

## 13 Paradise lost?

### Gender parity and the Nunavut experience

*Manon Tremblay and Jackie Steele*

In 1999 Canada saw the addition of a third Territory to its political landscape, namely, the Territory of Nunavut, which means 'Our Land' or 'Our Home' in the Inuit language of Inuktitut. Situated in the Canadian Arctic, Nunavut covers over 1.9 million sq. km representing almost 20 per cent of the total area of Canada. This vast territory is inhabited by the Inuit people, whose culture and ways on the land have allowed them to live in conditions that most Canadians would consider inhospitable. Heavily dependent upon financial transfers from the federal government, the Territory of Nunavut has a mixed economy, wherein both an emergent cash economy and the relationship with the land continue to be essential. Straddling tradition and modernity, the expression of this hybrid reality can be found in the political regime of Nunavut. If the new Canadian territory maintained a privileged place for British-style parliamentary traditions, it also sought to adapt them to Inuit traditions of equality. The best example of this can be found in the proposal to retain a first-past-the-post system but to make it a two-member system that reflects the gendered duality of humanity.

An analysis of this proposal for two-member, gender-balanced representation will be the focus of this chapter. We will begin with a general profile of Nunavut, followed by an outline of the theoretical framework inspiring our analysis and the methodology employed. We will then provide a description of the proposal put forward by the Nunavut Implementation Commission. Finally, we will analyse the variables contributing to the defeat of the proposal and articulate the lessons that can be learned from this extremely rich case study.

#### **A brief profile of Nunavut**

The Territory of Nunavut resulted from the splitting of an existing northern polity, the North West Territories. Specifically, in 1976 the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada, a pan-Inuit organisation, put forward a proposal for the creation of the Territory of Nunavut, carved out of the centre and the eastern parts of the existing North West Territories. In the face of increas-

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ing tension around the sovereignist movement in Quebec, the federal government was hesitant to support the formation of what would become a second geographical jurisdiction that was defined by a cultural and linguistic community distinct from the rest of English-speaking Canada. None the less, after the election of a majority of Inuit representatives to the Legislative Assembly of the North West Territories in 1979, steps were taken to consult the population of the North West Territories about the division of the territory. In a plebiscite held on 14 April 1982 a majority voted in favour of the creation of the Territory of Nunavut. A tripartite Nunavut Implementation Commission was created to develop recommendations that would be adopted by representatives of the federal government, the government of the North West Territories, and of Nunavut Tunngavik; it served as the implementing body for the preparations leading up to the creation of the Territory of Nunavut on 1 April 1999.

According to the 2001 census, the Territory of Nunavut has a population of roughly 27,000 people, 85 per cent of whom are Inuit. The territory has the youngest population in Canada, with 60 per cent of Nunavummiut being under the age of 25.<sup>1</sup> However, the life expectancy of a baby born in Nunavut in 1996 was fully ten years lower than the Canadian average, and infant mortality rates were three times the national rate.<sup>2</sup> These statistics paint a reality for Nunavut families that is very different from the rest of Canada. In 2001, fully 34.5 per cent of girls/women were still citing pregnancy or child-care responsibilities as the reason for not completing their elementary or high-school education.<sup>3</sup> The absence of quality child-care services has been a serious disincentive to women's ability to enter the work force, given the isolation of communities.<sup>4</sup> This demographic reality persists within a societal context where basic infrastructure supports are gravely insufficient. Nunavut has virtually no roads and over half of Inuit residents live in overcrowded living conditions: an additional 3,000 housing units would be necessary to place the living conditions of the Inuit on a par with Canadian norms.<sup>5</sup>

With respect to its formal political institutions, Nunavut has for the most part adopted the Westminster model for its governance. The legislative branch of the state is composed of 19 Members of the Legislative Assembly (hereafter, MLAs), elected through a first-past-the-post electoral system. The Executive includes a Commissioner, who essentially assumes the role and tasks akin to the Lieutenant Governors of the Canadian Provinces, a Premier and Cabinet Ministers. The Premier and his/her Ministers are chosen from among the Members of the Legislative Assembly, who are all individually elected by universal suffrage and are enjoined by the principle of collective and individual ministerial responsibility. Unlike the Prime Minister of Canada and the Premiers of Canadian provinces, in Nunavut the Premier is elected by his/her peers in the Assembly.<sup>6</sup> Following the tradition adopted in the North West Territories, Nunavut has a non-partisan system that functions according to the prin-

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1 ciple of consensus, rather than the adversarial bipartisan system typical of  
2 the Westminster model. While this might seem like a good omen for  
3 women's representation, in fact the 2004 elections in Nunavut saw the  
4 election of only two women to the Nunavut Legislative Assembly, a pro-  
5 portion of merely 10.5 per cent. This has occurred despite the fact that  
6 the constitutional and institutional engineers of the new Territory of  
7 Nunavut had seriously reflected upon the issue of women's political  
8 underrepresentation.

### 10 **Theoretical framework**

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12 When examining political institutions and practices, three main models of  
13 democracy come to mind: representative democracy, direct democracy  
14 and deliberative democracy. In Canada, although representative democ-  
15 racy predominates, the other models can also advance our understand-  
16 ing of political events. Representative democracy is grounded in the idea  
17 that the population delegates its sovereign authority to a restricted  
18 number of individuals who will act in their name. By contrast, a central  
19 tenet of direct democracy 'lies in recognizing that sovereignty rests with all  
20 citizens rather than exclusively with a small group of representatives, no  
21 matter how carefully chosen',<sup>7</sup> while deliberative democracy 'holds that  
22 decisions are best reached through public deliberation – argument,  
23 debate, exchange of ideas – among citizens'.<sup>8</sup>

24 The representative model of democracy raises the question of the selec-  
25 tion and, moreover, of the identity of the representatives chosen, as well as  
26 their relationship with the population. An ongoing challenge for political  
27 theorists and practitioners, the question of who is to be selected is not  
28 new. Central to the debates leading up to the ratification of the American  
29 Constitution, the federalist camp argued in favour of the representation  
30 of ideas (and interests); the selection of representatives was understood to  
31 reflect the wisdom, virtue, talent or fortune of delegates, not their resem-  
32 blance to the population at large. Conversely, anti-federalists pleaded in  
33 favour of representatives whose living conditions closely reflected that of  
34 the people, in order to better represent their realities or, in modern  
35 terms, to best reflect their diverse identities.

36 In addition to questions central to the theory and practice of political  
37 representation, in modern politics, two key institutions act as mediators  
38 between the political class and the population at large: the electoral  
39 system and political parties. The electoral system is the mechanism that  
40 serves to translate the popular vote (as expressed at election time) into  
41 seats in the legislative assembly. The principles guiding the selection of a  
42 candidate differs for each type of electoral system, be it majoritarian or  
43 proportional in nature. Under a plurality/majority system (notably, under  
44 a first-past-the-post, single-member district system), party leaders choose  
45 candidates who will maximise the party's chances of winning in a given

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district, irrespective of broader considerations such as the overall inclusiveness (or 'representativeness') of the assembly. By contrast, under proportional representation (notably under List PR), there is an incentive to maximise the party's collective appeal by including candidates from as many social groups as possible; the exclusion of an important demographic may be read as discriminatory, which may in turn lead to decreased support from voters. Regardless of the electoral system in place, elected representatives often feel more indebted to their political party than to the electorate, given that their election and re-election, not to mention their responsibilities, positioning and future advancement within the party and/or legislative assembly, depend upon their political party.<sup>9</sup>

What makes the Nunavut case of particular interest, therefore, is the absence of political parties, given that parties are often cited for their influence upon women's access to legislative assemblies. Although numerous studies point to political parties as a key obstacle to the election of women,<sup>10</sup> they have also served as a springboard for women's representation through the use of quotas.<sup>11</sup> As such, the absence of political parties in Nunavut can be interpreted positively as having removed an important barrier to the election of women; or, conversely, if understood as an opportunity structure for advancing women's representation, the absence of political parties in Nunavut can be seen as less fortunate. Our analysis will show that the election of women does not depend upon any single variable, but rather that women's representation must be understood within the context of complex circumstances relating to many political and cultural factors. Although representative democracy is often criticised for its inability to promote women's rights, our observations will serve to highlight the weaknesses that abound from deliberative and participatory democracy, especially when they are used as a last resort and without sufficient consideration given to the amount of time and preparation necessary for their successful implementation.

### Methodology

In order to acquire a better grasp of the many factors influencing the gender parity plebiscite, we explored the existing literature on the creation of the Territory of Nunavut, as well as that treating the proposal of two-member, gender-balanced representation in particular. This survey of relevant primary and secondary sources was enriched with elite interviews. This approach is interesting in that it invites the perspectives of the actors who were intimately involved in the societal transformations under way. On the other hand, it is one that fails to engage the views of the general Inuit population.

Interviewees were either implicated in the events surrounding the formation of the new territory and/or are involved in Nunavut politics currently. Conducted by telephone, these interviews took place between September and December 2004 and included the following:

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- 1 • An anonymous former senior official of the Status of Women Council  
2 of the North West Territories. This interview provided insight into the  
3 mobilising efforts of the council and the difficulties raised by virtue of  
4 having the council and its minister in opposing ideological camps.
- 5 • The Hon. Paul Okalik, Premier of Nunavut. This interview exposed  
6 the informal mechanisms that have been employed to advance  
7 women in politics since the defeat of the gender parity proposal.
- 8 • The Hon. Leona Aglukkaq, Minister of Finance and Government  
9 House Leader. Her perspectives clearly exposed the competing ideo-  
10 logies of representation that played out in the debates for and against  
11 gender parity.
- 12 • John Merritt, former Legal Counsel, Nunavut Implementation Com-  
13 mission. This interview was particularly useful in identifying the pro-  
14 cedural and political challenges that the Nunavut Implementation  
15 Commission's gender parity recommendation faced.
- 16 • Clara Evalik, former Nunavut Implementation Commission Commis-  
17 sioner and a former director with Pauktuutit Inuit Women's Associ-  
18 ation. This interview highlighted the role of religion in affecting the  
19 debates for and against gender parity.
- 20 • The Hon. Ed Picco, Minister of Education. This interview illuminated  
21 the ideological and administrative concerns that motivated the cam-  
22 paign of the North West Territories Nunavut Caucus against the  
23 gender parity proposal, as well as the ideological vision of their  
24 spokesperson, Manitok Thompson.

**The proposal**

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28 In December 1995, the Nunavut Implementation Commission put  
29 forward a proposal on gender parity that was ultimately brought to the  
30 representatives of the federal government, North West Territories and  
31 Nunavut Tunngavik for consideration. As such, the commission's proposal  
32 for a gender-balanced assembly was a few years ahead of Scotland and  
33 Wales, and of the constituency-twinning policy used in the election of  
34 1999. The Nunavut Implementation Commission proposal argued that  
35 balanced representation in politics is more than a call for recognition of  
36 shared interest: rather, it is a call for recognition of a historically mis-  
37 treated group in society.<sup>12</sup> Second, it proposed a model of dual-member  
38 constituencies that had been used in other provinces and arguably would  
39 be better suited to the Canadian legislative model than proportional  
40 representation.<sup>13</sup> According to the proposed model, the electorate of  
41 Nunavut would have two votes to choose the two representatives of their  
42 riding, one to be chosen from a list of female candidates and one to be  
43 chosen from the list of male candidates. Each electoral district would have  
44 had two representatives in the Legislative Assembly, namely the female  
45 and male candidates who received the most support in the riding. Given

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that each riding would have a male and female representative, the proposed model would have led to a legislative assembly with gender parity: a world first.

On 26 May 1997, the Nunavut Implementation Commission proposal was submitted to a popular plebiscite in the form of this question: 'Should the first Nunavut Legislative Assembly have equal numbers of men and women MLAs, with one man and one woman elected to represent each electoral district?' Although only 43 per cent of the voters supported the proposal, a mere 39 per cent of Nunavut residents actually cast their vote.<sup>14</sup> Fully 61 per cent of the Nunavut population abstained from voting. Several factors can be seen to have influenced this result. It would seem that many voters were either unsure of what choice to make, were perhaps turned off by the infighting among Inuit elites during the campaign, or were out on the land during the month when the vote was held. The vote against gender parity can hardly be understood as a clear mandate from the people. That the plebiscite would invite widespread debate on gender roles had in fact not been foreseen by political leaders and consequently there was an insufficient amount of time, energy, and resources devoted to explaining the two visions of equality being put forward.

### Analysis

Given the strong support among most of the Nunavut elite, and in particular, among all of the main Inuit organisations and the vast majority of prominent Inuit leaders, what factors can be said to have contributed to the defeat of the gender parity proposal? One important factor is that it unintentionally spurred a widespread debate on the fundamentals of social organisation. First, within the discussions of the tripartite political elite, there was disagreement as to which ideal of equality should serve as the cornerstone of the new legislative assembly. Second, the move to hold a popular plebiscite led to discussions and debates as to the appropriate relationship of Inuit women and men within society.

### *Competing traditions of equality*

At the level of ideas, the Nunavut Implementation Commission attempted to render operational, in terms of political representation, the theoretical ideal of gender equality. This ideal encompasses an understanding of gender differences as affecting the life experiences and views of both women and men, and of the value of having both groups contribute to the governance of the society. Associated by interviewees with traditional Inuit culture, the commitment to gender equality was repeatedly linked with the symbiotic relationship of women and men in society and the fact that the survival of the Inuit people had relied on their collective contributions. According to a former senior official of the North West Territories

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1 Status of Women Council, it was a means of both symbolically and practi-  
2 cally institutionalising the theoretical commitment to the equal value of the  
3 contributions and life experiences of both women and men. Indeed, the  
4 information pamphlet sent to all Nunavut homes, *Building our Future*  
5 *Together: Information about Gender Parity*, clearly stated, 'In traditional Inuit  
6 culture women and men were equal partners, each respected for their  
7 skills and knowledge.' Interviewees commented most often that the  
8 gender parity initiative advanced a commitment to equality grounded in  
9 the belief that the whole of Inuit society would benefit from better laws if  
10 the latter were informed by the life experiences and views of both  
11 genders. The equal representation of both groups was understood as a  
12 public good that would be upheld in each election.

13 Conversely, the opponents of the gender parity proposal took the uni-  
14 versalistic view wherein 'homo politicus' is a single actor devoid of social  
15 markers. Their assumption was that equality is best ensured by ignoring  
16 gender, racial or other differences. Placed firmly at the individual level,  
17 equality was defined not in terms that relate to the collective contributions  
18 of women and men, but rather in terms that relate to the individual merit  
19 and ability of a given disembodied person to represent and advance the  
20 general interests of the population at large. Good laws and public policy  
21 were seen to result from equal opportunity of all individuals to compete  
22 for the role of representing the society at large. To that end, equal  
23 representation was to be measured in terms of both the procedural equal-  
24 ity of competition, as well as in terms of its ability to affirm the value of the  
25 individuals that are selected in each election. Director of Community  
26 Affairs and the Women's Directorate MLA Manitok Thompson was  
27 selected by the North West Territories Nunavut Caucus to advance this  
28 view, and the idea that the proposal was both discriminatory (against  
29 men) by reserving seats for women who might not be the best representa-  
30 tives, and discriminatory against women for assuming that women could  
31 not get elected without representational guarantees.

32 Ultimately, given the lack of consensus among the political elite with  
33 executive decision-making power, the issue was taken outside the  
34 representative democracy model and was delegated to society at large  
35 through the vehicles of deliberative and direct democracy; this had the  
36 effect of imposing an even higher threshold on its acceptance. According  
37 to the Nunavut Implementation Commission's legal counsel, John Merritt,  
38 the Nunavut Act passed by the federal parliament in 1993 had referenced  
39 the creation of the new territory in accordance with the existing proce-  
40 dures used in the North West Territories. The decision to adopt a new  
41 form of electoral system would therefore require the federal parliament to  
42 amend the Act before the first election, and only thereafter would the new  
43 territory's executive be at liberty to amend its electoral system. Given that  
44 the Liberal Women's Commission had already taken an interest in devel-  
45 opments in Nunavut, he suggested that the issue of gender-balanced

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governance might have taken on national importance, as the House of Commons would have had to specifically amend the Nunavut Act in order to support the new system of gender parity. He suggested that the federal Minister of Indian Affairs, facing strong opposition from the Nunavut Caucus, made the political decision to request a popular plebiscite in order to seek a clear mandate from Inuit society.

***Competing traditions of gender relations***

While the terms of the debates championed by the political elites centered around the theoretical foundations of 'gender equality' and 'equal representation', discussion among the population focused more squarely upon the practical impact the proposal might have upon the roles of women and men in society. Reflecting fears that the proposal might threaten traditional roles, proponents and opponents argued that gender parity would either strengthen or weaken the family. The former likened the Nunavut Legislative Assembly to the home and defended the equal contribution of both fathers *and mothers* in politics with the foundation of a stronger Inuit society and culture; conversely, given the central role of women in care-giving and in the maintenance of family relations, the latter group suggested that families would suffer if women were encouraged to participate in politics.<sup>15</sup> Women's opposition to the proposal may also reflect a deep-seated commitment to maintaining strong families, and the fear of increasing social problems that increase women's burden.<sup>16</sup> The practical implications of a mere 12 women being engaged in the responsibilities of territorial governance fell by the wayside in what became a more symbolic discussion around the proper sphere of women and men within Inuit society.

The maintenance of cultural identity is often a process related to symbolic control.<sup>17</sup> While many invoked traditional Inuit culture as having historically respected and valued the contributions of both women and men on a par without regard to their gender, others argued that women and men had distinct yet complementary spheres of influence. Increased unemployment among men and the more prominent role of women as breadwinners was such that many men saw gender parity in politics as a further encroachment upon men's traditional role in Inuit culture as the providers of income, information and power within society. While conservative groups suggested that gender parity was an 'import' from the south, the invocation of Christian beliefs to oppose the proposal went unquestioned.<sup>18</sup> Former Nunavut Implementation Commission Commissioner Clara Evalik criticised the role of religious groups in playing upon the fears of the communities in an attempt to defeat the proposal. The discussions that resulted from the gender parity proposal were such that the population was being asked to define which version of 'Inuit traditions' (pre-contact, post-contact or a mixture of both) should form the

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1 basis of gender relations and democratic practice in their new territory.  
2 This was not a simple question, given that the past 50 years had seen  
3 tremendous upheavals in Inuit society in terms of their connection with  
4 the land, contact with the south, the influence of Christianity and the eco-  
5 nomic restructuring of the family and society. It is not surprising that the  
6 proposal met with forward-looking optimism as well as with rampant fear  
7 if we consider that the current generation has experienced, and will likely  
8 continue to experience, a tumultuous period of social, economic and cul-  
9 tural transition during the first few decades of the territory's development.

### 11 **Lessons from Nunavut**

12 Six lessons can be drawn from the Nunavut experience. The first relates to  
13 the role of culture in influencing political events. More specifically, it  
14 highlights two competing ideals of equality and alternative visions of how  
15 a society and its institutions should be organised. There is no shortage of  
16 mechanisms or possibilities for guaranteeing women's representation in  
17 Westminster or other systems where there is a genuine commitment to  
18 women being equally represented. The decision not to adopt a two-  
19 member gender-balanced assembly does not point to any inherent inca-  
20 pacity of the Westminster model to take multiple identities into  
21 consideration in its representation of the political community. The West-  
22 minster model did not prove to be incompatible with efforts to represent  
23 geographically dispersed communities and efforts to advance women's  
24 representation. The Nunavut Implementation Commission was genuinely  
25 committed to the ideal of equal representation for women and men; the  
26 electoral mechanism best suited to institutionalising this ideal was  
27 designed accordingly.

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29 The second lesson flows from the first. The Nunavut experience points  
30 to the force of conservatism in Canada with respect to electoral reform, as  
31 compared with other Commonwealth countries. Australia abandoned the  
32 first-past-the-post system in the early twentieth century, New Zealand in  
33 1993, and in the contemporary United Kingdom a wide variety of electoral  
34 systems are in use. In stark contrast, during the exploration of new polit-  
35 ical structures for the Territory of Nunavut the idea of abandoning the  
36 first-past-the-post was not considered. Resistance to electoral reform was  
37 likewise present during the municipal amalgamations in Quebec; at no  
38 point was the idea of adopting proportional representation seriously  
39 addressed for the amalgamated cities of Montreal and Quebec City. The  
40 electoral reform process under way in the Province of Quebec has moved  
41 towards a mixed PR model; however, the proposed system is majoritarian  
42 not only in practice (the electorate will exercise only one vote)<sup>19</sup> but also  
43 in its effect, as a result of the small district magnitude. Incentives to the  
44 feminisation of the Quebec legislature are present, if very weak, in the  
45 proposed system. Conservatism has likewise expressed itself in the BC

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electoral reform process; despite having boasted gender parity in the composition of the Citizens' Assembly itself, gender-balanced representation in the assembly was not selected as one of the values around which to build a new electoral system.<sup>20</sup>

A third lesson has both conceptual and methodological implications. The Nunavut case shows that the three models of democracy (representative, participatory and deliberative) do not function in isolation from one another. Rather, their coexistence and interaction allow a more holistic interpretation of political events. Although the representative democracy model points to the fact that the political elites put forward the idea of a two-member, gender-balanced assembly, the deliberative democracy model allows us to situate the ideological framework and debates surrounding the notion of equality and gender relations that flowed from the proposal. For its part, recourse to the direct democracy model through the use of a plebiscite can be understood in the context of confirming the popular legitimacy of the proposal. The coexistence and complementary nature of these models cannot, however, be associated with their equal heuristic value. When improvised or poorly planned, the deliberative and direct democracy models can in fact prevent the realisation of the ideal of equal representation for women and men within democratic representative institutions.

The fourth lesson relates to the fact that the advent of new political institutions (and notably a legislative assembly with new electoral rules) does not necessarily produce a new 'political opportunity structure' for women. Rather, it remains crucial that actors advancing women's representation receive the support of the political elite as well as a commitment consciously to eliminate the informal mechanisms that have kept women out of politics. In short, political power must be consciously used to advance the election of women to political office by design. When examining the creation of new institutional structures within constitutional monarchies with Westminster-style governance, it is imperative that we look to the source of decision-making power, or notably to the actors exercising the executive power of the Crown.<sup>21</sup> In the Nunavut case, the decision-making power was ultimately exercised by the tripartite group representing Inuit civil society (Nunavut Tunngavik), incumbent MLAs (the Nunavut Caucus of the North West Territories government) and the interests of the federal Liberal executive (the Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs). These representatives had a mandate to decide the rules and principles according to which the new assembly would be constituted; as such, they had control over the adoption or rejection of gender equality as a foundational pillar of the new decision-making body. The failure to obtain a consensus among these individuals ultimately led to calls for a plebiscite and the 'open' competition of ideas.

A fifth lesson concerns the role of political parties in women's representation. As mentioned earlier, the absence of political parties can

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1 point to greater access for women to legislative assemblies given that a key  
2 obstacle is removed. In Nunavut the absence of political parties has not,  
3 however, translated into a sufficient number of women in the legislative  
4 assembly. The absence of political parties can also prevent the promotion  
5 of women's representation through the use of quotas or other forms of  
6 affirmative action. The Nunavut example highlights the fact that affirma-  
7 tive action is not limited to the actions of political parties; in his interview,  
8 the Hon. Paul Okalik, Premier of Nunavut, was very open about his  
9 commitment to seeing women serve at the highest levels of governance.  
10 He confirmed having intentionally appointed women at the deputy minister  
11 level in 1999 to provide a balance for the majority of male ministers.  
12 Moreover, since his re-election in 2004, he acknowledged having used his  
13 power as Premier to advance the two women MLAs to the most important  
14 positions in Cabinet, namely that of Deputy Premier and Minister of  
15 Finance. Albeit an effective strategy for advancing women's representation  
16 in the short term, this method is insufficient as a medium or long-term  
17 policy given that it makes a central aspect of women's citizenship (partici-  
18 pation in decision-making institutions) subject to the goodwill of the  
19 prince, an arbitrary power that was supposedly defeated in the democratising  
20 revolutions of the modern era.

21 This leads us to a last important lesson, which concerns the theory and  
22 practice of women's representation. The existence of a link between  
23 descriptive and substantive representation has been increasingly ques-  
24 tioned in light of the sheer diversity of women and/or of women's views  
25 and experiences.<sup>22</sup> In the case of Nunavut, the views of one prominent  
26 woman in a relatively small political community contributed to derailing  
27 the adoption of an electoral system that would have ensured an equal role  
28 for women and men in the territory's assembly. Clearly, Minister Thomp-  
29 son had the mandate to advance the views of the Nunavut Caucus through  
30 the political system. One may suggest that, from the perspective of the  
31 population, the fact that she, as a woman, could be so vehemently against  
32 the proposal led to confusion as to who constituted the legitimate voice of  
33 women's equality concerns. If her views worked against women's equality  
34 interests, can she be understood as substantively representing women?

35 In other words, does feminism have a monopoly over the substantive  
36 representation of women, and if so, what are the second-order implica-  
37 tions concerning the ability of a society to ensure the expression of both  
38 feminine and feminist voices? Clearly, this exposes the theoretical tension  
39 inherent in assumptions about critical mass or the idea that the substan-  
40 tive representation of a group will necessarily flow from its descriptive  
41 representation. Dovi<sup>23</sup> frames the issue in terms of questions of authentic-  
42 ity and has advanced the idea that only those individuals who have deep  
43 and ongoing connections with their communities can claim to represent  
44 those interests. In particular, she asserts that not just any black or Latino  
45 will do. In the context of the gender parity proposal, it seems that not just

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any Inuit or any woman could claim to be an authentic representative of Inuit culture or of Inuit women's equality concerns.

A former North West Territories Status of Women Council official expressed her disappointment and discomfort with the fact that their efforts to lead an educational campaign in favour of gender parity was actively undermined by their own minister, creating confusion and making the debate seem divisive and counterproductive. While she was likely seen as a legitimate voice by the conservative segment of the population, namely those who subscribed to an individualised notion of equal competition and those who feared changes in gender roles, many interviewees felt that she had hindered the collective equality interests of women. Moreover, interviewees suggested that the arguments advanced on behalf of the Nunavut Caucus were not recognised as a legitimate voice by the vast majority of the Inuit elite involved in the creation of the territory.

For proponents of gender parity, Pauktuutit Inuit Women's Association, the North West Territories Status of Women Council, Nunavut Implementation Commission Commissioners and the Nunavut Tunngavik directors were seen as the authentic voices advancing Inuit women's and Inuit society's collective interests. Manitok Thompson was criticised by interviewees for having failed to understand the tenets of the gender parity proposal and for having reduced the debate to a simplistic view of democracy wherein equality is linked with each individual's ability to participate in electoral competition, rather than with a commitment to the equal participation of women and men as groups in the governance of the territory. The Minister of Finance and Government House Leader, Leona Aglukkaq, expressed her disappointment that the former minister did not address the realities affecting women such as high rates of homicide and domestic violence. Manitok Thompson was criticised for generalising from her own experience and for denying the systemic barriers to women's participation in her assertion that 'if she could get elected, any woman could'. Similarly, the Minister of Education, Ed Picco, asserted that there were no systemic barriers to women; however, he admitted the difficulties relating to strains on the family, such as frequent travel and a small political community, which strip politicians of their privacy.

Member of Parliament Nancy Karatak-Lindell<sup>24</sup> also observed the impact of the small size of northern communities; she felt that the ongoing hierarchies of age and gender in Inuit culture and the problems of campaigning against a male relative would discourage women from running for office if there were no proactive measures in place to validate women's equal ability to govern. Minister Picco acknowledged the degree of individual power formerly held by Ms Thompson; he suggested that had she not led the campaign against the proposal, the results of the plebiscite might have been very different. Ultimately, without a clear sense as to who had the right to speak on behalf of, or in the interests of, women's equality, the fact that there was a prominent woman speaking

1 against the proposal only added to the other ideological positions relating  
2 to gender roles, traditional Inuit culture and the procedural barriers such  
3 as a lack of time and resources for popular education.  
4

### 5 **Conclusion**

6 While the Nunavut Implementation Commission proposal of a two-  
7 member, gender-balanced assembly challenged the general premise of  
8 first-past-the-post parliamentary representation, it did so in such a way as  
9 to create a space for a form of political representation that can accommo-  
10 date territory, as well as identities relating to gender. As such it provided  
11 one possible solution to the ongoing dilemma within feminist theory of  
12 how best to represent women as a group within electoral political practice  
13 without falling into essentialising discourses.<sup>25</sup>

14 The most ironic aspect of the Nunavut experience is the force of con-  
15 servatism, and this despite the fact that the elements found in the gender  
16 parity proposal have in fact been a part of both Canadian and provincial  
17 political culture, to differing degrees, for quite some time. Not only have  
18 the House of Commons and the provincial legislatures previously used a  
19 system of two-member ridings as late as the 1980s, moreover, certain  
20 provinces (notably Nova Scotia and Quebec) have designed their electoral  
21 boundaries in order to facilitate the representation of particular identities  
22 relating to language, culture and religion.<sup>26</sup> Since the 1980s, proposals  
23 have been made for the representation of Aboriginal peoples, be it in the  
24 form of designated electoral ridings (the Royal Commission on the Electo-  
25 ral Reform and Party Financing), Aboriginal reserved seats in the Senate  
26 (the Charlottetown Accord) or the creation of an Aboriginal Parliament  
27 (the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples). The most recent example  
28 is of course the creation of the new Territory of Nunavut itself.

29  
30 Contrary to the position advanced by the Nunavut Caucus wherein  
31 race, creed or gender should not matter to political representation in the  
32 Assembly, the explicit recognition of Inuit 'ways of being' was the driving  
33 force behind the founding of Nunavut, as it would allow the Inuit control  
34 over their future through political institutions. Consequently, it is interest-  
35 ing, if disappointing, that while modern political culture in the Canadian  
36 provinces and territories has upheld the value of ensuring, to differing  
37 degrees, the descriptive representation and recognition of regional differ-  
38 ences, religious beliefs, urban versus rural realities, ethno-cultural identi-  
39 ties and linguistic groups, it continues to deny the relevance of the  
40 political recognition of gender differences to full citizenship for women.  
41 In the case of Nunavut, had the Inuit leaders been successful in asserting  
42 the value of what gender parity proponents termed 'traditional Inuit  
43 culture', notably the affirmation of the equal collective contributions of  
44 women and men to society, and had they secured the support of the  
45 Nunavut Caucus, the Nunavut Legislative Assembly would have become in

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1999 the first living example of the modern democratic ideal of gender equality. In the absence of this unique institutional mechanism, if 'traditional Inuit culture' prevails in practice, then perhaps the paradise of gender-balanced governance is not lost, but rather, remains collective work-in-progress.

**Notes**

- 1 See Government of Nunavut, *Nunavut at a Glance* at [www.gov.nu.ca/Nunavut/French/about/fglance.shtml](http://www.gov.nu.ca/Nunavut/French/about/fglance.shtml).
- 2 Hicks and White, 'Nunavut', 89.
- 3 See Statistics Canada, *Commonly Reported Reasons for not Completing Elementary/High School by Sex* at [www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/89-595-XIE/tables/html/table2/nu2.htm](http://www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/89-595-XIE/tables/html/table2/nu2.htm).
- 4 Conference Board of Canada, *Nunavut Economic Outlook*, 5.
- 5 Government of Nunavut (Nunavut Housing Corporation) and Nunavut Tunngavik, *Nunavut Ten-year Inuit Housing Action Plan*, i.
- 6 White, *Cabinets and First Ministers*, 58–62.
- 7 LeDuc, *The Politics of Direct Democracy*, 40–1.
- 8 White, *Cabinets and First Ministers*, 9.
- 9 Cross, *Political Parties*, 53–5; Norris, *Electoral Engineering*, 230–46.
- 10 See, among others, Lovenduski and Norris, *Gender and Party Politics*.
- 11 See Global Database of Quotas for Women at [www.quotaproject.org](http://www.quotaproject.org).
- 12 Nunavut Implementation Commission, 'Two-member Constituencies and Gender Equality', 5.
- 13 Young, 'Gender Equal Legislatures', 308.
- 14 Gombay, 'The Politics of Culture', 137.
- 15 Gombay, 'The Politics of Culture', 139.
- 16 Dahl, 'Gender Parity in Nunavut', 46–7.
- 17 Dybbroe, 'Questions of Identity and Issues of Self-determination', 42.
- 18 Gombay, 'The Politics of Culture', 139.
- 19 The elector would cast one vote, which will serve to elect both the constituency members of the National Assembly and list members. More precisely, 'electors would vote directly for a candidate in their division. This vote would also be used to calculate how many compensatory MNAs each party would receive for district seats'; see Ministère du Conseil exécutif (Québec) at [www.institutions-democratiques.gouv.qc.ca/publications/fiche\\_1\\_chaque\\_vote\\_compte\\_en.pdf](http://www.institutions-democratiques.gouv.qc.ca/publications/fiche_1_chaque_vote_compte_en.pdf); accessed July 10, 2005.
- 20 British Columbia, Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, *Making Every Vote Count*, 2.
- 21 See Smith, *The Invisible Crown*.
- 22 See Burt *et al.*, 'Women in the Ontario New Democratic Government'; Childs, *New Labour's Women MPs*, 22–7; Grey, 'Does Size Matter?'; Studlar and McAllister, 'Does a Critical Mass Exist?'; Towns, 'Understanding the Effects of Larger Ratios of Women in National Legislatures'; Tremblay, 'Women's Representational Role in Australia and Canada'; Weldon, 'Beyond Bodies'.
- 23 See Dovi, 'Preferable Descriptive Representatives'.
- 24 These views were shared on 28 February 2001 in response to a question on the gender parity proposal raised by Jackie Steele during a preparatory meeting in Ottawa leading up to the first Nunavut Legislature Study Tour of the Parliamentary Internship Programme.
- 25 See, among others, Campbell, 'Gender, Ideology and Issue Preference';

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- 1 Diamond and Hartsock, 'Beyond Interests in Politics'; Jónasdóttir, 'On the  
2 Concept of Interest, Women's Interests, and the Limitations of Interest  
3 Theory'; Sapiro, 'When Are Interests Interesting?'; Young, 'Gender as  
4 Seriality'.  
5 26 Courtney, *Elections*, 60–1, 108–11; Eisenberg, 'Domination and Political  
6 Representation in Canada', 46; Roach, 'One Person, One Vote?'; Royal Com-  
7 mission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing, *Report*, 179.  
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