

Pat Carney: An Honourable Member

Pat Carney est la première femme du parti progressiste conservateur de la Colombie Britannique à être élue à la Chambre des Communes.

Elle parle des problèmes et des récompenses qui attendent une femme dans la chambre.

*'The world of politics is as yet a strange and unfamiliar world to most women.'*¹

In March, 1978 when three women met to talk politics over luncheon at La Raclette, a West Broadway restaurant in Vancouver, no woman was less familiar with practical politics than Pat Carney, one of those three. A few weeks earlier Pat Carney — journalist, economist, President of Gemini North, and mother of a 12-year-old son — had received a phone call from Joe Clark, leader of the Progressive Conservative opposition in Ottawa. He wanted to know if she would stand as a candidate for the Conservative party in the Vancouver Centre riding. Pat, who had been about to leave the house to drive her son to school when the phone rang, told Clark she had no time to talk right then. Now, a few weeks later, she was still weighing the pros and cons of throwing her hat in the political ring.

The call from Clark had not been entirely unexpected, of course. Political parties are always on the look-out for outstanding candidates, and the local search committee had long been convinced that Pat Carney had the attributes of a winner. At 40, Pat had a successful career in journalism behind her, as senior business columnist for the *Vancouver Sun* and reporter on economic affairs in the press gallery in Ottawa. Subsequently, in partnership, she had formed and become president of a consulting firm with offices in Yellowknife and Vancouver with contracts throughout the western provinces and the Far East. During the previous summer, she had acquired a high profile as manager of media relations at the very successful Habitat Conference in Vancouver. It was not surprising, then, that Tony Saunders, campaign manager for the federal Tories in B.C., would recommend Pat as a high calibre candidate for the prestigious riding of Vancouver Centre.

But there were many factors to be considered. Pat was not independently wealthy. She depended on her business to support herself and her son. She was not a member of a political party and had only vague ideas of the support that would be forthcoming from the party in an election campaign. As a member of Parliament, could she afford to keep two residences, one in her riding and one in Ottawa? If she took her son with her to Ottawa, would she see anything of him, with the House sitting from 2:30 to 8:30, and with the problems of the constituency taking her back to Vancouver on weekends? In addition, the traditionally male-dominated political recruitment structure was an unexpressed but ever-present bogey on the horizon.

At this time I was president of the Progressive Conservative Women in British Columbia. It seemed to me that I could best help my party and Pat Carney by trying to give her a realistic picture of the problems facing her and of the practical help that she could expect from the party. So we met for lunch.

With us that day was Dawn MacDonald, editor of a new magazine, *City Woman*, a journal planned to serve the interests of women 'formed in the age of affluence and shaped by life in Canada's three largest cities.' As editor of this magazine, Dawn MacDonald was interested in the business and political worlds that were opening up to women and she planned to run a profile of Carney's business and political career. Her presence at lunch, I felt, meant that Carney was almost certain she would try for the nomination in Vancouver Centre.

The first step to be taken, I explained to Pat, was to become a member of the Progressive Conservative party. Fifty-one per cent of Conservative members are women. But many women, like many men, are

reluctant to join a political party, to make a commitment to one party's policies. Many women, in particular, are issue-oriented. The pro- and anti-abortionists, the anti-nuclear and environmental radicals, all lobby to have a political party publicly support their stand. They seek political solutions but they voice distrust of political parties generally. They do not lack the courage to stand up and be counted regarding specific issues, but they see no need to declare themselves where broader political principles are concerned.

What practical help could the Progressive Conservative Women's Association (PCWA) give a candidate? The Women's Association in B.C. is organized on federal riding lines; that is, there is a women's association in most federal ridings (though there was none in Vancouver Centre at that time). Not all Conservative women belong to a women's association. Many women perceive women's groups as archaic and inferior. They deplore their afternoon tea image. For many women in B.C. however, their work in the association is only one facet of their involvement in their political party. Joan Gillanders is an outstanding example. Joan was campaign manager for MP John Reynolds in 1974, and at the same time served on the provincial and national executives of the PCWA. Joan went on to become riding secretary to MP Tom Siddon, and was then elected President of the Progressive Conservative party in B.C.

Involvement in the Women's Association does not seem to isolate women from the mainstream of politics — quite the opposite. This may be because the PCWA is not primarily concerned with women's issues. It does provide a platform for the discussion of women's issues, many of its policy resolutions are concerned with women's issues, and it lobbies for affirmative action in the appointment of

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women to boards and commissions, but its interests include any political issue of the day. Seminars are sponsored by the PCWA on such topics as 'The Canadian Economy,' 'How to Organize a Campaign Office,' and 'Marketing Boards: Pro or Con,' just as often as seminars on 'The Problems of the Aging Woman' or 'Women and Politics.' So it was from this group of experienced political volunteers that I could offer Pat Carney help in her attempt to become a Progressive Conservative candidate. This group could form a nucleus to spread the word of Pat's candidacy, to sell and deliver memberships, to enlist new supporters, to stimulate publicity, to do the hundred-and-one 'jo jobs' that are necessary for a candidate to win a nomination in a contested riding.

Our conversation at lunch that day did not result in Carney's immediate decision to declare herself a candidate. She was impressed by the practical help offered, but her ultimate decision was based on many factors. Certainly it was influenced by her friends. Many of them, like Texie Verbrugge, a young lawyer, and Evelyn Atkinson, a member of the Vancouver Parks Board, were Conservatives of long standing and considerable influence. Pat's mother, too, had actively supported the Conservatives. Pat's son was keen to have his mother run, and Pat herself, facing the difficulties that had been spelled out for her, nevertheless had the desire to serve. So the decision was taken.

Pat Carney was opposed in her bid for the nomination by a very able Progressive Conservative politician named Douglas Jung. Jung had been the youngest member of Parliament in the Diefenbaker years. He still had a large and energetic group of followers that was to grow in the weeks before nomination day. It is interesting to note that many of those supporters were women, for it is a fact that some women, while supporting affirmative action by government agencies and private corporations in the appointment and promotion of women, are nevertheless reluctant to practice affirmative action themselves. They do not want to be 'unfair'!

The contest for the PC nomination in Vancouver Centre, however, was not a female versus male struggle. The fact that Carney was a woman was not raised. Conservatives regarded the contest as new Conservative versus old Conservative. Jung was perceived by many as one who had had his day, by others as a loyal Conservative who



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deserved loyalty in return. Pat Carney was seen by all as Joe Clark's candidate. Some regarded this as interference in local riding matters, others as an indication that Pat was Cabinet material. Feelings ran high.

Winning a nomination is a matter not only of convincing present party members that you are the best candidate, but also of selling more new memberships than your opponent. Pat's friends and business associates rallied around. Hundreds of new memberships were sold. On nomination night the hall was packed. When the speeches were over and the votes counted, Pat Carney had won.

That was in May, 1978. Everyone expected the election to be called any day. But weeks and months passed and the writ was not dropped. The uncertainty became a stumbling block in Carney's business. How could she give projected completion dates for projects with the possibility of an election intervening? It became increasingly difficult to give time to campaign obligations — time that was needed in her business. Reluctantly, in March, 1979, Pat decided that she must withdraw from the political field.

Three weeks after Pat Carney withdrew as a candidate, the election was called. This made it necessary for Carney to run for the nomination again. Her opponents this time were two university professors: one in economics at the University of British Columbia; one a constitutional expert from Simon Fraser. However, Pat had one successful nomination bid under her belt and had no trouble with the second.

Pat Carney's opponents in the May, 1979 election were Art Phillips, ex-mayor of Vancouver, husband of Carole Taylor, and as newly a member of the Liberal party as Carney was of the Conservatives and Ron Johnson, a veteran NDP candidate in Vancouver Centre. It was Carney and Phillips, neck and neck, until the results of a recount established Phillips as the winner by 85 votes. The Conservatives had won the election but Pat Carney had lost.

The February, 1980 election brought the opposite result. This time Pat's nomination was not opposed. The

tide of provincial support for the NDP made her chief opponent Ron Johnson, not Phillips. When the results were counted the Conservatives had lost the election, but Pat Carney had won her seat. She was the first Conservative woman in B.C. to be elected to the House of Commons.

When Parliament met again in the spring of 1980 and Pat Carney, in her role as opposition critic to the Minister of State, had cause to question that Minister, his reply referred to Pat as 'the woman Member.' In a small historical vignette in that House which has seen so much drama, the Speaker — herself a woman — rose and declared that the member from Vancouver Centre was entitled, as were all Members, to be addressed as 'the Honourable Member.'

Now the world of politics is no longer strange and unfamiliar to Pat Carney, the Honourable Member from Vancouver Centre. But what of other women in B.C.? Flora MacDonald has said that every woman MP needs a good wife. There is no putdown of women in that remark — quite the opposite. It recognizes an essential role in human relationships, a role of nurturing and supporting. In B.C. in the future, for Conservative women interested in a political career, that role is going to be filled by other Conservative women. Because of their close involvement with the problems that Pat Carney experienced, and as a result of discussions at the Status of Women and University of Victoria's jointly sponsored seminar on Women and Politics, Conservative women have evolved the idea of a big sister network in their party. Any PC woman, young or old, who is interested in becoming a federal candidate now or in the future, will be able to turn to one or more Conservative women for advice and continuing support. A women's network is a viable part of the changing role of women in the '80s — such a network could be a valuable foundation in the development of political careers.

As this big sister network gains in experience and scope, we hope it will encourage women to enter a field that has been as foreign to them as coal mining. We hope that other political parties will copy our idea so that one day the world of politics will be a familiar and exciting place for women to be. ©

¹ Diane Langevin, *Missing Persons: Women in Canadian Federal Politics* (Advisory Council on the Status of Women, March, 1977).