

Martha's Monthly
March 2007

It is International Women's Day and all we have is Britney's bald scalp.

Martha went to the grocery store yesterday and while she stood in the checkout line she saw about a dozen magazines aimed at women. As she took a look at the front cover of those magazines she saw way too much of Britney's scalp, learnt way too much about Paris' life, and saw way too many pieces of advice about losing weight. Is this really what women care about thought Martha? Is this as far as women have come in the media's eye?

Back in the late 1950s a Canadian women's magazine called Chatelaine had a fresh young editor named Doris Anderson. Ms. Anderson, born in Alberta in 1921, knew that women wanted to read about more than floral arrangements and place settings. Anderson transformed Chatelaine magazine for 20 years as she used it to educate and inspire women. Three years ago Martha met Doris Anderson when she [spoke](#) at the YWCA One Woman One Vote event. Martha was, as most people were when they met Anderson, awed. Sadly, Doris Anderson, a pioneer Canadian feminist, died in Toronto on March 2, 2007 at the age of 85. [Penney Kome](#), a famous Canadian journalist and friend of Anderson's [wrote](#) after her death,

Every woman today who has her own chequing account, or who wears pants in public, owes something to Doris. So does every woman who names and controls her own sexuality, or who survives divorce with her dignity and livelihood intact.

Anderson's first editorial at Chatelaine was about something pretty revolutionary in 1957: the need for more women to be elected to office. Doris Anderson put the issue of women's representation in Parliament on the political map in Canada. She did that first in the 1950s. She did it throughout the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. In the 2000s she spoke at the founding meeting of [Equal Voice](#), an organization dedicated to the *still* radical idea that we need more women in elected office and helped found [Fair Vote Canada](#), an organization dedicated to promoting proportional representation.

Sadly, women have yet to get halfway to equal in elected office. In Alberta we have just 13 women in the Legislature. They face 70 men. That makes women just under 16% of Alberta MLAs. **Not even halfway to equal.**

So for **International Women's Day** this year Martha has decided that we need to demand more elected women. Waiting patiently is not going to make this change. Waiting patiently has kept the percentage of women elected to the Legislature below 20% for Martha's whole lifetime.

On February 6, 2007 a nice group of women gathered in Calgary to discuss, in a nonpartisan way, how to get more women into politics. The sponsors were the [Famous Five Foundation](#), [Sheldon Chumir Foundation](#) and Winning Women so the focus was on solutions. While the discussion started with ideas about quotas and civics classes it quickly moved to some pretty radical stuff. Martha was *amused*. In the end the celebrity judge of the evening, Prof. Doreen Barrie from the University of Calgary, chose the most outstanding idea: **a women's strike**. That's right. A nice, staid group of women agreed to work on a women's strike to draw attention to the lack of female representation in elected office. (More than a few of the pearl-clad women were even heard saying it should be a **sex strike**!)

What would Doris Anderson say about a women's strike? Well, if we did it to press governments to adopt electoral reform then she would likely be darn pleased. After Doris Anderson left Chatelaine she wrote some books. And it was her research for the *The Unfinished Revolution* that turned her into a proportional representation proponent and founder of Fair Vote Canada.

Proportional Representation (PR) is simpler than it sounds. Every electoral system is a way of translating the votes into elected seats. Our current way, First-Past-The-Post is just like a horse race....whoever passes the post first wins. This means that if Candidate A gets 1 more vote than Candidate B he wins. Other systems of translating votes to seats exist. In fact, every democratic country that has been created since 1945 has chosen a system called proportional representation. The only major countries that still use our system are the US and the UK. And remarkably, the US, UK, and Canada have some of the worst rates of electing women. (Country rankings are at [IPU](#). Canada comes in 47th right after Pakistan but ahead of Serbia! The US is 67th and the UK is 52nd)

Proportional representation is better at getting women elected. Dr. Heather MacIvor, from the University of Windsor made a presentation to the Ontario Select Committee on Electoral Reform on Aug. 31, 2005 in which she concluded:

If you look at all the possible reasons why there would be more women in one Legislature than another—you look at culture, you look at socio-economic status, you look at the place of certain parties of particular ideological stripes, and so on—the **biggest single reason** there are more women in some national parliaments than there are in others **is the electoral system** used to choose those legislators—the single biggest!

Alberta has got to ditch our 19th Century electoral system in favor of PR. Doris Anderson tried for 50 years to get more women elected and eventually concluded that PR was the best chance. What Alberta needs to do is create a citizen's assembly, similar to the BC one that met a few years ago. That group could be charged with coming up with an electoral system that meets our current needs.

Please join Martha in writing to Premier Ed Stelmach and asking him to set up a citizen's assembly to explore electoral systems in Alberta. Doris Anderson would be proud of us. And Britney and her lot might get pushed off the front pages of women's magazines that rush to profile all the newly elected women!

Copy the following into a new email (or write your own letter) and mail it to:
premier@gov.ab.ca, cardston.taberwarner@assembly.ab.ca,
edmonton.riverview@assembly.ab.ca, ND@assembly.ab.ca,
marthasmonthly@yahoo.ca

Premier Ed Stelmach
Alberta Legislature

March 8, 2007

Dear Premier Stelmach:

Today is International Women's Day and I, along with many other Marthas of Martha's Monthly, wish to draw your attention to the woeful lack of women in elected office in Alberta. I do not think that women holding 16% of the seats in the Legislature is reasonable or equitable. Women make up 51% of the Alberta population and while we have been patient that eventually we will win more seats, it is apparent that if we keep waiting it will be another century before we get close to equal representation.

The biggest problem is our outdated electoral system. In countries with proportional representation women run for office and get elected at much better rates. I call on you to convene a citizen's assembly, similar to the one in BC a few years ago, that is charged with developing an electoral system for Alberta for the 21st Century.

I know that one of your goals is to change the way politics is done in Alberta. Changing the electoral system would be a way to make significant change and lead the country in electing women.

I await your response.

Sincerely,

Your name and address