

BELINDA STRONACH

High-tech politics may lure women to Ottawa

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The sold-out crowd at the Chateau Laurier applauded Stronach for stressing that politics isn't just a job — it's public service, and noting that women are keen to give back to their community and country.

Stronach now divides her own time between executive duties at the Magna International firm founded by her father and running her own foundation focused on improving the lives of people in developing countries. She wonders why Ottawa doesn't adopt some tools of modern communication to make political life more flexible for women and for men with family demands.

"I think we should consider some radical adjustments to the way that Parliament does its business," she said. "We could, for example, institute video-conferencing and afford people the option to participate in committees or caucus meetings by video-conferencing. We now have the reliable technology and it's used elsewhere, all the time, for distance work."

Similarly, she asked why in this day and age, MPs actually have to be physically present in the Commons to cast a vote. "We could even put in place electronic distance voting in the House. This would allow a greater number of women and men to feel more able to balance family and public service," she said.

Stronach was honoured at an annual lunch by the Equal Voice organization, which was set up to help improve women's representation in elected politics. She didn't reply to questions about whether she'd consider a return to politics, though she made many jokes and references to her political career, which included a leadership run with the Conservatives, a dramatic floor-crossing to the Liberals, a stint in Paul Martin's cabinet as Human Resources Minister, and winding up as an opposition backbencher and chair of the Liberal women's caucus. She resigned soon after a private — and successful — fight with breast cancer in 2008.

Stronach was asked which of her careers had brought her the most fulfilment — politics, business or philanthropy.

Smiling, she offered a quick retort: "There are four options. My love life is more fulfilling."

This was a backhanded reference to all the attention that Stronach garnered during her political life for her romantic entanglements with Peter MacKay, now the Defence Minister, and NHL tough guy Tie Domi.

Stronach also said that she got tired of answering questions about which designer's clothes she was wearing when she made political appearances.

What really may be keeping women from federal politics is the sense that it's irrelevant, she said.

"Women can handle partisan sniping, no problem, but only if it's an unavoidable cost to do something really meaningful."