citizen). This model has been recommended by both the former New Brunswick Advisory Council on the Status of Women (NB ACSW) and the Commission on Legislative Democracy. The NB ACSW's submission to the Commission on Legislative Democracy is attached to this submission.

The council urges the Commission to consider sections 1.1-1.3 of the submission; while the numbers in the document have not been updated since it was submitted in 2004, the analysis of barriers to women's participation in provincial politics that SMP poses as well as the advantages of MMPR remain relevant and compelling.

On the subject of changing the way in which MLAs are elected, it must be noted (given the prominence that preferential voting is given in the commission's discussion paper) that there is no evidence that preferential voting increases the participation or election of women in politics. Many of the dynamics that contribute to the underrepresentation of women as candidates in SMP are recreated with preferential voting. For instance: because both systems rely on winner-takes-all races, parties will continue to select candidates that they deem most likely to win (which, to date, has overwhelmingly proven to be men). While implementing preferential ballots may initially appear to be a positive step toward strengthening democracy, it must be recognized that it will not actually create systemic changes that are likely to increase the participation of women in provincial politics.

Whether or not electoral reform is enacted, women's participation in provincial politics can be supported through changes to the public funding process for political parties. Presently, political parties in New Brunswick receive annual funding from public coffers based on the percentage of votes they received in the last provincial election, as per the *Political Process Financing Act*. The council recommends that this funding formula be modified to include additional funding for parties with strong representation of women in their slate of candidates, as well as funding for parties which see their women candidates elected.

The latter measure may seem redundant or even problematic as it is based on the will of the electorate, but it serves an important function: to encourage parties to run women in competitive ridings. Were financial incentives only tied to parties running more women, parties could conceivably boost the number of women candidates they field by running women in their non-competitive ridings (i.e. where the party has little chance of winning the seat). Parties could then continue to use their existing strategies for identifying candidates in competitive ridings – strategies which, of course, tend to produce men as candidates. This may appear to be a cynical view of party politics, but it is, in fact, a dynamic so common in both politics and other areas (such as executive leadership) that it has a name: the *glass cliff*.

The council urges the Commission on Electoral Reform to consider these options as they prepare their report for January, 2017. The council's co-chairs and staff are available to the commissioners for further discussion of these or other proposed recommendations as well as the barriers that women face in participating in provincial politics.