

Whose Job is it Anyway?

The Life and Work of an MLA

Research and Recommendations on Work-Life Balance for PEI MLAs
PEI Coalition for Women in Government
January 2009



Executive Summary

The PEI Coalition for Women in Government began its work of encouraging the election of more women in 2004 with research to determine why women weren't being elected. Having more women elected will bring more diversity of experience to the decision-making table, increasing the potential for policy and programs that speak to women's experience and lives. Key findings of that early research indicated that one of the main reasons women do not run for public office is the perceived lack of work life balance for PEI politicians. The Coalition undertook to find out whether that perception is a reality and from this research, set out to identify best practices and recommendations for supporting PEI's elected members to have balance between work and personal areas of their lives.

The report highlights findings from a national survey conducted with sitting MLA's from across the country, a third of which were from PEI, and interviews with current and former PEI MLAs and staff people.

Do Unrealistic Expectations and Lack of Respect Plague the Role of PEI MLA?

The survey research indicates that PEI MLAs spend more time than MLAs in other provinces and territories on constituency duties, including meeting with or corresponding with individual constituents, attending private functions (such as funerals and birthday parties), and helping constituents to access employment. Four times as many Island respondents as respondents from outside PEI say they spend at least six hours a week helping constituents to find work. A former Cabinet Minister highlighted the difference between jurisdictions when she said, *"I was at the airport waiting to fly home and the Minister from Quebec was there and he asked what I was doing for the weekend. I told him that I was going to this and that event, going to some anniversaries and other events, and he just looked at me. I asked him what he was doing and he told me that he spends every weekend with his family."*

High constituent expectations is the most cited explanation of the challenge PEI MLAs face in balancing work with personal time. Many focus group and workshop participants defined the expectations of some constituents as unreasonable. A former Cabinet Minister is quoted as saying, *"I remember one MLA telling me that he had a call from this woman because there was a cat on her roof - he had to go with a ladder and get the cat down."*

In this document, the Coalition reminds Government of its 2008 Throne Speech in which it promised to constitute a Special Committee on the Role of the MLA and suggests that committee also explore ways to create reasonable public expectations and restore public trust and respect to the office of MLA.

Do Women and Men Experience Public Office Differently?

It seems as though many of society's divisions of labour based on gender hold true even when you are an MLA. Results of the research show that just as women in the whole of society spend more time on home management and family care giving than men, women respondents to the survey spend more time on these tasks, as well. Often, it is these duties which are credited for keeping women away from running for public office. A former Cabinet Minister interviewed said, *"I observed that it was much more difficult for women, especially if they had children. Women tended to enter politics, a lot of them, later or not at all, because they waited until their children were older."*

Once they get elected, however, women and men tend to rate their work life balance similarly. Men were marginally more likely to indicate balance than women, with 56.3% of male respondents saying they felt they had some balance, compared to 47.1% of women.

The document reminds readers that the job of MLA is not the only job that can bring about imbalance. A current Cabinet Minister points out that, *"In some situations it's not a choice. If I were a single mom pouring coffee at Tim's and needed to make more money to pay for bills, but wanting to spend time with my children, I may not have a choice. When you choose to be a politician, you hopefully go into it with your eyes wide open. [And then,] you need to make sure that you find that time for you. The fact that I'm a female in a political role is no different than being a female in any other role."*

Recommendations

With ideas generated from the research participants and those in attendance at a November 2008 workshop, the Coalition makes 17 recommendations to government and political parties. Key recommendations include a call to Government to bring together the Special Committee on the Role of the MLA promised in the 2008 Speech from the Throne, and to develop an Ombudsperson Office to assist constituents to efficiently access services and problem solving, when they might otherwise call their MLAs. Recommendations to political parties centre on increased support to attract diverse candidates, and a recommendation that each party work towards the goal of nominating at least nine women in the 2011 Provincial election.

It's About Time: An initiative to elect women in PEI is a project of the PEI Coalition for Women in Government, a non-partisan coalition of individuals and organizations committed to increasing women's opportunities to be elected to government in PEI. Financial assistance for this project is provided by the Women's Program, Status of Women Canada. For more information visit our website at www.wnpei.org/womeningovernment.