

Women and electoral politics: the Canadian federal elections of 1993

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The Canadian federal elections of October 25, 1993 were distinguished by an unprecedented presence of women in the electoral process. The results, however, were uneven. While two parties that were led by women for the first time in Canadian history suffered a crushing, historic defeat on election day,¹ the number of female candidates elected to Parliament was higher than ever before.²

This situation raises a number of questions regarding women's role in electoral politics: how did other party leaders, the media and the electorate respond to the fact that two major parties were led by women? What role will a relatively large number of

female Members of Parliament play in the future government? Does women's presence in election campaigns and in Parliament facilitate the discussion of women's issues and the achievement of gender equality in Canadian society at large?

The purpose of this article is to answer some of these questions. I will focus on the dramatic defeat of one of the two parties led by women, the PCP, and argue that Campbell was obliged to run her campaign under very difficult circumstances, despite the image-building crusade she undertook during the summer of 1993.

The real story behind the defeat of the PCP under Campbell's leadership is that the party had little chance of

reelection after nine years of failed attempts to reduce the deficit and reconcile Quebec nationalism with federalism, and two years of recession and high unemployment. As at other moments in Canadian history, a woman was given leadership of a major party when its possibilities for winning were minimal and a new image was required.

Kim Campbell's election campaign

The election of Kim Campbell as the leader of the PCP in June of 1993 made her the first woman prime minister in Canadian history. But the task facing her was not easy. Brian Mulroney's administration had hit historic lows in opinion polls for several years, and he was personally disliked by many Canadians.

Campbell thus started a crusade to make the public forget Mulroney's nine-year administration. She spent the summer traveling across the country to meet voters informally and spread the message that the Conservative Party would be different under her leadership from what it had been under Mulroney.

"Her attempts at differentiating herself reaped success as polls showed her popularity, and that of her party, rising. By Labour Day [September 6], she was the two-to-one favorite for Prime Minister." The policies were a little shopworn, "but the Conservatives had a new image—that of a smart, energetic woman with quiet managerial skills—that

¹ These parties are the Progressive Conservative Party, led by Kim Campbell, and the New Democratic Party, led by Audrey McLaughlin. The number of parliamentary seats they hold fell from 169 in 1988 to 2 in 1993 and from 43 in 1988 to 9 in 1993, respectively.

² The number of female candidates in federal elections has grown consistently since 1980. In that year women accounted for 5 per cent of the total number of candidates running for the Progressive Conservative Party, 8.2 per cent for the Liberal Party and 11 per cent for the New Democratic Party. In 1984 the percentage rose to 8.2 per cent for the PCP, 16 per cent for the LP and 22.7 per cent for the NDP, while in 1988 it further increased to 12.5 per cent for the PCP, 17.3 per cent for the LP and 28.5 per cent for the NDP (Young, 1991:82). The number of female candidates increased once again in the 1993 elections: 23 per cent or 67 women running for the PCP; 22 per cent or 64 women running for the LP; 38 per cent or 113 women running for the NDP; 11 per cent or 23 running for the Reform Party; 13 per cent or 10 women running for the Bloc Québécois (*La Presse*, October 1, 1993). Accordingly, the number of women who were elected to Parliament in 1993 was higher than ever before: 54 of the female candidates will be going to the House of Commons, 16 more than in 1988. This number represents slightly less than 20 per cent of the 295 seats, and comes close to the "30 per cent critical mass"—that is, the point at which feminists believe "the number of women starts to significantly influence the operation of Parliament and raise issues of special interest to women high in the political agenda. The theory is based on European parliaments that have had a high proportion of women as members" (Makin: October 27, 1993).

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they thought would sell" (Campbell and Sallot: October 26, 1993).

Campbell called for a federal election in early September. Despite her summer crusade and a 36 per cent support rating in opinion polls,³ she started the campaign under difficult circumstances. Brian Mulroney had taken over the party in 1983 after a divisive leadership battle with Joe Clark, yet had a year to heal the wounds before heading into an election. In contrast, Campbell had little time to unify the party (Sallot: October 1, 1993).

She had become the leader of the PCP in opposition to Mulroney, who threw his support to Jean Charest. On taking office, Campbell refused to reach out to Charest, and Mulroney was forced to mediate. Campbell also turned to advisers in whom Mulroney had little confidence (Thorsell: October 27, 1993).

As a relative newcomer to the party, Campbell was unable to coordinate her election campaign adequately. She was unknown to some of the key people who surrounded her; even some members of her own campaign team hardly knew her. A Tory veteran who saw her up close said Campbell was "uncomfortable with some of the strategy that the campaign organization" had laid out for her, and that she lacked "Mulroney's instinctive understanding of why the advisers are proposing certain things to her." By the middle of the campaign, there were rumors of conflicts between the staff on the road and party headquarters (Sallot: October 1, 1993).

³ See Hugh Winsor, "Polls shows PCs, Liberals neck and neck. Campbell popularity key to rise in Tory support, Globe survey finds," in *The Globe and Mail*, September 16, 1993. The same survey showed that "even substantial numbers of people who plan to vote for other parties say she [Kim Campbell] would make the best Prime Minister. Among those are one-third of the Bloc Québécois supporters in Quebec, besides 16 per cent of Reform supporters and 16 per cent of Liberal supporters."

Campbell headed straight into an election with her personality as the party's major card, confident that it was sufficient to put her into office. As Mendelsohn suggests, these elections were distinguished by the contenders' reliance on leadership qualities rather than on values and competing visions of Canada. None of the issues raised—whether taxes, the deficit, or job creation—was as much of a key factor as the 1988 free-trade debate (Mendelsohn, quoted by Murray Campbell: October 7, 1993).

Campbell in particular emphasized image-building rather than debates over policies or social programs. As Frank Davey pointed out during the campaign, "In Kim Campbell's case, the dividing line between substantive issues and image projection is much less clear than it often is for a politician. She and her many images have themselves become campaign issues" (Frank Davey: September 16, 1993).

Campbell made the "politics of inclusion" or "new politics" an integral part of this image-building and the *leitmotif* of her campaign. Part of these new politics was her preference to meet with groups of voters and small crowds to answer questions rather than delivering rousing stump speeches or handing out daily policy statements. According to her, this style was both a lesson from the referendum campaign and a product of British Columbia (B.C.) politics, where "people are more frank. Saying what you think is not an unusual thing." In an interview with CKNW radio, she explained:

Far from being arrogant, it seems to me that my whole approach to public life, going back to being a school trustee and even now, the campaign that I'm conducting now as prime minister, is to go out and talk to people and listen to them.... I've been taking my campaign to what I call "the locations of the new Canadian reality" and it's

been perplexing for some people who are already committed to vote for you, coming out and waving their signs.... I've been going into factories, and into schools and into town hall meetings in unstructured, uncontrolled situations to try and show that... I believe this is a country that can survive and thrive. I see the strength of ordinary people who really understand what changes need to be made (Campbell quoted by Susan Delacourt: September 28, 1993).

Campbell also attempted to be seen as above the fray of old-style confrontations between candidates. By September 23, she had made no comments on the Liberals' economic program and leader, Jean Chrétien, apart from a few dismissive remarks about "pork-barrel politics" and "wheel-barrows of money." She never spoke of the other parties except when asked by journalists. By late September PCP strategists were urging her to do so. The issues were NAFTA, the goods and services tax and the Liberals' economic program. She argued that "any gains from those policies would be more than offset by increases in inflation and the deficit" (Ross Howard: September 23, 1993).

Campbell's new politics also meant avoiding promises—or giving too many details that could be interpreted as promises. Trust and directness were major themes in the early part of her campaign. But as Chrétien's strategists—as well as members of the Reform Party—believe, by relying on trust rather than details Campbell seriously weakened her chances of winning (Ross Howard: September 21, 1993).

She wanted people to believe that she would eliminate the deficit, although she did not provide details as to how this could be accomplished. She declared that job creation and economic recovery were unlikely to happen before the end of the century, given that 12 per cent of Canadians were

officially out of work. Her failure to give details on deficit reduction and job creation at a time of high unemployment and a huge federal deficit indicated that, despite her emphasis on new politics, she was not in touch with the reality many Canadians were living. For her, the important question was “how we practice politics”; talking about how many jobs she would create was “old politics” (Kim Campbell, quoted by Murray Campbell and Jeff Sallot: October 26, 1993).

Campbell realized too late that her personality and “new politics” were not enough to win. By late September, the Liberals were already five to seven points ahead in the polls. At that point Campbell dropped all references to “trust” with regard to her ability to overcome the deficit, and began not only discussing social and economic issues but attacking the Liberal program for economic recovery as well.

But the change in strategy only underlined the fact that Campbell could not separate herself from Mulroney’s legacy. She continued to emphasize deficit reduction and proved unable to link the issue of the deficit to job creation, social programs and economic recovery.⁴ Voters turned to Jean Chrétien, who —while portraying himself as fiscally prudent— did not make deficit reduction the central issue of his campaign; instead he emphasized the importance of job creation. Those frustrated with the Conservatives’ inability to reduce the deficit, in spite of high taxation and cutbacks in social programs, went for Preston Manning,

who had argued that the deficit could be eliminated in three years and offered a plan to do so.

There are several lessons to be learned from Campbell’s experience. Although —according to Shari Graydon, president of Media Watch (quoted by Murray Campbell: October 12, 1993)— Campbell was in the main judged by the same standards as Jean Chrétien, Preston Manning and Lucien Bouchard, and male party leaders put aside whatever discomfort they professed to feel about fighting female party leaders, the fact that she had to rely heavily on image-building is indicative of gender discrimination in Canadian politics.

As former Manitoba Liberal leader Sharon Carstairs told Campbell “woman to woman” well before Mulroney’s resignation, Campbell “would win the Tory leadership, lose the general election and then have the party turn against her because she could not do the impossible” (quoted by Murray Campbell: October 12, 1993).

It is not a new feature in Canadian politics for women to be placed at the head of parties that find themselves in bad shape and with little chances of winning. Historically, parties have turned to women for leadership when they are in trouble or in the “last stages of power.” Among such cases are the B.C. Social Credit Party, which turned to Rita Johnson in 1991, and the federal NDP, which chose Audrey McLaughlin in 1989 “because it needed a breakthrough to become really competitive.”

Kim Campbell was also elected in June 1993 to “erase the legacy of the Mulroney guys-in-suits era” of the federal PCP. According to Bashevkin, “the conditions under which women are seen to have potential for leadership are when the party is on the skids enormously, when the competitive status is vastly diminished or when the party was never in a competitive position” (Bashevkin quoted by Murray Campbell: October 12, 1993).

Still, it is hard to affirm that Campbell was a victim of male-dominated parties. First, she believed that she could win on her own, without the support of some her own party’s members. Otherwise she would not have made critical comments about Mulroney, Mazankowski and Charest in an interview with Montreal’s *La Presse* —comments that resulted in party tensions breaking into the open (*The Globe and Mail*, October 18, 1993).

Second, she alienated female voters by avoiding discussions of women’s issues regarding social programs such as day care (which the Liberals did discuss), and by failing to respond to the attacks on feminism made by members of the Reform Party. As Judy Rebick, ex-president of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, wrote in a letter to *The Globe and Mail*, Campbell had a chance to attract female voters with her politics of inclusion: “when she was behaving differently over the summer and when she was talking about being a woman Prime Minister and being a role model and bringing more women into politics, that is when her popularity soared.... If only she had done what she had promised” (*The Globe and Mail*, October 12, 1993).

Third and most importantly, Campbell did believe that politics was a friendly space for women. Despite her many remarks on the “loneliness” she felt in a male-dominated environment, Campbell was caught between the new image she was supposed to portray through a new politics of honesty, trust and consensus-building on the one hand, and the arrogance and lack of popularity of the party she represented on the other. Campbell is a liberal feminist who believed she could achieve anything she wanted to,⁵ in a world made by men, for men.

⁴ See Geoffrey York and Susan Delacourt, “Liberals outstrip Tories in polls,” *The Globe and Mail*, September 27, 1993. The authors believe that Campbell’s focus on deficit reduction hurt her campaign, at a time when 71 per cent of Canadians thought that job creation was more important than deficit reduction. Also, 71 per cent of Canadians did not believe that Campbell could fulfill her pledge to eliminate the deficit in five years, and two-thirds were convinced that she would continue Mulroney’s policies.

⁵ During her campaign, Campbell loved to tell the story of a little girl who shook her hand as her mother said: “Now you can be anything you want.”

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