

Summary of March 5, 2015 Panel Discussion

"Make It Happen" : The 2015 United Nations theme for International Women's Day

Moderator: the Honourable Eleni Bakopanos, Queen's Privy Council

Panelists: **Manon Gauthier**, Member of the Executive Committee, Ville de Montreal, Responsible for Culture, Heritage, design, Space for Life and Status of Women

Mair Verthuy, First Principal of the Simone de Beauvoir Institute at Concordia University dedicated to women's studies

The Honourable Marlene Jennings, P.C., a former Member of Parliament of the Liberal Party of Canada in the House of Commons

Manon Gauthier spoke about her humble beginnings and her belief in gender parity rather than gender equality. She has a broad background in the arts, business and communication. Manon is trying to build a better world one person at a time. When Mayor Coderre gave her the responsibility for the portfolio of "condition feminine" she told him that women's issues were not a "condition" and changed the name of the portfolio to "status of women". She has worked on an equality initiative that would make Montreal the city of equality. Women form 52% of the population and have more university degrees than men. There are not many women in politics but many women hesitate to run for political office for a number of reasons, including balancing their family and work responsibilities. There needs to be better access for young women to work in democracy and politics as parity comes from access.

In 1940, there were only three women on Montreal's City council; now 41% of elected officials in Montreal are women, which is the highest number in any municipality in Canada. Montreal also boasts the highest number of police women and the highest number of women firefighters of any municipality. We need to look at how far we have come, what will be the next priority and this priority must have a gender perspective. Madame Gauthier believes in equality and will fight for it. While economic development is a huge priority in Montreal, one crucial issue that remains to be addressed is the number of homeless women and getting these women off the streets into safe and affordable housing as well as help for their multiple health and economic problems. Madame Gauthier suggested that this is an issue where the MCW and all women can assist the City and her to "make it happen".

She also expressed her pleasure in welcoming the NCWC AGM attendees to a cocktail reception at City Hall on May 21. In addition, this year for International Women's Day, Montreal is celebrating the 75th anniversary of women's right to vote in Quebec and there is a call to take action on women's equality.

Mair Verthuy spoke of her Welsh roots and her "longish" life in France, which along with her pedagogical bent and feminist interests enabled her to promote women's studies. She believes that women must do things for other women in order to move ahead.

She suggested that we should each find a half hour a week to write to the Prime Minister, our MP or our MNA about what matters to us. We should write, email or call about an issue or concern we have or something we want and let them know our opinion. It appears that each letter written to an elected official is considered to be representative of ten opinions in their constituency. She profoundly believes that women need pay equity and not equal pay for equal work, because we do not have equal work. This means we need to work for equal pay for work of equal value and this premise must be legislated and enforced over time. The only province to have this enshrined in law at this time is Quebec. Only six provinces have pay equity and only Quebec has public and private pay equity legislation. While we have the Charter of Rights, it is difficult to use the charter to fight for pay equity. Mair further stressed the importance of letting your government representative know that you want pay equity because it affects not only your working life but also your retirement. Women need an equitable basic income. Finally, Ms Verthuy stated that we all need to exercise our hard earned political franchise and speak up by voting.

Marlene Jennings was the first black woman to be admitted to the “barreau du Québec” as well as the first black woman to be elected from Quebec to the Parliament of Canada. She has been the former Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for International Cooperation, the Solicitor General of Canada and the Prime Minister.

She believes in education as a priority and that educating a woman benefits everybody. She stated that there is no gender equality in politics and that the number of women in the House of Commons has dropped from 30% to 21%. It has been proven that the critical mass for affecting change in any institution is 30%.

Moreover, Harper has removed per-vote-subsidies which allow political parties to finance elections and this will take effect on April 1 of this year. The subsidies had been instituted to make up for the elimination of corporate and union donations to federal political parties. Canada does have legislation regarding employment equity in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms for women, visible minorities, aboriginals and the handicapped. Marlene introduced a Private Member's Bill when she was in Parliament, that would give federal political parties a government subsidy when the number of women in their caucus reaches 40%. There would also be a subsidy for the number of aboriginal and handicapped members elected. Unfortunately the bill was never debated and died on the order paper.

Marlene stated that there is a vacuum of women's voices in Parliament. This is unfortunate because it has been proven that an increased number of women in parliament results in a better educated population, better public policies and increased economic benefits. Me. Jennings believes that MCW can "make it happen" by expressing its support for this subsidy which would lead to greater representation of women in the Canadian Parliament.