

Gender parity in cabinet is more than good optics

Was Justin Trudeau's promise to have women fill 50 per cent of his cabinet positions: (a) A crass play for progressive optics? (b) A lamentable abandonment of our long tradition of meritocracy? (c) Good public policy?

Congratulations if you correctly guessed (c).

In the days to come, many will analyze the merits of Mr. Trudeau's individual choices. But let's be clear about this: His decision to appoint equal numbers of male and female ministers is not only defensible, but also advisable.

The federal cabinet makes decisions that profoundly affect all Canadians, [more than half of whom](#) happen to live lives irrevocably shaped by their extra X chromosome. Public policy – on health and labour, taxation, justice – needs to reflect and accommodate their realities.

Consider Brian Mulroney's cabinet in 1989, featuring future prime minister Kim Campbell as one of only a handful of women in a cast of 40. During a discussion on access to abortion, a member of the anti-choice cohort proposed that women really ought to be educated about birth control. Ms. Campbell generously shared her considerable experience on the matter. She pointed out that many children are conceived by people who actually are practising responsible birth control. Then – too much information be damned – she described her own challenged contraceptive history. She cited a failed IUD (intrauterine device), the impracticality of the diaphragm and the reluctance of men to use condoms. Her discomfiting impromptu sex-ed class reminded many of her cabinet colleagues that they truly had no idea how to anticipate or address the needs of half the population they were elected to serve.

As for meritocracy, let's not forget that female candidates continue to face greater challenges raising money, winning nominations and being perceived as leaders through a pervasive veil of unconscious bias. When they are elected, it's important to recall the famous words of Charlotte Whitton, two-time mayor of Ottawa, who noted, "Whatever women do they must do twice as well as men to be thought half as good."

Selecting cabinet talent has always been balanced against the necessity of appointing ministers from different regions of the country. What is shocking, in retrospect, is that

gender has, until recently, never been seen as a default category in need of consideration. How is it that previous PMs have catered to the interests of Atlantic, Prairie, Northern and Pacific Canadians, but not women?

Now, in light of the substantive body of research documenting the benefits of diversity in decision-making, there's even less justification than ever before to not strive to improve all kinds of representation.

This is not to say that the optics of a gender-balanced cabinet aren't significant. As the 2011 documentary *Miss Representation* points out, if you can't see her, you can't be her. High-profile, diverse women in varied careers and positions of authority allow their younger counterparts to imagine and pursue alternative futures for themselves.

Vigdís Finnbogadóttir spent 16 years as president of Iceland. The length of her service meant that a generation of Icelandic kids grew up knowing only a female head of state. After announcing her retirement in 1996, she was reportedly watching television with her young grandson as the candidates to succeed her were profiled on the news. In confusion, he turned to her and said, "But Grandmother, they can't be president – they're men!" This speaks volumes about the power of role modelling: It has the capacity to make women's leadership not only conceivable, but also inevitable. (A number of observers credited the *Commander in Chief* TV series, about a female president, with increasing Americans' ability to imagine a woman in the White House, giving a bump to Hillary Clinton's run in 2008.)

Similarly, research into what kinds of interventions make a difference to students who are statistically more likely to drop out of college finds that when women and members of other traditionally excluded groups receive messages such as "You belong here," their graduation rates increase.

Canadians are justly proud of our democracy, but the fact that women's political representation is stalled at 26 per cent at the federal level remains an embarrassment. Today's gender-balanced cabinet is a great start, but let's not stop here.

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