



SEX AND POWER IN CANADIAN POLITICS

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This is an important speech for me because it marks a kind of anniversary. It was to a Canadian Club that I gave the first public speech of my life seventeen years ago now.

At the time I was working for Chatelaine Magazine. I was in my early twenties, trying to look like the very model of a lady magazine editor and that day I was carrying white kid gloves, wearing an expensive French hat covered in green silk flowers on top of my bouffant hairdo -- and feeling absolutely scared out of my wits.

This fear was induced partly by an encounter I'd just had in the hotel lobby a few minutes before the lunch began. I had been introduced to a federal politician as the Ottawa Editor of Chatelaine. He had responded to this information with a loud guffaw and the remark, "My God, that's a riot! -- the only thing funnier than the Ottawa Editor of Chatelaine must be the Ottawa Editor of Wee Wisdom."

I remembered his remark recently when I was getting ready for this speech and I began to think about how much things have changed for me in those seventeen years. I don't wear flowered hats anymore and I don't own white kid gloves. And for many years I have been writing about politics in publications that are read by both men and women. And nobody thinks it's a riot. Or even a personal peculiarity.

In fact some of the most interesting political journalists in the country now are women -- Sandra Gwyn, Marjorie Nichols, Mary Trueman, Lise Bissonette -- and neither their positions nor their perceptions are seen as funny by anybody that I'm aware of, least of all the politicians they're describing. The truth is that in those seventeen years things have changed for all of us and the topic I've chosen today -- Sex and Power in Canadian Politics -- is a means for me of examining some of those changes.

When the Canadian Club asked me last spring to give this talk I knew I had chosen a grabby title, as we say in the publishing business. But just how grabby I didn't realize until this last fall when Saturday Night published a piece called The Sex Life of the Ruling Class. For anybody here who missed it -- it was an article written by a professor of history at the University of Toronto called Edward Shorter who has a side interest in pop sociology and it gave his highly personalized impressions of the sexual adventures of the new Ottawa elite. Its appearance caused a greater uproar than anything else the magazine has published in the last ten years. The issue it appeared in sold out completely on the newstands. We got scores of letters to the editor. And everybody associated with the magazine from the receptionist to the publisher was accosted by dozens of people voicing their objections.

The week the issue hit the newstands I was in Ottawa myself for an interview with the Prime Minister. About an hour after my session with him was over I was sitting by a window in a hotel coffee shop on Albert Street talking to an old friend when a well-known Liberal Senator came walking by. As soon as he spotted me he marched resolutely into the coffee shop and over to our table and started to say in a voice that would have resonated through the Senate's Red Chamber, "I just want you to know, Christina, that I'm not upset, I'm not angry and I'm certainly not offended BUT" -- At this point my mind was racing wildly trying to figure out what kind of unpardonable mistake I had committed in the Prime Minister's presence. So I was greatly relieved when the Senator got to the end of his sentence and it turned out that what he wasn't angry, upset, or offended by was Shorter's article. He just thought it was sleazy, and a disgrace to the magazine's dignity and he wanted me to know that he wasn't interested in reading about that kind of stuff. As Bob Fulford wrote later in Saturday Night, he's never met so many people in his life who weren't interested in reading about a subject.

Shorter was describing the mating games of the unmarried who are also powerful, which is something of a new phenomenon in Ottawa. But as a young politician said to me defensively the other day, there is at least as lively a story in what goes on with the powerful who are married. Certainly if you could figure out how to do it and keep yourself out of the law courts at the same time you could devote a fascinating hour to a description of how things have changed in this area in the last few years.

When I first lived in Ottawa the raciest scandal on Parliament Hill involved an MP who ran a hamburger stand on Sparks Street in partnership with his secretary, who may - or may not - have been his mistress. This liaison reached its climax, as it were, when they both were caught in the Commons one morning -- he in his seat and she in the gallery -- smelling of fried onions. After that early Age of Innocence, the pace quickened and we had the Munsinger scandal which titivated Canada for years and since then there's been the Francis Fox affair, the Mackenzie King revelations, the Margaret Trudeau innuendos and a dozen other sub-rosa tales about the unlikely amorous antics of some of the most unlikely looking sober people until the point where frank talk about the sexual lives of public personalities has become a kind of sociological phenomenon in Ottawa that's liable to cause the rest of the country to believe the capital is turning into a Gomorrah on the Rideau.

The conclusion I drew from all this is whatever people thought about Ned Shorter's views in Saturday Night -- or his manner of expressing them -- and most people disliked both -- he obviously touched on a subject that's very sensitive and very pertinent -- the subject of changing sexual mores and changing sexual behaviour patterns.

I want to address myself to the same subject but from a very different point of view. Because after Shorter's piece came out I realized that when I say Sex and Power in Canadian Politics, I really mean Gender and Power. What I want to talk about is Why Men Have Power and Women Don't. What Men Know About Politics that Most Women Never Dream Of. About how it is that a powerful man is sexy and a powerful woman is terrifying. About why -- after years of observing the powerful, I am ready to believe Henry Kissinger's dictum that "Power is the greatest aphrodisiac" but I reject the idea Jacqueline Onassis once put forward -- that there are two kinds of women -- those who want power in the world and those who are content with power in the bedroom.

Mrs. Onassis made that remark when she was still Mrs. Kennedy back in the early Sixties. And it seems to me that there have been at least three phases in the relationship of women to power since then. The first was Mrs. Kennedy's own era when there were only a few exceptional women in politics, most of whom had to live according to the "every woman for herself and God help the rest syndrome" -- and power in the bedroom was all that even the most beautiful and accomplished could aspire to. Though -- if you believe all the stories published since about President Kennedy's libidinous proclivities -- power in that particular bedroom seems to have been shared rather widely.

The second phase was the flowering in the late Sixties and early Seventies of the Liberation Movement when sisterhood was a heady idea, consciousness raising was going to alter the world -- and women thought they would get power simply by pointing out to men how unfair the current social structure seemed to them.

The third phase is the one that we're in right now. What I call the realistic phase -- the phase when a few women have said, Okay, let's stop (whining,) marching, petitioning and cajoling men and start working towards real power ourselves.

Before I go on it might be a good idea to define what I mean by power. For a lot of people it means domination -- which may be why so many men are afraid of the idea in connection with women -- they feel they will be overwhelmed / by hordes of hardened harpies. I'm using it, though, in the sense that most sociologists do when they're describing power in a democracy -- as the ability to get things done -- to mobilize resources, to lead people, to effect change, to achieve goals, to be able to deliver to your followers some of the things they're expecting of you. Power is central to politics. It's what it's all about.

In this sense very few women have power in Canada. And until very recently a surprising number of people believed in the sexual segregationist argument that women aren't interested in power at all -- that as Gloria Steinem once said sardonically -- there must be something in women's genes that makes them prefer to be ordered about, that biological destiny means women want / to be pushed around. This turns out to be no more fundamentally true than many other ancient myths: that women enjoyed sex less than men, for instance, or that if they were allowed to vote the political system would be destroyed.

Women clearly are attracted to power -- it's just that they have traditionally felt that they had to marry it ~~or serve it~~ or attach ^{themselves/} to it in some other way as secretaries or ^{girl Fridays./} -- and you can see remnants of this attitude still in the ways women relate to party politics. At any kind of political gathering these days -- at policy workshops, leadership conventions, election rallies -- women are very much in evidence. Women of nearly every age group and in every kind of get-up. Women who are eager-eyed, hard-working, well-informed -- but when you get right down to it, essentially powerless.

Despite their burgeoning numbers, most women are still relating to politics in a couple of fundamental ways -- as political wives or as backroom party workers. Within these categories women may have won some small victories -- or at least made some visible changes. Political wives, for instance, are no longer all the docile creatures in navy blue pumps who inhabited the Parliamentary Wives Association lounge when I first went to Ottawa. It's unthinkable now that a political wife would meekly accept the kind of behavioural rules that were drawn up in the Diefenbaker era by the Speaker's Wife, and issued in mimeographed form to Members' wives telling them what to wear, where to entertain, how to talk and how to hand out calling cards -- all advice given in the line of business, their business being 'support your husband if it kills you, the seat you save may be your own.' As we all know very well some political wives now work in their husbands' offices, pursue their studies or their careers, even leave home and

shoot off their mouths whenever they feel like it. I'm not sure what's been gained for [REDACTED] women in the process. Certainly the political wives who stick with their traditional supportive role -- and that's still the majority -- are coping with the same frustrations their predecessors experienced. They quickly discover that marrying power is not what they'd been led to expect -- it may bring them an instantly recognizable identity alright but the identity is their husband's. Some women handle this situation superbly -- and some can't handle it at all. They turn to martinis straight up, or love affairs flat out, or to identifying so closely with their husband's power plays that they are no longer really sure of who they are. I remember once watching the highly intelligent wife of a powerful minister go into a small tantrum at an embassy party because she hadn't been seated according to protocol. "Don't they know -- don't they know," she kept saying in outrage, "that I'm the Minister of the Wife of Finance?" A psychiatrist would have called that a Freudian slip -- I'm inclined to look on it as symbolic of a minor Canadian tragedy.

Still in the other traditional area -- the area of behind-the-scenes organizational work -- women have had what has to be described in the circumstances as a kind of minor triumph. Whereas they used to fetch the coffee, make the sandwiches and write the You-Vote-At post cards -- now they are fetching the coffee, making the sandwiches, writing the post cards -- and doing an impressive share of the canvassing, serving as riding delegates to conventions, getting elected to party association executives -- and in an increasing number of ridings during the last couple of elections, actually serving as campaign chairmen. One step up the ladder of political service jobs are the executive assistants and special assistants to cabinet ministers -- jobs that

in the past have been a training ground for male politicians on the rise. In Ottawa now there are thirty ministers with twenty-eight executive assistants -- of whom three are women -- and one hundred and nineteen of the junior more/ special assistants, forty-nine of them women.

Through the kind of tough, largely selfless work women do in these backup jobs, they are becoming increasingly indispensable to party machines and they are acquiring more and more political moxie in the process. But for the most part, the fruits of their labor in terms of realized power has yet to accrue to them either as individuals or as a sex. Because when you move one further crucial step up the political ladder to those heights where real power is at least a possibility -- you find relatively few women still. There are now ten women in the House of Commons, three of them in the cabinet -- and this is more than ever before in our history.

But when you consider that it is nearly sixty years since the first woman was elected to the House and the ten seats held by women represent slightly less than four percent of the parliamentary seats available, with the other 96 per cent held by men -- it's clearly evident that the male power bastions have yet to be successfully stormed.

The response of most male politicians to this kind of statistic is a soothing one. They say Look, it's simply a matter of time. We are all receptive to women -- in fact we want them as candidates. There are no constitutional barriers to women holding any political office. A woman can be prime minister. A woman can be President of a party executive. A woman can be a behind-the-scenes advisor -- any day now we'll see a female Keith Davey or a female Lowell Murray wheeling and dealing in the back rooms. All you have to do is wait. Apart from the difficulty Davey, there are other fallacies to this argument. / negatively. / of imagining a female Keith / Most politicized women respond to it / They figure that it will take more than time -- it will take a minor revolution for women to share equally in political life.

Any woman who has had some experience in the field quickly realizes that politics is a male world, a kind of sub-culture. From centuries of experience men understand political power. They know how to go after it. How to use it and how to share it. And women don't know any of these things.

In the last fifteen years or so several social scientists have made studies of this phenomenon. And their conclusion is that in political parties as well as in business corporations women haven't had power because they don't understand it. And because they don't understand it they can't get it. It's a Catch-22. A vicious circle. In order to translate this research into the daily reality of Canadian politics, what I'm going to do is describe a typical contemporary male politician's career and show you what kind of man succeeds in the party power game.

Let's call this guy Frank Sure Success. Frank is in his late 30s now. He grew up in an upwardly mobile English-Canadian family with a father who was a pilot in the Second World War and who made a comfortable living in the widget business in the Fifties while Frank and his brothers were young. There was a lot of political talk in the Sure-Success house -- Frank's father had strong opinions about C.D. Howe and Donald Fleming and all the rest of the good old boys and the family always listened to the CBC news. Frank was a solid student and a good team player and from very early on he was always getting elected to student councils. By the time he went to the U of T he already knew he wanted to be a big-time lawyer and decided to join the campus Liberal Club as a first step in aligning himself with the comers of his generation. In the '62 election, when he was still a student, he canvassed a poll for Mitchell Sharp in Eglinton and in 1963 he volunteered in Sharp's riding office as a full-time worker for the duration of that winning campaign. A couple of years later when another minister was looking for an executive assistant, Sharp remembered Frank and recommended him as a young

bring on side./
 man to / So Frank spent two years in Ottawa, making friends with the other E.A.s, who were also comers, like John Roberts, now the Secretary of State, Jim Coutts, now the PM's principal secretary, Mike McCabe, now the head of the CFDC, Andre Ouellet, now the Minister of Public Works/. On the Bill he concentrated on making himself an expert in one or two important policy areas, and on understanding the workings of his minister's department.

In the sixty-eight leadership campaign Frank worked for John Turner -- lots of his friends were at the convention, many of them supporting other candidates but when it was over there were no hard feelings. After all, they all felt part of the Liberal Team and winning big with Trudeau was easy to take.

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 In the meantime, Frank/joined a big Toronto law firm and began to absorb the rules of corporate power. He dressed well and went to a lot of political meetings, exercised at the Cambridge Club and married the daughter of one of his firm's senior partners. She was conditioned to accept the fact that Frank talked on the phone constantly to his cronies about political issues and kept in touch with his mentors in Ottawa -- mostly with Turner who was famous for his early morning phoning-around-the-195-club, the/country to the/guys who'd been loyal to the last ballot in '68.

In 1973 all this paid off and Frank was asked to chair the Liberal policy convention, and the next year when Senator Keith Davey invited him for lunch at the Inn on the Park to discuss contesting a seat, he had already made up his mind.

When he and Davey got through the ritual jokes about the Argos and the Leafs, the conversation was short and sharp. Frank said yes he would run -- but not in Broadview where there was a strong NDP incumbent. What he wanted was the nomination in Mr. Retiring Cabinet Minister's seat where the Liberals had won three out of the last four times and where his chances were good even in a difficult year. So that's what he got. And that's why he was elected. And that's how come two years later, having served as a parliamentary secretary, he began to appear in the press as sure-fire cabinet material -- as the representative of a new generation, a hot-shot, with all the right connections.

I'll leave him there pickled in parliamentary press gallery prose and let you guess whether he ever made it or not. But just before we move on -- let me dangle one further clue about Frank's chances: Jimmy Coutts -- the Prime Minister's right-hand man -- has been playing piano at his parties since 1964.

Now there are dozens of permutations of Frank Sure Success. Sometimes he's a guy who grew up in the Maritimes and got involved with the Tories there and expects to ride into power with Joe Clark, whom he knew when they were both members of the Young Conservatives. Sometimes he is a former Saskatchewan farm boy who went into the agribusiness after college and caught the eye of Alan Blakeney. But whatever his specific roots are, Frank Sure Success is a type. A male political type. Which means there aren't any Susan Sure Successes for very obvious reasons.

First off, women just haven't had the kind of social training that a Frank gets. They have never learned how to operate in groups. They haven't learned how to be self-assertive or how to be team players. They have learned how to be nice and how to be dependent, how to smooth over arguments. Secondly, few women think of educating themselves for a political career. They have rarely gone into law or business which are the training grounds for power elites. If, as students, they were interested in social change they were liable to go into social work or to hang around with a guy who was into Marxism and hash. Thirdly, those few women who became politically active while very young were liable to spend their time at party conventions adorning the hospitality suites, hoping to dazzle the comers like Frank. By the time they're in their thirties, if they're still politically engaged, they tend to do the routine work in the committee rooms instead of getting out front where the connections and reputations are made. Lastly, if they do decide to run they're rarely confident enough or shrewd enough to go after the choice seats. They wait to be asked or they agree to be sacrificial lambs, running in the hopeless ridings that so many women candidates have contested in the last 30 or 40 years.

When they run, they rarely have a network of political contacts to draw on or years of personal favors to cash in for fund-raising help or organizational strength or policy advice the way a Frank Sure Success does. They don't have a wife to give dinners for them, to ward off the bores and crazies at political gatherings, leaving them free to wheel and deal. If by some stroke of good fortune, some outstanding personal character strength, some shift in the political winds -- if by some miracle in brief -- they overcome

these drawbacks and do get elected -- and remember we have ten miracles in the House at the moment -- they face quite a different situation from a man's once they get into office.

The pressures all politicians are subject to these days are intense -- but for women the situation is For starters worse. they are gossiped about and scrutinized as sexual objects. Nobody warns them about pitfalls. They are usually without female role models to be guided by or male mentors to show them the ropes. If they make the kind of mistake that's inevitable with an inexperienced MP, they are immediately pounced on and their failings are inflated in the press and among their male colleagues. Even when they do survive, women politicians are constantly made aware that they've charged a male preserve. Two of the most prominent young women in politics now -- one a Conservative and one a Liberal -- told me recently (in separate conversations and in strict confidence lest they be accused of party disloyalty) -- that they have never yet seen any evidence that men want to share power with women. Political men are essentially male separatists still. Parties may have been forced by changing social circumstances into accepting a few token women but in the crunch, the men who run them find really successful political women frightening and tend to close ranks to shove them back. You don't have to hear this in confidence from active political women -- you can see it all the time in the limelight.

Take the case of Flora Macdonald. She came into the Conservative Leadership Convention in 1976 showing amazing strength. A veteran of the Tory organization network with as much political savvy as any man in the country, she had attracted to her banner half a dozen important old Tory hands. But once the convention got under way her show of strength scared both the delegates and the old Tory hands and by the time it came to the first ballot she got roughly 100 fewer votes than were promised her and it was downhill from there. After it was over her loyalists bitterly realized a lot of her initial support was from the undecided power brokers who had been with her for the interim as an acceptable loser candidate until they could figure out the sure/^{male}winner and make the right leap.

Or let's think about Judy LaMarsh. She was undoubtedly one of the biggest political assets the Liberals had in the Sixties. But despite her guts and her ^{popularity} / she gave up politics under the pressures of that all-male world, was forever after characterized as erratic and never again called on to run for office -- though god knows she wasn't half as erratic as Bryce Mackasey and look what happened to him.

Thirty years ago most people would have said that women like LaMarsh and Macdonald were aberrations anyway(-- that a normal woman is biologically programmed to be without an interest in or an aptitude for power.) But now sociologists are saying that it's cultural conditioning that is at fault -- that women can learn how to deal with power in the same way that men do if they're given the chance. And despite the gloom of the statistics I quoted earlier there are some hopeful signs that this is what's taking place.

There are younger women going into the political system now who realize that politics is a career, and who are ready to train themselves for political success. Some of them have law degrees or are reaching for business experience. Some of them have become part of political networks. I could name several women in their twenties and thirties who are going to be influential in deciding the course of the two main parties in the 1980s. They have realized that it's a good idea to contest civic elections to get experience and a power base. They know it's important to find a mentor high up the political pyramid. They are heartened by the new Election Expenses Act which means that funds will be available for them on an equal basis with men. They even realize that a woman in politics has to be as poker faced as Cool Hand Luke and as beyond reproach as Caesar's Wife.

And all of these young women are smart enough to realize that full equality in the power structure won't happen in the next year -- or even the next decade. But I like to think they're optimistic enough to hope -- as I do -- that if by some chance I'm invited to speak to a Canadian Club seventeen years from now that much of what I've been saying will sound as out of date as my flowered hat and bouffant hairdo do to us today.