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JANE TABER AND THE GLOBE'S PARLIAMENTARY BUREAU SET THE AGENDA

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Women step up to podium but fall down in political arena

Jane Taber

Women don't like Stephen Harper. The fact that he owns the "cranky, old Anglo white male cohort" is not news, EKOS pollster Frank Graves says.

What is news, however, is that women are not exactly embracing the other federal leaders: Michael Ignatieff doesn't do it for them, and women are ambivalent about Jack Layton, according to [EKOS's latest poll \(PDF\)](#) on political leadership.

Mr. Graves was surprised by this.

“This led me to think about the pervasive gender gap which permeates Canadian politics,” the pollster said. “It is particularly striking when contrasted with the overwhelming success of our women athletes in Vancouver.”

Canadian women have been a success story at these Olympics – they make up 43 per cent of Team Canada and have so far won 80 per cent of the medals. The political story is different entirely – women make up 52 per cent of the population and won only 22 per cent of the seats in the House of Commons in the last election.

And so as Canadians see these strong, fast and competitive women on the Olympic medal podium, Mr. Graves wonders whether there is a way to put more women on the political podium, a way to bring their successes in the sports arena into the political arena?

There are problems. One big one is that the issues articulated by the leaders are not as compelling to women as they are to men.

Mr. Graves said that women still place a much greater emphasis on social issues, such as health and education. Men are more concerned about taxation and economic matters.

And he noted that the recent growth of crime, security and defence issues, pushed mostly by the Harper government, mirrors men’s concerns, not women’s.

“This may be a mutually reinforcing problem,” he said. “Women’s interest in politics is dampened by failure to recognize an agenda which resonates with women’s priorities, which in turn results in the perpetuation of a more male-dominated agenda.” He said this requires more female leaders and politicians.

How does this relate to the Olympics?

Mr. Graves said that as female athletes are the ones helping the Canadian Olympic Committee save face – it had boldly predicted a first-place medal finish – it may be time to “turn to women to fix up the malaise in the political world.”

Good idea, but such bad timing.

It doesn't help the case for more women in the House of Commons when a female minister throws a [public temper tantrum](#), reinforcing the stereotype of the unhinged, emotionally fragile woman. Making matters worse is that the woman, Helena Guergis, is also Stephen Harper's status of women minister – hardly a great role model.

On Friday, Liberal status of women critic Anita Neville [called for Ms. Guergis's resignation](#), saying her behaviour at the Charlottetown airport was “completely unacceptable of any citizen, let alone a minister of the Crown.”

“Canadian women deserve a better representative at the cabinet table. An apology is not enough. She must resign now,” Ms. Neville said in a statement issued to the media.

One step back for women in the political arena just as female athletes at the Olympics were diminished this week, too, when the International Olympic Committee mused about taking women's hockey out of the Games. This after the IOC wouldn't allow women to compete in ski jumping at these Olympics.

B.C. Liberal MP Hedy Fry said that the IOC needs to be pushed, as does Parliament, to be less institutionally rigid.

“Women can be as tough and can be as strong [as men],” said Dr. Fry, an MP since 1993. And she points to the “toughness, dedication and commitment” of Canadian figure skater Joannie Rochette, who won the bronze medal Thursday night, just days after the sudden death of her mother.

“That took pluck and it took guts,” Dr. Fry said.

No emotional meltdown by Ms. Rochette; Ms. Guergis could learn from her grace and discipline.

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