

# BELINDA STRONACH

## International Women's Day

*Toronto Star*  
March 7 2009

International Women's Day, first commemorated almost 100 years ago, is a time to celebrate a century of achievement and advancement for women in Canada. But it also serves as an annual reminder that pride of progress cannot make us complacent before the issues that affect women in their everyday lives.

Women with young daughters know the mixed emotions that can stem from conversations about the rights and relative status of women. So many young people today hold the belief that the battle for equality has been well and truly won. This is encouraging, because it means they themselves are encountering few obvious systemic obstacles or barriers. But it is also unsettling, because it means they may be unaware that too many are still subjected to discrimination and disparity.

Taking stock of the state of Canadian women in 2009 means taking a hard look at the inequalities that remain, and taking action to help eliminate them. There is much we can do as individuals.

First, we need to understand that the price of our century of achievement is the need for vigilance. The recent decision of the federal government to weaken provisions relating to pay equity for Canada's federal public servants demonstrates how tenuous some of our victories may be. If we are silent on this issue, it will become easier for governments to ignore the voices of women.

Second, we need to encourage policies and build institutions that help to empower the equal treatment of women. Among other things, that means stepping up the pressure on governments to make a priority of implementing quality and affordable child care right across our country. It is distressing that in a time of massive government spending in the name of stimulus, there has been little public pressure on Ottawa to fund a system of child care and early learning, an investment that would create jobs in the short-term, but would pay off again down the road in the form of better-educated children and more successful women in the work force.

Third, we need to embrace mentoring. I would encourage successful women from all walks of life to give of their valuable time to organizations that provide Canadian girls and young woman with access to the life-changing benefits of mentorship. This empowers them with knowledge, experience and leadership at a time in life when that guidance and support can make all the difference.

Fourth, we need to work to elect more women to Parliament and other levels of elected office, not merely to fight for the issues that matter most to us, like equal pay for equal work, a national caregiver agenda, and more flexible parental benefits, but to bring a women's perspective to the issues that matter more broadly to our nation.

We are of course long past the time when a woman entering politics prompted men to gasp at the audacity of it all. But we haven't achieved equality of numbers, in fact, we're not even close. While women represent 52% of the Canadian population, only 22% of federal Members of Parliament are women; this ranks Canada #46 out of 189 countries in this indicator, behind Rwanda, Iraq and Afghanistan. We haven't achieved the kind of progress that so many Canadian women seek in advancing social justice and improving the tone of political discourse in the House of Commons and beyond.

As women, we owe much to those who over the past hundred years struggled for and aspired to a Canada in which true equality is a reality. The most fitting way to celebrate these past achievements is to help forge new ones.

The Honourable Belinda Stronach, P.C.

*Belinda Stronach is former member of Parliament for the Ontario riding of Newmarket-Aurora and chair of The Belinda Stronach Foundation.*