

BELINDA STRONACH

Make changes to accommodate women in politics, Stronach says

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Canadian women have made great strides forward in the workforce, but should have a stronger presence in the federal government and the country's boardrooms, executive and former politician Belinda Stronach says.

In her keynote address to a Women in Public Life luncheon Tuesday, Stronach said government officials should implement "radical re-adjustments" to help women overcome the serious challenges they encounter when considering a political career.

"In the push to attract more women to federal politics in Canada, we need to do a much better job in explaining why it's relevant to our quality of life," she said. "Women would be more willing to make that personal sacrifice required for national and provincial public life, provided the commitments they make make a real difference."

During the meeting, Stronach — the 44-year-old executive vice-chair of Magna International Inc., founded by her father, Frank — received the Equal Voice's Eve award for her philanthropic work and contributions to the promotion of women in public life.

A mother of two, Stronach also said the travel involved with a political career often collides with responsibilities many women have, such as caring for their children or elderly parents.

"In federal-level politics, a woman must live and work in Ottawa for extended periods of time and sometimes be gone for five to six days a week. She'll be separated from her children back at home and this can be the most difficult part of public life."

Stronach, who left the Magna boardroom to serve as an MP in 2004, suggested Parliament should consider introducing video-conferencing for committee meetings and encourage online voting.

"We now have this reliable technology and it's used elsewhere all the time," she said. "This would allow a greater number of women and men to feel more able to provide for a balanced family and public service."

In addition to her four-year stint in federal politics, Stronach has been involved in a number of charitable projects.

In 2006, Stronach co-founded Spread the Net, a national fundraising campaign that educates Canadians about malaria and sends bed nets to African families. She is also a board member of Malaria No More and chair of its Canadian chapter.

In 2008, she established the Belinda Stronach Foundation to help fund education for young women and aboriginal youth in developing countries.

Previous Eve award winners include Kim Campbell — Canada's only female prime minister — 89-year-old Mississauga Mayor Hazel McCallion and Health Minister Leona Aglukkaq.