

Canada trails world in representation by women

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By Mario Canseco

A few days ago, Argentinean President Nestor Kirchner decided to forego what seemed like an easy re-election campaign to allow a fellow party member to run instead. The certain nominee for the Peronist Front for Victory (FV) is a two-term senator who happens to be married to the current head of state. Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, who actually dislikes being referred to as Argentina's first lady, stands to become the first person to be elected to follow a spouse into the presidency.

Ms. Fernandez de Kirchner holds a large lead in recent polls, which suggest she will earn the 45 per cent of the vote required to win on the first round in late October. Her speeches have already drawn comparisons to another Argentine first lady, despite the fact that, unlike Eva Peron, Ms. Fernandez de Kirchner has actually faced the electorate and won.

In Chile, Michelle Bachelet has led the government for a year and a half, but the emergence of women who can become national leaders is not restricted to South America. In the United States, former first lady and senator Hillary Rodham Clinton has consistently topped national surveys as the preferred Democratic Party candidate. South Korea's next presidential race could feature two women: former premier Han Myeong-sook and former opposition leader Park Geun-hye.

First ladies such as Ms. Rodham Clinton and Ms. Fernandez de Kirchner can launch their campaigns with instant pre-eminence, but the road to political success is much harsher for most women in their countries. In the United States, there are just 74 women serving in the 435-seat House of Representatives, and only 16 in the 100-seat Senate. In Argentina, the situation is slightly better, thanks to a law that not only forces at least 30 per cent of the candidates to be women, but calls for them to be placed in positions that would likely lead to their election. In the South American country, 84 of the lower house's 257 seats are filled by women, as well as 28 of 72 seats in the upper house.

In Canada, the numbers are not particularly pleasing. There are only six women in the federal cabinet, and 64 in the 308-seat House of Commons, or 20.8 per cent. In Sweden, where at least three political parties have established a gender quota for their candidates, 47.3 per cent of all national lawmakers are women. Many countries -- including Norway, the Netherlands, Mozambique, Germany, Guyana, Afghanistan and Tunisia -- have a higher percentage of women representatives than Canada.

To foster female participation in politics, several countries have introduced legislation aimed at guaranteeing that women not only have a chance to run, but a chance to rule. In Rwanda, the constitution mandates for women to occupy at least 30 per cent of the posts

in decision-making organs. In Costa Rica, 40 per cent of all candidates in all local and national legislative races must be women.

In Europe, Spain -- once mocked for failing to do away with gender stereotypes -- is leading the way. During the 2004 campaign, opposition Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) leader Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero vowed to have a cabinet where at least half of the ministers were women. Mr. Zapatero delivered on his promise, and kept it earlier this month after a cabinet shuffle. In March, the Spanish Congress passed the Equality Law. Under the terms of this legislation, electoral lists cannot have more than 60 per cent of candidates from either gender. In some communities, a 50-50 split will be mandatory.

In France, Nicolas Sarkozy, who faced a woman in the presidential race, was not oblivious to the call for inclusiveness. His 15-member cabinet features seven women, including Christine Lagarde, the first woman to head the finance ministry in the country's history.

At this time, none of the parties represented in the House of Commons is led by a woman, and while two of them -- the Liberals and the NDP -- have set targets for female participation, a national quota system has not been implemented. In 1997, an effort to establish gender parity in Nunavut's legislative assembly was rejected by 57 per cent of participating voters.

Most of the countries that have embraced quotas for gender parity have done so after lengthy parliamentary debates, which in some occasions have required constitutional amendments. In the case of Canada, where constitutional review has been intimidating, federal parties must reflect and reassess their current practices.

Ensuring that Canadian women are invited to partake in public service will not be enough unless the thought of serving the country -- without gossip or innuendo -- becomes appealing.

While Ms. Kirchner awaits the verdict of Argentina's population, a similar scenario proved unattainable in Mexico. Former president Vicente Fox flirted with spousal succession, but the public rejected the inexperienced Martha Sahagun. Mr. Fox instead fashioned the concept of the "presidential couple" and insisted on the ambiguous title for official and unofficial duties -- even now that he has joined the conference circuit.

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