
A Woman's Perspective on Surviving and Succeeding in Politics

by Susan Thompson

The challenge of running for elected office is similar whether one is vying for federal, provincial or municipal office. Female candidates face special and additional challenges. In this article a former Mayor of Winnipeg offers some advice for women contemplating a career in politics.

I start from the premise that our country needs more women in politics. Our society needs more women in leadership positions. Many years ago I attended a conference with Justice Rosalie Abella, an incredibly dynamic speaker. She said "I cannot believe that the women of Canada are the majority of the population and we still act like a minority. We must bring gender balance to our governments." That was in the mid-80s and I already knew that I would run for mayor of Winnipeg, I just did not know when. She was right; we needed more women in government.

Women, I believe, offer balance, a more caring society, a more cohesive team approach. I think women understand society's needs and embrace life's realities more pragmatically. I do not believe women go into politics for power. They go into politics to make things better, to make a difference, to improve things, to plan the future and to leave legacies for our children. When we express our views, we need to be respected for our views, listened to, and our ideas need to be embraced. Our perspective is critical. So how do we get there, and how do we win?

You cannot enter politics or be a successful candidate if you are not rock solid with your reasons for entering.

Susan Thompson was owner of a family business when she decided to run for Mayor of Winnipeg in 1992. She won, becoming that city's first woman mayor and was re-elected in 1995. She is currently President and CEO of the University of Winnipeg Foundation. This article is based on her presentation to the conference of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians – Canadian Region, held in Winnipeg on July 22, 2007.

You have to know who you are, why you are running and what you want to achieve. Do not go into politics unless you have thought these questions through and are very comfortable with your answers.

One of the very first questions a reporter will ask you is, why are you running? The first question people will ask is why should I support you? The first words that come out of your mouth must be short and succinct and straight from the heart. So when a reporter first asked why I was running, I replied: "It is my destiny." You should have seen the expression on the faces of my advisors. "What did you say? No, that's not the answer." It was a moment in time and it was the truth.

I went into political life because it was my calling. It came to me and I knew I was meant to be mayor. I am sure that everyone at some point in time has a feeling about what he or she is meant to do. It does not matter how far-fetched this is. Here I was the owner of a cowboy/saddlery store, and in the middle of the night in 1982 I heard a voice that said "You're meant to be the mayor of Winnipeg." It was one of the most phenomenal experiences of my life, but, I did not doubt it.

I was raised an entrepreneur. My family owned a small saddlery store. Nowhere on my life's screen was it obvious that I would be a politician. Yet I knew I had to listen to what had come to me. We often hear about men who knew from an early age that they would be Prime Minister one day. Not so for women. But I encourage women if they have that feeling or that experience to never dismiss it.

Taking the Plunge

I was raised in St. James, Manitoba and came from quite a middle class family. My parents instilled in me the idea that you could do anything you set your mind to. I have never been afraid to fail. To me, “failure” is simply a lesson learned. It just took hard work and perseverance, “perseverance” being the operative word, and please do not ever forget that word. It is the key to political success. Nobody could ever have convinced me that it takes so long to complete things in government. I never ever would have believed it.

All the tremendous things that women have accomplished are because we have persevered. I think tenacity is one of the greatest strengths that women in politics have and it is always underestimated.

Many people go into politics because somebody has asked you to run. Others go because they are angry at the current party or person in power. It is amazing to see how anger motivates people to serve. Still others go because they have a commitment to public service and they believe in a party’s platform.

Once you feel comfortable with why you are running, make sure that you know what you want to achieve. You must have quantifiable goals in order to stay focussed during the hard times. I also highly recommend that you visualize the beginning and the end of your political career. You should decide when you want to enter politics, and you should decide when you want to leave. You should plan your own exit, for if you do not, the voters will plan it for you.

If you are a woman in politics now or are contemplating politics, you should realise that it is not an easy road.

It has been said that being a woman in politics is like being Ginger Rogers. You have to do all the same dance steps as Fred Astaire, but you have to do them backwards and in high heels.

Women have always had to work harder, longer and smarter in order to be successful. Holding public office is about public trust. To be successful in politics, one must be very respectful of that public trust and put your own due diligence in place to make sure that you never betray that public trust. A successful candidate will be pulled in a thousand directions trying to please everyone. You must stay focussed and do the daily test. My daily test was every morning when I woke up and looked in the mirror, if I liked what I saw then I knew I was doing the right thing. If you look in the mirror and you do not like

what you see, then you are off track. Remember in the end, and political life will come to an end, all that you own is your name, and your name is everything.

How to Win

The first challenge for women in politics is raising the money. Next is name recognition and third is what I call coping with the old boys’ club or the corruption of power. It is only when you get to experience power for the first time in your life that you realize how corrupting power could be.

But money is probably the single biggest obstacle for women and the biggest challenge. Women are not prepared to risk their family’s money or income and rightfully so. How do you overcome that hurdle? My first priority was to build an incredible fundraising team. I remember getting some very good advice from a former mayor of Ottawa. She said it is the men who can raise the money, so when you build your fundraising team, utilize the men. This is their assignment. They need to raise money for you. Recruit the best fundraisers you know. Try to have co-chairs of fundraising, one woman, one man but men clearly have better and more access to money so they need to be assigned to raise the money.

I tell all budding female politicians to make themselves aware of a wonderful organization in the United States called EMILY’s List. It stands for “early money is like yeast”; it makes the dough rise. It is the largest grass-roots political network in the United States. It works at the local, state and federal level. EMILY’s List helps fund progressive women candidates, organize campaigns and mobilize women voters.. There are some tremendous opportunities and lessons from EMILY’s network. It was formed in 1985 by a network of 25 women to raise money for Democratic women candidates.

There are currently over 100,000 members in the EMILY’s List organization. It is now the largest grass-roots political network in the United States. Since its formation, it has helped elect 67 candidates, and it is the largest resource for minority women seeking federal office. They recruit. They train. They fund candidates at local state and state levels, and they have four programs to help build candidates for campaigns. They have a program called Women Vote. It is the get-out-the-vote division of the organization. They have another area which is called Campaign Core, and it provides training for campaigning workers. They have a Training and Campaign Jobs Program which gives candidates access to the best campaign staffers for organizing and fundraising. They have a Political Opportunity Program which recruits and trains and supports women who run for office, and EM-

ILY's List is the current No. 1 supporter for Hillary Clinton in her presidential campaign. There are many things we can learn for an organization like EMILY's List.

Another good bit of advice is not to spend the money unless you have it and to have the toughest financial controller possible. There is many a story of people who have risked their own money and spent years paying off the debt in order to finance themselves in a campaign.

When it comes to name and face recognition there is lots of scope for creativity. I went into my first campaign with less than 5 percent name recognition. Nobody knew me but I was a retailer and marketer and I knew what to do. MediaCom had all the billboards in Winnipeg and I met with the general manager and asked him to show me the most important billboards in the city. He drove me around and said there were only 19 billboards that needed to be sewn up in order to blanket the city. So I booked them all in 1989 even though I did not run until 1992.

Of course you cannot totally book them unless you put the cash up-front, and you can only do that within the election period. But I had those sites sewn up the day that we were allowed to put the billboards up. I had the city covered. My name and face recognition went from 5 to 99.9 percent.

I also developed postcards. I am a former Eatonian, so the Eatonian retirees helped me blitz the city with a hundred thousand postcards. All of these volunteers went and put my postcard in peoples' mailboxes. It was a great tool for blitzing because on the front it had my picture and "Time for Change, Susan Thompson for Mayor". Then on the back it had what I stood for and my experience.

A third stream was television. We raised significant money and had one television blitz during the World Series. It had a huge impact and allowed me to be a serious candidate. The incumbent mayor had retired and I was running against the deputy mayor, the chair of finance and the chair of parks and protection, the three strongest city councillors. Each had over 10 years' experience. I had none.

Another important detail is to always remember to say thank you. In a campaign you get very busy and you have no sleep so you tend to overlook some obvious things. So I established a Thank You committee whose sole task was doing thank-you notes and keeping on top of who had to be thanked. That committee was also the place to go for hugs because when you are in a campaign you need a safe haven where somebody will nurture you.

It is important to accept advice but not if you are advised to change or hide your personality. At one point I

was advised to be less exuberant, less emotional. You know, women are emotional, and somehow that translated as a weakness. I found that I was being stifled so my advice is to show your passion, show your imagination.

Changing the Culture of Politics

Another fundamental change that must take place, in my opinion, is the culture and behaviour of politicians. Sixty-two percent of Canadians voted in the last three elections. Therefore, 38 percent of Canadians did not vote. There is a cynicism out there and people are reluctant to vote. Part of it, I believe, is the behaviour that occurs within Question Period that is televised.

I sincerely believe we should consider ending the televising of Question Period.

My experience was at the municipal level but city council was televised for a while. I was totally shocked by the behaviour that occurred, and afterward said to the speaker: "What the heck is going on? He turned to me, and said: Madam Mayor, its show time." I said: "What do you mean its show time? We are here to do the business of the government; that person gave misinformation during the session. It was such a disservice to why we are in public office. We are there to do the job of the government, and all you can say is that it is show time." Getting the cameras out of every level of government is highly recommended.

Shortly after I became mayor, I had a private meeting with my Executive Policy Committee in the mayor's office. It was our first meeting. They did not know me. I did not know them. To say the least, it was not a cohesive group and I was the outsider. The message was clear. They had already decided that they were going to get rid of me as quickly as they could. I had defeated their friends. I was an outsider. I knew nothing. They were the power. They would control the committees and I would be gone as soon as they could get rid of me. It was a delightful introduction into politics.

However I was there to assure accountability of government. So I called the meeting to order. It was unruly to say the least, but from the get-go I believe it is leadership that has to set the tone.

Those first three years of public life were excruciating. The media was against me; my city councillors were non-supportive; my administration was doing everything to get rid of me. The support I had was from the citizens because they were so annoyed with council. After my re-election it was fascinating to see the Executive Pol-

icy Committee come in and just simply by action tip their hat and go, all right, you now have the power. Then they were willing to co-operate.

Speaking of the media I remember some advice I received from former Liberal MP and cabinet minister Iona Campagnolo. She said, "Remember, the media simply builds you up just to tear you apart and bring you down." That perspective certainly helped me and I never forgot her words. I always tried to take the high road and never get into any kind of attack politics or negative politics. I was sometimes criticized by my advisers who urged me to get in there and take the gloves off. But I would not. I always tried to say to the citizens what I was trying to accomplish and what I would be accountable for.

I learned the lesson that nothing is off the record. It is a hard lesson. Also, I never did leaks; never believed in it. I always protected confidentiality and I felt if you do not protect confidentiality you will not last. Whatever I learned stayed within the confines of the four walls of my home.

You also have to know how to deal with crises. There will be times when you have to draw inner strength from very deep down inside. One of those moments was during the flood of 1997. It was the biggest flood to hit our city in a century.

I had received a call from Mayor Pat Owens of Grand Forks, and she was very emotional. Her city had flooded and burned. She had been told wrong numbers as to how high the water would come. She called me on my cell phone and said "Susan, don't trust the numbers. Get the numbers checked." Our pumping stations had been tested to 19.5 feet. We were looking at a flood of 26.5 feet. We did not know if they would hold. If the pumping sta-

tions did not hold, we would have 100,000 homes, which translates into 300,000 people, with six feet of sewer water in their basements.

Panic was even a bigger issue. As I went to the first press conference I was filled with anxiety over the state of the pumping stations, the flood gates at the floodway, the saturated sandbags, how much water was really coming at us. How would I find the strength of leadership? As I heard the director going to live television counting 10-9-8, I can say to you that God wrapped his arms around me and gave me strength. Through those 21 days, I had total belief that we would survive. So when those moments happen I can only encourage you to embrace that strength.

Let me conclude with the idea that in politics you will need to develop your coping skills, particularly how to cope with criticism. Most people do not handle any kind of criticism well and public criticism can be mortifying. Here are some tips that were given to me.

First, focus clearly on the criticism, visualise it as if it were a baseball and then decide whether to hit it out of the park or leave it alone. Some criticism is better left alone. That is hard to do but sometimes there is a lesson to be learned. In that case learn it and move on. Second, keep a sense of humour. That is often easier said than done but it is very important. I also kept a lucky charm on me and it helped. Finally, do not be afraid to cry. But keep it short, maybe ten seconds, and then get on with the job.

Political life is not easy for anyone and especially difficult for women. But it can be extremely rewarding and I hope some of my comments may, in the coming years, encourage more and more women to run for office and be elected.

