A staples analysis of women's political leadership

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Introduction

Harold Innis's foundational text *The fur trade in Canada: An introduction to Canadian economic history* introduced the concept that "the trade in staples … has been responsible for various peculiar tendencies in Canadian development" (1956, 401). Innis held that our economic development, our financial institutions, and our major corporations, are all products of our export markets in staple commodities. He also argued that our government institutions were shaped by their role in the development of staples industries. Innis surely never intended his thesis to relate to women's empowerment, but my empirical research on women's leadership suggests that there is indeed a linkage, and that one of Canada's "various peculiar tendencies" has been its inability to get greater numbers of women elected to public office, particularly outside the big cities.

At both the national and provincial levels of government, the proportion of elected seats held by women has levelled out at around 21 per cent. For example, the proportion of women elected to the House of Commons has not substantially increased since 1993 when we saw a jump from 13 to 18 per cent (Trimble and Arscott 2003). While many people are now aware that the earlier shift toward gender parity has stalled, fewer people appreciate just how much the overall numbers of women elected have been held back by an extreme dearth everywhere outside the large cities. Metropolitan centres across Canada have made great strides since the 1970s in sending more women to the House of Commons and to provincial legislatures. Proportions of seats held by women in urban metropolitan districts are now typically near or above the 30 per cent range. The same cannot be said about districts outside the big cities, where the percentage of women elected continues to languish in the low teens – less than half the urban metropolitan levels (Carbert 2005a). Considering that this distinction divides the federal ridings roughly into two equal halves,[1] it is fair to say that the dearth of women elected outside the big cities has played a major role in limiting the total number of women in the House of Commons. The same holds true in the provincial legislatures (Carbert 2006; Matland and Studlar 1998; Moncrief and Thompson 1991). These analyses show that this dearth is a robust, enduring electoral pattern that stands separately from, and in addition to, regional and partisan effects. As such it poses a distinct challenge to achieving further substantial increases in the numbers of women elected in the near future. The problem lies not with voter hostility to women, but rather the small numbers of female candidates who are nominated for winnable seats – the result of the recruitment and nomination processes.

While the dearth of women elected extends throughout the districts outside the big cities, it is most pronounced in the most sparsely populated, highly rural areas. It is here, where the problem is most conspicuous, that I conducted empirical research on women's leadership. Between 2000 and 2003, I interviewed more than 200 rural women leaders in two very different regions – Atlantic Canada and the western provinces – about their experiences and perceptions of leadership, public life, and running for elected office.[2] This hands-on inquiry went directly to the types of women who could be included in the pool of potential candidates – well employed, well-educated women with reputations for being active in civic life – but who, for the most part, are not running for elected office. The fact that I was able to find and interview these women as easily as I did indicates that there are sufficient numbers of potential candidates to support substantial increases in the numbers of women elected.

It is sometimes presumed that people in rural areas are less enlightened in regard to gender equality, so that a dearth of women in positions of power can be attributed to lower education levels, the absence of organized women's movement, and so forth (e.g. Matland and Studlar 1998). The comments of the women whom I interviewed did not support this presumption. They did speak of local elites' resistance to women's political ambitions, but they did not frame it in terms of old-fashioned sexism or ignorance. Rather, they described quite rational reasons for why a riding association would want to keep things the way they have been, and preferably with the same candidate as before. Just as importantly, an alarming majority of interviewees articulated their own strong reluctance to stand for elected office. This reluctance was not typically linked to competing family responsibilities, or traditional gender roles. More commonly these women cited the dangers of partisan affiliation to their careers, or to the family's business. Additionally, the interviews revealed a pervasive and deeply held disdain for political practises in their local environment. Many women leaders have turned up their noses at the idea of running for elected office in a system of which they disapprove, in which they see short-term interests of a few being traded against long-term community viability.

Much of the community resistance, and much of women's reluctance, comes down to the detailed relationship between a political representative and the constituents in rural areas. As the interviews progressed, it became increasingly clear that a rural politician's role is perceived very differently from that in an urban metropolitan setting. The comments of these women leaders showed how the unstable and fragile economic environment that accompanies a lack of industrial diversification leads people to have heightened expectations for their political representatives. Their descriptions of these expectations, and their rationalizations of how politicians react, resonate with longstanding traditions of Canadian political economy pioneered by Harold Innis. This paper dust offs Innis's staples thesis, and polishes it up for the contemporary purpose of understanding more about women's leadership.[3] While the empirical base of my interviews is restricted to the more rural end of the spectrum, we will see that the analysis applies more generally, to much of Canada outside the major centres.

Women's leadership in resource-reliant areas

The economies of rural Canada have historically been, and continue to be, characterized by resource-extraction industries. Manufacturing in particular has declined precipitously throughout the past century. While resource-extraction industries continue to prosper and generate a substantial share of Canada's economic activity, technological innovation has resulted in greatly reduced employment levels over time, thus contributing to a secular process of urbanization and rural depopulation. Resource-extraction industries also produce primarily for export to global markets whose business cycles can fluctuate unpredictably; thus profit and production fluctuate accordingly. The economies of most rural areas are dominated by one such industry.

Looking beyond the strictly rural, much of Canada outside the major centres features similar resource reliance. Statistics Canada data on economic activities shows that despite the commonly held notion that we are in a post-industrial era, much of the Canadian economy – especially that portion located outside the big cities – still relies on resource-based economic activities. Natural Resources Canada uses a measure of "resource reliance" to map the relative importance of a resource sector in terms of employment income directly generated by their exploitation, processing and distribution (2007). The resource economy refers to the production and initial processing of five types of natural resources: agriculture, energy, fisheries, forestry, and mining.[4] Most of the resource-reliant communities are relatively small. At the 30 per cent reliance level, only five have more than 100,000 people, and only two communities with a population of more than 200,000. There are a further 84 communities that would be considered small or medium-sized cities, with between 10,000 and 100,000 people; and a great number with lower populations. Most of the smaller communities in the list have reliance levels over 50 per cent, and in some cases, more than 80 per cent. Calgary, with a million people, is the largest resource-reliant community, and its reliance level is only 46 per cent, which suggests a somewhat diversified economy. Natural Resources Canada produces maps showing the distribution of resource-reliant communities across the country, and the pattern is visually striking. The locations of resource-reliant communities correspond very closely to where women are not being elected to public office.

Single-commodity resource reliance makes communities particularly vulnerable to ecological crises, such as the collapse of the cod fishery in the early 1990s. Donald Savoie predicted that, "in future the split between the `haves' and the `less developed' regions will likely be more between urban and rural areas than between Atlantic Canada and Ontario. That is the nature of the new economy" (1997, 50). A more nuanced approach to the national scene would also include distinctions among resource-reliant communities, by considering differences in their specific industrial structures. Savoie's generalization was published near the end of a long-term commodity bear market that impacted many resource-extraction industries, at the same time that others, such as the cod and salmon fisheries, were devastated by ecological disasters. Hence in the late 1990s, few resource-reliant communities anywhere in Canada were thriving.

More recently, some resource industries, such as energy and base-metals mining, have rebounded sharply (Coxe 2003), while others, such as fishing, and pulp and paper, have continued to languish. Consequently, some areas are experiencing economic booms. For example, Fort St. John, British Columbia saw a surge of investment after a substantial natural gas discovery nearby in 2000 coincided with soaring prices for that

commodity. Continued growth in this industry has led to severe local labour shortages (Nikiforuk 2003, Jaremko 2005). At the same time, Prince Rupert, British Columbia, whose economy relies heavily on salmon fishing and pulp and paper, has fallen on hard times. The collapse of the fishery and the mill closure in 2001 has resulted in a population decrease from 17,000 in the late 1990s to 13,000 in 2004 (Greenwood 2005). Similarly, Stephenville, Newfoundland, whose economy depends on fishing and pulp, has fallen on hard times. As a general rule, Atlantic Canada features less variability from one area to another, than is the case in other regions (Alasia 1996).

For our present purpose, the crucial issue is how governments and politicians interact with these economic structures. Harold Innis observed that one of the peculiar features of Canadian development has been the role of government in the country's economic growth, as a result of its dependency on the extraction of staples from the remote hinterland, and their export to the manufacturing heartland located in either the St. Lawrence River basin, and / or centres overseas (1956, 400). On the basis of his examination of the range of staple industries that have dominated Canada's economic development at one time or another – fish, fur, forestry, grain, and mining – and in conjunction with their distinct relationship to centralized institutions of finance capital, Innis observed the guiding hand of government throughout. As a result, he decided, "the Canadian government has a closer relation to economic activities than most governments" (1956, 401).

Prior to the 1980s, public policy throughout Canada had been focused on large-scale industrial projects. Public investments in the coal mines and steel manufacturing corporations of Cape Breton are familiar examples of this industrial strategy. With large sums of money directed to a few ventures, relatively few people were involved in economic development, and the policy process was centralized in Ottawa and the provincial capitals, with a few key players from Cabinet and the private sector.

The advent of neo-conservatism in the 1980s brought a shift away from nationalization as an industrial strategy throughout the western world. Accordingly, governments across Canada began to privatize public corporations, while pulling back on public-sector investment in large-scale industrial ventures. A new appreciation emerged for wealth creation through entrepreneurship and small-business formation, and for the local context in which business operates. In contrast to hard industrial development, a new "soft" approach identified a community's levels of social and human capital as important elements in whether economic-development initiatives would succeed (Diochon 2003; House 1999; Savoie 2000). Investment funds were increasingly allocated to a multitude of small players who were dispersed geographically. One net effect was to democratise the elite networks, as the "fixers" responsible for the allocation of funds were further down the pipeline. Another important effect of decentralization was to make economic development more amenable to the non-metropolitan focus that emerged. These changes have brought about the present form of what may be described as the public-sector economic development industry.

Economic-development policy has been subjected to considerable criticism from the right. For example, it is not unusual for economists to claim that Atlantic Canada is more rural than the rest of Canada precisely as a result of development policies which created, or at least perpetuated, the region's traditional way of life (McMahon 2000, 126-43). A similar argument was used by Michael Rushton to warn against unwarranted public investment in declining industries in rural Saskatchewan (2003, 152).

It may also be futile for governments to guess how to intervene effectively, since commodity markets and prices are determined by unpredictable global forces. On the back page of *Policy Options,* Todd Hirsch pondered the impact of pipelines, aluminum smelters, and gold mines in northwestern British Columbia:

> How can you plan for the future when you have very little idea what that future will look like? Worse yet, how can you steer your economic destiny when you have so little control over the eventual outcomes? Decisions are made in boardrooms in Calgary and Montreal. Battles are fought in Ottawa and Victoria. What can regional planners do but throw up their hands and hope for the best? The uncertainty around commodity prices and corporate decisions is making things tough for planners, but that is all part of being a resource-based economy. Coping with the "not knowing" and lack of control over your destiny is part of what defines many parts of the West (2007, 80).

Despite these deep uncertainties and criticisms from the right, governments are not about to abandon economic development initiatives outside the major centres. So long as economic fluctuations and geographic disparities continue to exist, there will be a need for governments to facilitate and moderate the bumpy and often painful transitions. In addition to solid economic reasons for addressing such cleavages, Savoie presents a pragmatic consideration: "Politicians will never buy fully into the neo-conservative agenda. Politicians will wish to intervene and we all have a responsibility to assist them in defining the best possible measures" (1997, 59). Hence we can expect the public-sector economic development industry to remain with us for the foreseeable future.

My interviews revealed a profound connection between these government programs and women's leadership. Some of the most strongly articulated deterrents to electoral aspirations among the interviewees concerned the interaction between politics and the economic-development industry, in its current form. Interviewees at one meeting after another described, and invariably expressed disdain for, past and ongoing forms of patronage – the giving of employment, grants, contracts and other government perquisites on the basis of partisan affiliation. There was a broad consensus among interviewees that they would not make moral concessions to perpetuate what they perceived as an unfair and dysfunctional system.

Interviewees especially disapproved of direct intervention by elected officials in the allocation of public funds, a practise which was alleged by knowledgeable insiders to occur regularly in some of the communities in which interviews were carried out. A variety of models have been proposed in the literature for the role of a Canadian Member of Parliament or provincial legislature in the administration of government initiatives in their ridings. Savoie stated flatly that there is no role, beyond holding the government accountable by asking probing questions (1997, 125). His position is closest to the consensus view of the interviewees. Others are less scrupulous. House reported from Newfoundland that politicians "wanted to re-assert their control over the allocation of economic development funds" (1999, 193). Allan Gregg proposed that the elected Member be "chief operating officer for the District, administering and overseeing government policy and programs" (2004, 29). David Good, former Assistant Deputy Minister of HRDC, reported that in each Canadian district, the local Member typically has an informal advisory role to the Minister's Office on the selection of labour-force development projects (2003, 140). Considering that non-metropolitan election

campaigns often hinge on local economic development issues, one could argue that it would be unrealistic to expect the successful candidate to take a completely hands-off approach once elected. Anthony Sayers described how the 1988 national election campaign in British Columbia featured much more of a local economic focus outside, as compared to within, the major centre of Vancouver (1999, 34, 112).

Will the system evolve into a form that women leaders can feel more comfortable working within? There is ample evidence that Canada has already come part-way in reducing discretion in the allocation of public funds. Much of the change occurred when the expenditure of public funds became formally institutionalised in government bureaucracies, especially for universal social programs. Nevertheless, James Bickerton has documented how much of the traditional system of politics has remained, at least in Atlantic Canada:

> But in the context of continuing regional economic weakness and dependence, government spending and transfers of all sorts provided the material basis for the continuation of quasi-traditional political regimes, with bureaucratic clientelism and transfer dependency superseding (but not totally displacing) traditional forms of patronage politics. The role of elite networks and political "fixers" did not disappear, nor the importance of patron-client relations (1994, 445).

In Bickerton's view, Ottawa reproduces essential elements of the old patron-client system through new programs.

Moreover, there may be a hard limit to progress in small communities. David Siegel outlined obstacles to change that result directly from the structures of governance in sparsely populated areas:

> Small towns are, well, small. The "hands-on" nature of decision-making means that small-town politicians are more likely to find themselves in situations where they are called upon to make decisions that transparently affect themselves, their families, or their friends (or enemies). This situation personalizes decisions in small towns. When a municipal council is making decisions, it is frequently very clear which individuals and groups will benefit from a decision (1994, 218-19).

It is difficult to see how politics could ever become as formalized as in large cities. There are simply too few people to sit in elected positions, operate the partisan institutions, and administer economic / labour force development organizations without overlapping membership or conflicts of interest.

The ongoing role of a non-metropolitan politician as patron to dependent-client electorate was eloquently articulated, in a blunt quip by former Prime Minister Jean Chrétien in 2002. His Solicitor General, Lawrence MacAulay, had come under fire for lobbying the RCMP to approve a $3.5M grant to a group led by Holland College in his province of PEI. In response to Opposition accusations of conflict of interest, and comparisons to Chrétien's own lobbying of the Business Development Bank of Canada on behalf of the owner of a hotel in his riding of Shawinigan, Chrétien said, "Do you want us to be eunuchs in our jobs? We have to do our jobs."[5] Chrétien's comment is remarkably pithy, and his choice of metaphor speaks volumes about gender stereotypes in what is expected of a politician. For a politician to be deprived of the ability to channel wealth back to the riding is to be castrated. Chrétien thus equated being a patron with being a man.

Such displays of patron machismo are not restricted to the Liberal Party. Soon after the Conservative Party formed the national government in 2006, Peter McKay (Regional Minister for the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency) gleefully announced $2.5M in Atlantic Innovation Funds to an enthusiastic audience in Sydney, Nova Scotia: "ACOA, I want to tell you, is here to stay - and it's here to pay" (MacVicar 2006, D1). His tone evokes an image of a big spender picking up the tab at an expensive restaurant. Few women politicians would likely be comfortable speaking publicly with such bluster or bravado.

On several occasions, I put the question directly to my interviewees: why couldn't women play the patronage game just as men do? Participants invariably scoffed at the suggestion, and expressed moral disapproval of the political fray. Yet it is important to keep in mind that men have moral scruples too. For example, Norman Spector, former President of ACOA and deputy minister, wrote a column deploring former minister Lawrence MacAulay's insistence that he "not simply present cheques, but also be the first to inform clients whose projects had been approved by ACOA" (2002, A23). As another example, one interviewee claimed that her husband, a municipal politician, had refused to accept all campaign donations, and had repeatedly declined to run at the provincial level because of his perception of the expectations that would be incumbent on him in return for accepting political donations.

Hence disdain for the political fray is widespread among both men and women. Fortunately, the political system does not require that everyone feel comfortable dealing with the partisan and economic realities of the job; only a fairly small number is required. But those few individuals are crucial. Reluctance to take on what is expected of politicians in non-metropolitan districts evidently whittles down both the male and female sub-pools of potential candidates, relative to urban metropolitan districts. Clearly though, there still remain sufficient numbers of willing men to fill the available spots. In many cases, the smaller pool of qualified women leaders is effectively whittled down to zero members who are willing to stand as candidates. A program of increased recruitment of women would be difficult to carry out in the face of pervasive negativity. The fact that my interviews found such uniform unwillingness to embrace the moral ambiguities of being a patron - after seeking out and interviewing individuals of all partisan stripes and levels of responsibility - bodes ill for any imminent increase in the participation of women in electoral politics in economically distressed areas.

Realistically, some women will always be deterred by the moral ambiguities of administering public resources under such intimate circumstances. But there is, of course, a distribution of attitudes. It seems likely that there is room to change enough to suit some qualified women. The present results suggest that a more tightly regulated system with a bit more distance between the decision-making process and the affected constituents would offer more electoral opportunities for women.

This is not to say that disdain for the political fray is uniform everywhere outside the big cities. To be sure, patronage practises abound everywhere, and are particularly noticeable in small towns. But this does not mean that local politics are always best understood in those terms. One needs to ask the question: how much importance is attached to local patronage practises? In part, it depends on how dominant a role the public sector plays in the local economy. In more prosperous towns with thriving private-sector economies, public-sector transfers and expenditures typically form a proportionally smaller component of the economy than in economically distressed areas.

Hence there is less scope for a politician to assume the role of a patron of dependent clients. Even though individual politicians do dispense patronage, the dollars at their disposal make less of a splash, when measured against more affluent living standards and the relatively larger pool of private-sector economic activity. We might pose a question here, by way of analogy to the proverbial tree falling in the forest. If a regional minister announces economic development funds in Grande Prairie, is anybody listening?

The relative importance of public-sector expenditures also affects how desirable elected office is perceived to be. This impacts a woman's chances of getting the job; even assuming that she wants it. Men have historically dominated positions of prestige and responsibility in most fields of endeavour, and this tendency persists. In politics, it has become a truism that the relative importance of an elected office determines (inversely) the likelihood of it being held by a woman. This tendency is often summarized in terms of a familiar rule about women in electoral politics: "the higher, the fewer" (Bashevkin 1985, 53). The presumption behind this characterization is that higher levels of office hold more power and prestige. At first glance, this rule might seem at odds with the low proportions of women elected in non-metropolitan districts. These ridings are not particularly powerful at either the provincial or national levels. Naïve application of "the higher, the fewer" would lead us to expect more, not fewer, women to be elected there, especially if they did not hold a Cabinet position.[6]

But that expectation ignores the local context for politicians within their own electoral districts. As noted by Bickerton, in circumstances where the private sector falls short in securing wealth, "politics, *in all its forms*, takes on greater import" (1990, 330). In economically distressed areas, elected representatives hold positions of considerable power and prestige, by virtue of their influence over a substantial proportion of the overall local economy, as well as their *relatively* high salaries. Of course, MPs and MLAs in major urban centres earn the same salaries, and the local economies in their ridings are often just as reliant on public-sector expenditures. However, those same salaries are less impressive when compared to local private-sector salaries, particularly at the professional level. Also, the representative of a metropolitan district is usually perceived to have relatively less influence over the size and allocation of public expenditures there.[7]

Hence in the present context, it might make more sense to restate the rule more precisely as "the higher the status within the local environment, the fewer." Outside the big cities, we would expect this status to vary quite a lot. In most prairie farm towns, the salary of an MLA or MP would be just as prestigious as in a typical rural Atlantic town; less so in more prosperous farm communities in southern Ontario; and even less relatively prestigious in a rapidly expanding resource town with a thriving private-sector economy. Similar patterns hold outside Canada as well. Based on their work on the dearth of women in southern United States legislatures, David Lublin and Sarah Brewer came to their own version of the restated rule above: "Women are most likely to win public offices in areas where men do not want the jobs" (2003, 391).[8]

A community's openness to change is also crucial to the chances of a woman being nominated as a candidate, and this too depends on what a politician's role is perceived to be. My interviews in Atlantic Canada in particular revealed a number of conventions that seemed surprisingly old fashioned and ritualised. One of the most important manifestations is a preference for recruiting candidates for elected office from particular

families that had produced politicians in previous generations. Deference to incumbents and leading families can be a convenient way to avoid open feuds arising from excessive competition. It can also help to maintain a consistent flow of jobs and development funds, if those leading families can be counted on to draw on their experience and political networks to that end. According to Savoie,

> In areas of economic distress . . . there is an urgent need to focus energy and resources on designing and building local organizations and institutions and on finding ways to generate new economic activities. The effect of intercommunity rivalries is to consume energy precisely at the wrong time, in the wrong place, and on the wrong issues (2000, 119).

Sharing high regard for incumbents and established family names among electoral candidates can be viewed as a strategy to avoid such destructive rivalries. Its pervasiveness helps to explain high incumbency rates, for example in Atlantic Canada, where it is common for sons to inherit their father's seat (Stewart 2002). These conventions contribute to a lower probability of women being nominated and elected. But it is important to recognize that they depend on multi-generational population stability. In a town featuring rapid population growth and high transience, many people would have arrived only recently, and many live far from their extended families. Hence there would be less opportunity for leading families to maintain their prestige within the public life of newer and less stable communities.

We have encountered a number of important distinctions among different resource-dependent communities – depending on whether their main industries are languishing or thriving – which affect both women's willingness to run, and their community's openness to change. The present analysis suggests that the perceived role of a politician in economically distressed areas is less amenable to women, as compared to those where private industry is thriving. In this light it is interesting to look at a high-profile example of a woman who holds an elected position carrying considerable power in a non-metropolitan community with a thriving resource-dependent economy.

Fort McMurray, Alberta is perhaps the most well known example of a community that is "solely (80 – 100 per cent) resource-reliant" (Natural Resources Canada 2007). In recent decades it has grown along with the local oil-sands industry, and is now a medium-sized city with population over 60,000. The municipality has been re-named Wood Buffalo. In 2004, Melissa Blake "thoroughly trounced" the incumbent to win the mayor's office, after serving two terms as councillor. She was 35 years old when she became mayor. Blake had moved to Fort McMurray with her parents when she was twelve years old, so she had no family reputation to precede her. Prior to entering public life, Blake had worked in human resources at Syncrude (Gibson 2005).

At first glance, Blake's description of her job as mayor seems to share some features with what has been described above as that of a traditional patron-politician. Municipal property tax revenues cannot keep up with the rapidly growing demands of a burgeoning population, and she puts a great deal of effort into obtaining revenues from the province and federal government to pay for community infrastructure – hospitals, schools, water treatment plants, recreational facilities, and affordable housing – which she claims to require a two-billion dollar infusion. However there are crucial differences in her acquisitiveness. For one thing, a substantial portion of the province's revenues is from royalties on the oil-sands industry in Wood Buffalo. Blake sees the provincial funds paid to her municipality simply as a proper deployment of a share of those revenues. Another feature that distinguishes her role from that of a patron is that her council uses those

funds to build infrastructure, not to invest directly in industry, much less to "divvy out" jobs for their own sake (a practise singled out for criticism by some interviewees). She is not seeking funds to fuel, or even to act as a catalyst for, the local economy, as the main economic engine of the area chugs along on its own. She is more likely to seek contributions *from* the private sector than to provide funds to it. In fact, she tries to keep local industry from growing too fast. Her overarching concern is to try to maintain a dynamic balance between the growth rates of the population and the level of community services – a difficult juggling act in the current economy. Evidently Fort McMurray's elites feel comfortable with a woman taking on this role.

Blake seems to be eminently recruitable for legislative office. When asked about her ambitions, she coyly replied: "I haven't had aspirations beyond the municipal level, but find myself increasingly aware of what I expect from our MLA and MP, and wonder about the most effective way of making a difference for our region" (Arnott 2007, 26). Granted that she is willing, does she stand a chance of being elected, and not just running lost-cause candidacies in perpetuity? Blake's outlook and policies appear to be compatible with the provincial PC Party, or the Conservative Party of Canada, both of which garner majority support in non-metropolitan districts in the west. When asked whom she most admired, she cited Eric Newell, former Syncrude CEO and long-time conservative, and Ralph Klein, former Premier of Alberta (Gibson 2005).

It seems notable that Blake came out of the private sector. Most of the women whom I interviewed worked in the public sector. In many non-metropolitan communities, this is the only option for well-educated, ambitious women. Public-sector employment was found to be something of a double-edged sword in regard to women's leadership. The skills, networks, and financial security acquired in these jobs empower women to take on leadership roles. At the same time, these roles are limited by a conventional prohibition against the public participation in politics by people employed in the public sector – whether directly as government employees or indirectly as contracted-out service providers. While this prohibition has become less formalized than in the past, the interviews revealed that its remnants continue to deter many of the most qualified women from running for elected office. The ideal of impartiality remains deeply entrenched within the public service. To many government employees, taking a public stand on partisan or contested civic issues would feel like a violation of the professional ethos of their workplace. To an even greater degree, public-sector entrepreneurs constantly worry about not having contracts renewed, and are quite aware of the attitudes toward open displays of partisanship within the public service, where those contract decisions are made.

One public-sector occupation seems particularly well suited to grooming candidates for public office. Women professionally employed in the economic-development industry have acquired positions of considerable responsibility that were not available until recently. They are the people in the field implementing the development agendas designed at the centre (House 1999, 192). In addition to their access to funds, economic developers are important people because they acquire a range of networks and contacts that are beyond the reach of most people. In my interviews, economic development professionals consistently stood out as sophisticated and knowledgeable insiders. These women seemed particularly well qualified to stand as candidates for public office.[9] However, most of them expressed much of the same disillusionment with public life as the other women leaders. Their positions had brought them into close proximity to the interface between politics and the local economy, and they did not always like what they

saw. Hence we have the paradox that the advent of the economic development industry has created a cadre of specially qualified women leaders, and has helped them to get their foot in the door of electoral politics; yet their experience in that same industry has made them reluctant to walk through the door. On the bright side, any efforts to clean up the political interface could be expected to have a particularly favourable impact on these most likely potential candidates. Indeed, in western Canada, where development funds are seen as less crucial for month-to-month sustenance, some economic development professionals whom I interviewed seemed keener to run for elected office.

Amidst all of the challenges for women leaders in economically distressed areas, one feature might be expected to nurture their political candidacy – high levels of civic engagement. The women that I interviewed had carried out a great deal of unpaid work for voluntary organizations, and also substantial work for nominal pay as appointees on government boards and commissions. In declining towns, much of this work involves strategies to cope with the economic challenges of de-industrialization while trying to keep existing public infrastructure – libraries, museums, arenas, cemeteries, and so forth – from falling into decay. These efforts are reinforced by longstanding ties of family and friendship in much of Atlantic Canada, in farm communities in Ontario, and in some of the older towns in the agricultural belt of the southern prairies. On the face of it, the opportunity to build skills and networks through volunteering should be expected to act as stepping-stones to elected office. But clearly this equation has not operated effectively. Comments made during the interviews spoke to a general sense of disarray and apathy in people's lives. It is one thing to spend a lifetime working to establish the community infrastructure for grandchildren to enjoy, and it is quite another to preside over the decline of that infrastructure as grandchildren grow up far away, leaving abandoned buildings and a ghost town in the making. It takes more than social capital to bring the mines or the fisheries back into production.

Conversely quite different patterns of volunteering arise in rapidly growing towns with thriving resource economies. Transient, young populations tend to have lower civic expectations and less affinity to the community; hence lower overall levels of volunteering. On the other hand, those who do volunteer may be more likely to see their efforts meet with success, and to come away with a feeling of having accomplished something lasting, worthwhile, and recognized by others. As a concrete example, building a new sports complex to service a growing number of children tends to garner more widespread appreciation than keeping a mouldering museum from closing, or maintaining an old cemetery, for another year or two. It is tempting to imagine that the flush of success following such an effort might energize those involved to take on more ambitious projects, including elected office.

Practical implications

The results and interpretations presented here help to address practical questions about prospects for change in women's leadership outside the large cities, and what steps might be taken by interested stakeholders to hasten change. There have recently been a series of initiatives across the country to promote women's candidacy. To mention only a few - the Federation of Canadian Municipalities has embarked on a long-term project to promote women's election at the municipal level. Its work has sparked follow-up projects in several provinces, in conjunction with provincial municipal organizations. This past winter, Alberta Municipal Affairs organized a "Be on the Ballot" event. Nova Scotia has mounted a Campaign School for Women three times now. Equal Voice is a prominent, multi-partisan, national advocacy group that operates the On-line Campaign School.

Logically, the most efficient way to increase the proportion of women elected is to go directly to where the dearth is greatest – that is, outside the metropolitan centres. After all, some of the biggest cities have already come a good deal of the way toward gender parity in elected office. Our staples analysis has, in large part, focused on how the role of a non-metropolitan politician is perceived by local elites, by potential candidates, and by communities at large. The relationship between politician and electorate is very different in a resource-reliant non-metropolitan community from that in an urban metropolitan centre featuring a diversified economy. Interview results in the Atlantic region and in the western provinces show that this relationship has profound implications for women leaders' reluctance to stand for elected office, as well as for local elites' resistance to change when it comes to recruitment and selection. The many factors that reinforce the reluctance and resistance constitute a formidable barrier that has made the dearth of women elected outside the major centres such a pervasive and enduring pattern. Overcoming this barrier uniformly throughout non-metropolitan Canada might practically be viewed as a long-term goal, requiring major systemic change.

Nevertheless, we have examined reasons why some of these prohibitive factors may be mitigated, in particular places and times, by a prolonged resurgence of the dominant local industry. When public-sector expenditures are relatively less important compared to private-sector activity, community expectations of a representative become less heightened. A politician's job may come to resemble less of a patron, and more of a trustee or administrator. Women leaders would likely be more eager to take on this sort of role. Local elites might view it as less of a stereotypically masculine role. To them, it might be less important for incumbent politicians to remain in office, and for their successors to be drawn from prominent political families who have longstanding ties and networks. In any case, an influx of newcomers tends to disrupt established local hierarchies, and so the idea of a "leading family" may diminish in importance. When the economy is doing well, opportunities open up for educated women in the private sector, and promising women candidates could be recruited from the private sector, thus escaping the public-service prohibition on partisanship. And when prospective women leaders are cutting their teeth on volunteer projects in a growing community, their efforts are more likely to meet with success and appreciation. Finally, if the job of a politician were not quite as powerful and prestigious, relative to other jobs available locally, an ambitious woman might be more likely to actually win.

All this leads us to speculate that growing resource communities with thriving economies may present opportunities for a motivated political party to break through the stubborn pattern of low numbers of female candidates in non-metropolitan districts. Among parties

that have attracted substantial support outside the major centres, the Liberal Party of Canada could be described as motivated. For example, immediately after winning the 2006 Liberal Party leadership convention, Stephane Dion committed to having women make up at least one-third of his party's slate in the next election, and did not rule out using his power as leader to appoint women as candidates in winnable ridings (Taber 2006). This is by no means a new initiative for that party, as Paul Martin and Jean Chrétien before him declared similar intentions. The Liberals have enjoyed considerable success in recruiting women candidates in urban metropolitan districts, but not outside the big cities to date. Some non-metropolitan districts in Ontario where they have electoral support fit the above description as likely opportunities for adding women candidates, assuming that Dion can overcome local resistance by riding associations (Carty and Eagles 2005).

Other parties that are committed to women's empowerment seem less well positioned to benefit from the present analysis. The NDP slate has included substantial numbers of women candidates in both rural and urban districts over recent elections. However, that party has not yet attracted broad support outside the big cities. In Quebec, both the Parti Québecois and Bloc Québecois have made great strides in nominating and electing significant numbers of women, both within the big cities and outside (though it should be noted that their urban metropolitan numbers are still much larger). At present, however, both are experiencing weakness in their base of support. Furthermore, not many non-metropolitan areas in Quebec have expanding economies.

Perhaps unfortunately, it is the less-motivated parties that seem best positioned to benefit from the present analysis. Given the current economic environment, it is safe to say that many of the non-metropolitan communities with thriving resource-reliant economies are in the western provinces. This is the heartland of support for the Conservative Party of Canada, and its conservative provincial counterparts. These are the parties that have been least favourable to the idea of proactively increasing women's candidacy. The present study suggests that if conservatives were to change their stance on this issue, they might have an easier time than other parties in adding women legislators in districts outside the big cities.[10] In terms that they might appreciate, we could say that when it comes to women's candidacy for elected office outside the big cities, it is now up to the Conservatives to carry the puck out of their own end, and take a shot.

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1. Some readers may find it difficult to square this 50 / 50 split of federal districts with the well known Census fact from Statistics Canada that four-fifths of Canadians live in urban settings, and only one fifth rural. Simply put, within the 80 per cent urban portion, large numbers of Canadians live in towns with populations between 1000 and 10,000, and small- and medium-sized cities such as Quesnel, Moose Jaw, Owen Sound, Rivière du Loup, Edmundston, or Truro. Another well known Census fact seemingly at odds with a 50 / 50 split in electoral districts is that nearly two-thirds of Canadians live in Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs). Here it is important to note that all CMAs include substantial rural areas, and some of them, such as Chicoutimi-Jonquière and Thunder Bay, are for many purposes not grouped among Canada's major urban centres. Hence the percentage of Canadians living in urban settings in the major centres is somewhere in the mid-fifties, depending on which cities are included. Then, taking into account the over-representation of voters in the most remote districts, we recover the nearly equal balance between urban metropolitan districts, and districts outside the big cities.

2. Details of the method used can be found in Carbert 2005b and Carbert 2006.

3. Lois Harder engaged in a similar exercise when she framed the history of the Alberta women's movement in terms of cyclical commodity prices (2003).

4. It should also be noted that these categorizations do not include substantial economic activities that depend indirectly on resource-extraction industries; e.g. the component of the financial services sector that funds their capital-intensive projects.

5. "MacAulay in conflict controversy" CBC Online News, 2002 Prince Edward Island News in Review, website: http://pei.cc.ca/newsinreview/pei_macaulayconflict.html.

6. This expectation would follow the example of American state assemblies, which first saw significant increases in women elected in the less professionalized, amateur assemblies of the small New England states during the 1970s, when the job held considerably less power and prestige (Thomas 1994, 144-6).

7. For example, Maurice Beaudin notes that "when examined on a regional basis, the relative size of the public sector is greater in ... Halifax [where] the public sector contributes ... 33.5 percent of jobs and 41 percent of employment income" (1998, 47). Despite this city's heavy reliance on the public sector, most of the expenditures involve relatively stable program spending. MPs and MLAs in Halifax ridings are not perceived to influence the expenditures of the Department of National Defense, or the universities, or the Port Authority. The budgets of these institutions may go up or down, but usually only incrementally from year to year. Hence the continued vitality of these pillars of the economy does not rest on the choice of elected representative, and the voters and riding associations know it.

8. Lublin and Brewer argue that the fact that metropolitan electoral districts with higher levels of education and income tend to elect greater proportions of women to public office is not proof of more egalitarian attitudes in those districts. Instead, they see it as proof of the lower desirability of the job in those high-income districts. Where private-sector incomes are relatively high compared to the salaries attached to public office, standing for election carries a higher opportunity-cost than in lower income districts (2003, 383-4).

9. Similarly, a study by Bourke and Luloff on community leaders in rural Pennsylvania found that: "younger, college-educated women who were directors of local and county agencies, usually involving economic development, were recognized as leaders due to their position" (1997, 15).

10. At the national level, the Conservative Party has also fallen far behind other parties in nominating women in urban metropolitan districts. Considering the relative ease of recruiting women candidates in big cities, it seems highly likely that a change of heart by this party would have a significant impact there as well.