

Paving the way in the Land of the Midnight Sun: Yukon Women in Politics

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Introduction:

The Yukon is nestled in Northwestern Canada and is a territory famous for the northern lights, the midnight sun, cold winters, giant mosquitoes, the gold rush and its welcoming and charming population always on Yukon time. There is, however, something that is often overlooked when one thinks of the Yukon, and that is the advancements Yukon women have made in politics both at the territorial and national level. The Yukon has represented a series of firsts and significant achievements for women in politics. The first woman in Canadian history to lead a political party which was successful in having its members elected came from the Yukon and the first woman at the head of a national party in all of North America came from the Yukon.¹ The Yukon has also been one of the very few places in Canada to elect a woman as Premier. The Yukon has often been at the top of the charts for its election of women, and one of the only places where women have achieved the targeted percentage or even surpassed it.² These numbers have, however, been dramatically reduced in recent years. This paper will give an overview of Yukon women's contribution to politics, and the challenges they face. This paper will focus on the achievements of Audrey McLaughlin, former New Democratic Party (NDP) leader in the House of Commons, Pat Duncan, former Yukon Premier, and Elaine Taylor,

current Deputy Minister in the Yukon Legislative Assembly and will discuss their experiences as women of power, or as Joyce Hayden calls them, “political pioneers”.³

Women as Political Pioneers:

The Yukon was born out of the 1898 Klondike Gold Rush and is now home to approximately thirty-two thousand people.⁴ Since this time, women have had a continuous role in shaping the Yukon into the territory it is today. On April 3rd, 1919, the Yukon Act was amended to give Yukon women the right to vote, and to seek elected office.⁵ In 1935, the Yukon elected its first woman to Parliament, Mary Louise Black as an Independent Conservative Member, and in 1967, Jean Gordon was the first woman elected to the Territorial Council, which was renamed the Yukon Legislative Assembly in 1978.⁶ That year, Hilda Watson became the first woman to lead a political party, the Progressive Conservatives, in the Yukon.⁷ There has been at least one woman in the Legislature since 1967 but women have yet to hold the balance of power, meaning they have yet to achieve gender parity in the Yukon Legislative Assembly.⁸

Since its inception in 1898, only nineteen women have been elected to the Yukon Legislative Assembly and three to the House of Commons.⁹ One of these women, Audrey McLaughlin, would go on to become federal leader of the NDP. In Canada, there have only been four jurisdictions which have elected women to a quarter of the seats in their legislative assemblies. The Yukon has done this twice, in 1989 and 2000.¹⁰ Along with British Columbia, it is the only jurisdiction to have done so twice.¹¹ Women constitute about fifty-two percent of Canada’s population, yet only makeup twenty –two percent of those elected to Parliament, which makes one realize

how much more work there is to be done to ensure Parliament reflects the country's demographics.¹² Women make up around forty-nine percent of the population of the Yukon, yet currently only account for eleven percent of the seats in the Legislature.¹³

Given its small population, the Yukon legislative assembly has only eighteen seats.¹⁴ In politics in general, the glass ceiling is set at around twenty-five percent of elected women in a legislature.¹⁵ The Yukon, despite its small size, has been able to exceed this on a couple occasions. In 2000, the Yukon had over twenty-nine percent of women in its legislature.¹⁶ This changed drastically in the 2002 election, when it dropped to seventeen percent.¹⁷ In 2009 it is currently at eleven percent.¹⁸ Linda Trimble and Jane Arscott, in *Still Counting: Women in Politics across Canada*, argued that “the Yukon slipped from the top of the 'electing women's' chart to the near bottom”.¹⁹ Despite this, many women have brought commendable change to the territory and the next section will focus on the achievements and experiences of a former Member of Parliament (MP) and federal leader of a party, a former Premier of the territory and a current Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA).

The Achievements and Experiences of Yukon Women in Politics:

The Honourable Audrey McLaughlin

The Honourable Audrey Marlene McLaughlin was born in Dutton, Ontario, and moved to the Yukon in 1979 to work as a social work/community development worker.²⁰ When Erik Nielsen, a Progressive Conservative (PC) who had been the Yukon's elected MP for twenty-nine years, retired in 1987, McLaughlin decided to run for the

leadership of the Yukon's NDP and was elected.²¹ Following this, she ran in the by-election where Yukoners once again put their faith in her and she was elected to the House of Commons.²² As an MP, McLaughlin pushed Northern issues and women's issues and often returned to the Yukon often to keep in tune with her constituency.²³ The House of Commons provided McLaughlin with a new experience and a new view on politics. She referred to the House of Commons as an "old-fashioned Men's Club."²⁴ When I asked her about her experience as the first woman leader of a federal party and what challenges she faced, she answered that:

"Anyone who is a first at anything always has challenges [...] The challenge of being a woman leader is that there are not many role models to compare it too, other than men [...] Women in positions of power tend to be seen as too aggressive [...] I was deemed to be conciliatory, too interested in team building, all things that Obama is now being admired for [...] Being the first can be a cultural change, it's just like Obama's election in the United States [...] (In terms of women in leadership) Many people unconsciously see this as a power shift, particularly men and when you have a power shift there is a reaction."²⁵

At the time of her election, there were only twenty-nine women MPs representing about ten percent of the seats.²⁶ In her autobiography she further discusses her experience, saying that:

"When you stand up in the House to speak, you look over a sea of blue and grey-the men in their club uniform, the business suit. Here and there you will see a splash of colour: the women. When you

walk into your first committee meeting, chances are you will be the only woman. The entire place was steeped in the assumption that women were interlopers...”²⁷

In 1988, she was reelected to the House of Commons with fifty-one percent of the vote.²⁸ That year, the NDP achieved the most seats yet for the party at the federal level with forty-three seats but the number of women elected did not increase.²⁹ Only five women were elected with the NDP, and only thirty-nine women were elected to the House of Commons out of two-hundred and eighty-eight seats.³⁰ As an NDP MP, McLaughlin kept pushing for a woman to be appointed to Chair, or House Leader or as a whip but kept being told that it was not the right time.³¹ In 1989, Ed Broadbent resigned as leader of the NDP, opening the door for a leadership race and McLaughlin saw this as the opportunity to take matters into her own hands and make it the time for a woman leader.³² McLaughlin was only the third woman to run for the leadership of a federal party and after a campaign ‘from coast to coast to coast’, she became the first woman in North America to lead a national political party, a huge step forward for women.³³ Furthermore, an article in the *Whitehorse Star* credited McLaughlin’s win as “a major step forward in putting the Yukon on Canada’s political map...”³⁴

Despite this achievement for women in politics, McLaughlin was still shocked by the behaviour of many of the men in the House of Commons.³⁵ One of the most shocking moments was when the men of the House of Commons laughed as Margaret Mitchell, the NDP MP for Vancouver East, spoke about wife battering and made jokes about the fact that “they don’t beat their wives”.³⁶ They were, according to McLaughlin, ironically proving to be abusive towards a woman trying to speak about women’s

abuse.³⁷ To McLaughlin, feminism has always been linked with social democracy, something that is fundamental to the NDP.³⁸ She argues that:

“Feminism means women having the ability to earn the same amount as men, and to get the same status as men for work done. It also means having your work acknowledged and your experience valued [...] every issue is a woman’s issue. How can the environment, defence, the economy and peace not be women’s issues?”³⁹

When asked what the main challenges for women in politics in general she stated:

“The portrayal of women in politics in the media is definitely a major issue. They are the arbitrator of what people know. The reason I hear the most for not getting involved is that women feel that they don’t want all the hassle and be harassed by the media over their looks and families and the list goes on. For women, this is a hurdle because women in politics aren’t the norm so they are singled out since the norm is typically a man, and in most cases, a white man [...] Family life is also a challenge, my children were grown when I became involved so it was easier to balance it but this is a tremendous issue. Finding that balance is difficult and people often judge you for it and if you do not have children, like Kim Campbell, you are accused of not understanding the problems of Canadians [...] One of the biggest challenges is that women aren’t taken seriously in general, whether it be in business or politics, but the most difficult thing is that most of the time women don’t take themselves seriously either and when we devalue ourselves we leave the

door open for other to do the same. They always think that they aren't qualified but they are! The challenge as Charlotte Whitten puts it: 'Whatever women do they must do twice as well as men to be thought half as good. Luckily, this is not difficult.'⁴⁰

Despite the challenges, McLaughlin always held her head high and governed with attention and care throughout her time in the House of Commons.⁴¹ She was in the House of Commons through some of the most controversial issues in Canadian history: the Meech Lake Accord, the GST debate, the Gulf War debate, the Charlottetown Accord, and she proved to be more than capable of dealing with these issues⁴². Her success was a tremendous step forward for women and some, such as Joyce Hayden, have referred to her as "the best riding representative the Yukon has ever had."⁴³

The Honourable Pat Duncan:

Patricia (Pat) Jane Duncan was born in Edmonton, Alberta but moved to the Yukon soon after.⁴⁴ Following the completion of her Bachelor of Arts in Political Science from Carleton University in Ottawa, Duncan returned to the Yukon and became an advance person for the Progressive Conservative MP at the time, Erik Nielsen.⁴⁵ She worked with him in Ottawa for two years before she followed the 'call of the North' back home to work.⁴⁶ In 1995, she decided to seek candidacy as a Liberal MLA, which came at the same time as her second pregnancy.⁴⁷ She conducted her entire campaign while she was pregnant, something she was both commended and criticized for as many argued that she should be focusing on raising her family as opposed to running as an MLA.⁴⁸ This issue affects women in politics everywhere as the balance between

family and politics is one of the hurdles most frequently identified by women in politics.⁴⁹

Duncan won the general election in September 1996 as the Liberal MLA for Porter Creek South.⁵⁰ Two years later, Duncan was elected leader of the Yukon Liberal Party where she served as the Leader of the Official Opposition in the legislature and in the 2000 general election Duncan led the Yukon Liberal Party to a majority government, defeating NDP leader Piers MacDonald.⁵¹ The Liberals were elected in ten ridings and received 42.7% of the popular vote.⁵² She became the first Liberal Premier of the Yukon and the territory's first woman Premier, and was also the first woman to win an election in which all the competing parties were led by men.⁵³ As the first woman elected as Premier, it took a bit of time for the media to realize that a woman had been elected to such a high-standing post in politics, as *The Globe and Mail* kept announcing “Mr. Duncan’s” victory.⁵⁴ This may also serve to show, however, the disconnection from the rest of Canada towards Yukon politics. Duncan was the Yukon Premier from April 2000 to November 2002.⁵⁵ In 2002, there were only three female party leaders across the country and Duncan was the only Premier.⁵⁶ To date, Duncan has been one of two female Premiers elected through general election.⁵⁷ There have been two others, Nellie Cournoyea of the Northwest Territories and Eva Aariak in Nunavut, elected through their consensus government system for the Premier position as opposed to a general election.⁵⁸ Despite this, the territories have all had a woman Premier, showing significant advancement for women north of the 60th parallel.

For Duncan, “politics is the medium I’ve chosen to explore my ideas and make a difference”.⁵⁹ It was not always easy to do so, however, and of her experience as a

woman in the Yukon Legislature, Duncan has said that “the high testosterone level in our Legislative Assembly gets to me at times.”⁶⁰ Her experience as a woman leader has led Duncan to believe that “women do their homework, work harder, and are better team players than men.”⁶¹ In 2002, the Yukon was home to the highest percentage of women representatives.⁶² Duncan wanted to ensure that it was a hospitable environment for women, so she pushed for non-sexist language to be adopted and pressed for consensus on the need to avoid violent terms and images in parliamentary debates and succeeded.⁶³ This was a significant advancement for women in politics.

On October 4, 2002, only two years into her five year term, she called a general election for November 4, 2002⁶⁴. Duncan was hoping for a stronger majority as three Liberal members had defected, changing her majority government to a minority one⁶⁵. Many Yukoners were angered by this quick return to the polls and the Liberals suffered a crushing defeat and the Liberals were reduced to only one seat: Duncan’s⁶⁶. The Yukon Party, led by Dennis Fentie, a former NDP MLA, won a majority by a landslide, claiming twelve out of the eighteen seats.⁶⁷ The number of women in the Yukon Legislature was reduced from five to three, representing a loss of twelve percent due to the small size of the legislature⁶⁸. At the 2005 Yukon Liberal Party leadership convention, Duncan was defeated by Arthur Mitchell and did not seek re-election in the 2006 general election.⁶⁹

Tumbling Down the Electoral Chart: What’s Happening Now in the Yukon?

In 2009, in the 32nd Legislative Assembly, the Yukon Party occupies ten seats; five seats are occupied by the official opposition, the Liberals, two by NDP and one

independent⁷⁰. There are only two women in the Legislative Assembly, Marian Horne, the MLA for Pelly-Nisutlin, and Elaine Taylor, MLA for Whitehorse West.⁷¹ This represents only eleven percent, which is nowhere near where the percentage of women's representation in politics to achieve gender parity.

The Honourable Elaine Taylor:

I interviewed the Honorable Elaine Taylor, the current Deputy Premier and Minister of Environment as well as the Minister of Tourism and Culture to gain more insight on the current experience of women in politics in the Yukon. Elaine Taylor was first elected to the Yukon Legislative Assembly in the general election of November 4th, 2002 and was re-elected in the general election of October 10th, 2006.⁷² On January 23rd, 2008, she was appointed Deputy Premier.⁷³ Taylor argues that the Yukon provides “countless examples of women who put their name on the ballot, worked to advance a cause and succeeded in bringing about change”.⁷⁴ She argues that she became involved in politics because:

“Like many others who have served office, I too chose to make a difference in my community [...] On the day I was first sworn into office, I was presented a plaque which reads a direct quote from Mahatma Ghandi. The quote reads, “Be the Change You Wish to see in the World”. The plaque sits on my desk and continues to serve as a reminder as to why I do what I do [...] it's about making a difference and part of that is being able to bring different perspectives to the table, perspectives which are representative of those who call Canada our home.”

I asked her about the importance of women in politics and she argued that:

“Women’s life experiences are different from men’s and therefore, women’s perspectives on issues – whether it may be childcare, elder care, health care, education to the environment - are different [...] Equal participation of women and men in decision making is a necessity for achieving sustainable development and quality of life [...] Women bring a different set of skills, life experiences and views about community needs to the table. I want to stress, however, that each and every woman is different from one another [...] Women for a whole host of reasons often tend to be the primary caregiver in any given household. Nurturing and caring for others are traits which women hold near and dear to their hearts. Because of this, women tend to bring a different style to leadership [...] a style which seeks to balance the traditional role of caring with the need to use the power they have to bring about change.”

When asked about the biggest challenges of women in politics, Taylor argued that:

“Women face some unique challenges. Combining motherhood and politics is one of them; that is striving to find the perfect balance between family and work. You see unlike other workplaces, there is no parental leave policy available for members of the Legislative Assembly.”

In 2004, while in office, Taylor gave birth to her first child, a son. Of this experience, she says that:

“At that time (2004), there also weren’t many other examples of women who had had a child while serving in Cabinet for me to draw upon [...] In fact, (I was) only the second woman Cabinet Minister in the country to have a baby. What soon became apparent, amongst the many attributes of being a new parent, were the hours associated with the sittings of the Legislative Assembly [...] These hours would still be an issue of concern if it wasn’t for the will and determination of three women legislators which comprised Yukon’s first ever women’s non-partisan caucus. Those legislators comprised of Pat Duncan, Liberal member, Lorraine Netro, NDP member and I, Yukon Party member [...] the one item that was presented was a motion to amend the Standing Orders to reflect a change in the normal hour of adjournment from 6:00 to 5:30 p.m. The motion, amongst many things, spoke to the recognition of the importance of family and making accommodation for family while serving the people of the Yukon. The proposed change - albeit a relatively small change - meant something different to all of us but the common element was family. The motion passed in the legislature, albeit not without debate in our respective caucuses. The motion, however, was a historic moment in which 3 women representing 3 political parties came together, parked the politics at the door and worked to effect change and that which resulted in more family friendly hours.”

I asked her about the other barriers which seemed to be in the way of women getting involved in politics and she stated that:

“Other barriers which are often spoken of pertain to the culture of parliament – the business of the house in which often confrontation more so than consensus tends to rule the day. Bringing respect, credibility and integrity to politics are traits that people expect of their representatives and deservedly so. Fear of public speaking, public scrutiny and perceptions that in order to run for office, one must hold certain qualifications are but further examples of systemic barriers.”

This led me to ask her where the Yukon is today in terms of women in politics and Taylor responded that:

“I am pleased to report the number of women who are putting their name forward for election is on the rise. In the last territorial election held in 2006, the overall number of women candidates increased as well, albeit the number of women who were elected decreased from three to two. The Yukon Party, as a case in point, fielded the most women candidates than in any other previous election and elected, in turn, the only two women who currently sit in the Yukon Legislature [...] On the municipal front, five of Yukon’s municipalities have women Mayors and a high number of women councilors. Likewise, Yukon has two woman chiefs representing self governing first nations [...] they are all making a difference in their own way, as difficult as the choice may be at times for women [...].”

When asked why politics, the answer was simple: “I do it to make a difference.”⁷⁵

Despite the many achievements made, the number of women in the current legislature is nowhere near where it

should be in order to break the glass ceiling and achieve gender parity and changes must be made to address this.

The Challenges of Women in Politics:

By speaking to these women, it is undeniable that there are facing the same hurdles as other women politicians across the country. These hurdles include, but are not limited to: the balance between politics and family, being taken seriously by voters and male politicians, the representation of women in the media, being the sacrificial lamb, feelings of inadequacy, the lack of role models and not being the norm. These issues are not limited to the Yukon, they are the same issues that the women in politics face across Canada. Jacquetta Newman and Linda White, in their book *Women, Politics, and Public Policy : the Political Struggles of Canadian Women*, identify these challenges as well and categorize them as: ideational, social and cultural; organizational; and institutional.⁷⁶ These issues affect women everywhere and are in great part responsible for why the representation of women is hovering at around twenty percent at the national level.⁷⁷ The key is to work towards breaking down these barriers by identifying the challenges and working together to find a solution to make politics more hospitable for women and to increase their participation and election. Certain suggestions, which have been brought forward to shatter the glass ceiling, will be discussed in a later section.

Why the success of women in the Yukon?

By studying the work of Yukon women in politics, it is clear that although each experienced something different in politics, there are still general themes and challenges that women in all aspects of politics across the country face. The question now remains, what has enabled

the women of the Yukon to surpass these challenges on many occasions? It is hard to determine this precisely but there are several factors at play. The territory's small size is one of them⁷⁸. When I asked this question to McLaughlin she said that:

“The advantage of the Yukon or any other small place is that people can get to know you personally, they know your work, they know who you are and they can connect with you on a more personal level and make their judgement which is not as possible in larger places. When they know you as a person and not just a politician, it seems they are more responsive [...] In the Yukon, it's the personal thing and the fact that you can't separate politics from the general culture and there have been many women here who have had non-traditional occupations and held senior posts that makes a change too. It shows that women can do all things. The Yukon is an anomaly as the Yukon is often considered as a small “c” conservative and there is somewhat of equality between the sexes [...] we haven't made it but progress has been done. But right now there are only two women in the Legislature and that is unacceptable!”

This holds true for many reasons. Many women have identified the depiction of women in the media as a barrier to getting involved in politics and in larger cities or electoral districts, people rely on the media to gain insight on political hopefuls and since the media can often be seen as ruthless towards women, this can alter the way in which they are viewed by voters and elected.⁷⁹ As McLaughlin established, when voters can get to know women politicians on a personal level, they can be more responsive. Furthermore, the Yukon's location in Northwest

Canada is also a factor. The West gave women the right to vote earlier than the rest of the country, and BC women have also made significant progress for women in politics. In addition, the women from the Northwest seem to have been pioneers in politics. Furthermore, the three territories have all had a woman Premier, which shows advancement but much work remains to be done. As McLaughlin puts it:

“The key is to keep going. Yes in the Yukon we have made it on very significant occasions and we have had a lot of women in senior positions but it’s always *A* woman, there is often not enough continuity. At one point there was myself at the federal level, Pat Duncan at the territorial and Kathy Watson at the municipal level as the mayor so there was one at all levels but afterwards, it seemed like there was a feeling of ‘OK, well that was cute-now let’s move on to something serious’.”

This is a continuous challenge in politics. Kim Campbell has been the only woman Prime Minister so far, and was only in power for three months.⁸⁰ It does not happen often, if at all, that a woman in a position of power is able to have another woman successor. McLaughlin says that the NDP was an exception when she was succeeded by Alexa McDonough.⁸¹ Women in politics all have something to contribute, whether it be different views on issues or different perspectives on leadership, it is important that their voices be heard. The glass ceiling seems to be a pretty resilient one in Canada, but it is through the work done by these women, and the work that is continuously being done by women across the country that we will someday be able to break it.

How to Shatter the Glass Ceiling?

The question remains, how can we do this? There have been several suggestions proposed from the women I interviewed and studied, and in Canada as general, such as changing the electoral system to a proportional representation system or implementing quotas.⁸² This is something that McLaughlin finds fundamental:

“This is controversial but I believe in quotas, quotas, quotas. I think that political parties have a real responsibility to implement quotas [...] we tried doing this when I was leader but it just didn’t happen. I do think this is hard to implement nationally but I think parties should do it and Elections Canada should support it with a financial incentive. Also, women need to be more confident. Women always say that they would love to get involved but don’t have the qualifications. I have heard the excuse that, “I do nothing, I stay at home with my kids”, so many times, and that is certainly not nothing! It is an important role [...] It is really important that the women elected believe in equality because there are many women that are elected that don’t believe in that and I’d rather have a man who believes in women’s equality than a woman who doesn’t [...] There needs to be encouragement and support [...] I am also a fan of having women’s committees within political parties because they do two things. They help women gain confidence and also help formulate policies for are positive for women. And they provide an opportunity to include men. Often we talk to the converted so it needs to branch out. If I’ve anything across the world, in Canada and the Yukon, it’s the refrain: Well we love to have women, there just

aren't enough qualified women!" Well come on, who is defining qualified! We have to do that ourselves and we are not doing that enough. We have so much potential."

The Honourable Elaine Taylor echoes this by saying that:

"I believe we need to continue to actively recruit more women. We need to be supportive and we need to start early; that is the more we can talk about women in leadership at all levels, the more successful we will be."⁸³

These recommendations must be taken into consideration and to achieve change, the issue of gender parity must be taken seriously by Canadian citizens and must be on political agendas at the provincial, territorial and national level.

Conclusion:

Through this research it is clear that women have made significant advancements in the Yukon and its politics, and have made it a more hospitable environment for women by altering the language used and the working hours, and continuing to strive for equality. Much work remains to be done, however. Even though the Yukon seems to have always been taking steps forward, the recent electoral numbers have shown only steps back in terms of women's representation. It is through continued dedication and cooperation that we will keep moving forward and reach equality. These women in Yukon politics have braved harsh winters, political barriers and have still shone with their heads held high. These women have risen up to the plate and have achieved many firsts and many significant achievements in Canadian politics. By doing so they have showed Canada and the rest of the world that the

Yukon has a voice and that the Yukon has a feminine voice. Author and former politician Joyce Hayden says it best:

“The many similarities in the lives of the women included in this history cross the boundaries of political parties, race, education, experience and even personal philosophies. By the number of firsts in their lives, it seems obvious that they were all trail blazers and risk takers. They were pioneers who were willing to make personal sacrifices necessary to stand up for what they believed in.”⁸⁴

These women have gotten involved because they care, because they can make a difference and because they can. These women are still pioneers and are still continuing to provide a better society for all Yukoners and by doing so, are working towards a better and more equal Canada.

Notes

¹ Arscott Jane, Trimble Linda. *Still Counting: Women in Politics across Canada*. Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press. 2003.

² *Ibid.*

³ Hayden, Joyce. *Yukon's Women of Power: Political Pioneers in a Northern Canadian Colony*. Whitehorse: Windwalker Press. 1999. P. VII

⁴ Yukon Bureau of Statistics. Age and Sex. Census 2006. www.eco.gov.yk.ca/stats/pdf/age06.pdf

⁵ Hayden, Joyce. *Yukon's Women of Power: Political Pioneers in a Northern Canadian Colony*. 1999

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

Yukon Legislative Assembly. Accessed March 10th, 2009 at: <http://www.legassembly.gov.yk.ca/>

¹⁰ Arscott Jane, Trimble Linda. *Still Counting: Women in Politics across Canada*. 2003

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Taylor, Elaine. E-mail interview. March 20th, 2009.