

Wall's government off to shaky start on women's issues

By David McGrane, *Saskatoon StarPhoenix*, March 7th, 2008, A11

Following is the opinion of the writer, an assistant professor of political studies at the University of Saskatchewan.

With International Women's Day marked on Saturday, it's worth noting that Saskatchewan's new government doesn't appear to have a detailed or elaborate plan to improve the situation of women.

The only promise contained in the Saskatchewan Party's platform specifically concerning women is to provide \$4 million over four years for transition houses and sexual assault centres. Further, Premier Brad Wall decided not to appoint a minister responsible for the status of women in his first cabinet -- the first time since 1989 that the Saskatchewan government hasn't had a minister whose title includes responsibility for women.

These facts point to a low level of awareness of women's issues within this new government compared to previous governments.

In an article I recently had published in the *Journal of Canadian Studies*, I examined the records of Saskatchewan provincial governments in relation to women's policy and the election of women to the legislature, and it would seem the Wall government has strayed from the path charted by previous governments.

For example, between 1944 and 1964, the CCF governments of Tommy Douglas and Woodrow Lloyd elected three women, while opposition parties didn't elect any women. However, at least at the outset, the CCF government's famous 1947 Bill of Rights didn't contain any provision against discrimination based on sex. It was added a couple of years later at the behest of women within the CCF party.

Over the 20-year period of CCF governments, the only other advance for women was of legislation securing "equal pay for equal work irrespective of sex" for the civil service and allowing women to drink in bars.

The Ross Thatcher Liberals came to power in 1962 with one woman on their side of the benches. Over the next eight years, this government only created a small women's bureau and a minimal day-care policy.

When Allan Blakeney's NDP took office in 1970, it came without a single woman MLA, despite opposition parties electing three women. Nonetheless, the Blakeney government was sensitive to women's issues and outlawed wage discrimination based on gender in the private sector, instituted unpaid maternity leave, established programs to promote women to management jobs in the public sector, and improved women's legal control over their property.

The Progressive Conservatives elected six women when they swept to power in 1982, and this government appointed the first woman cabinet minister in Saskatchewan's history. Despite the large number of women in the PC caucus compared to previous governments, however, the Devine government was criticized by women's groups for reducing day-care subsidies in favour of a pension scheme for homemakers, abolishing programs designed to promote women within the civil service and cutting funding to women's shelters.

But the Progressive Conservatives did create a free-standing women's secretariat, which reported to the province's first minister responsible for the status of women.

In 1991, the NDP came to power with 11 women on their benches, and Romanow appointed four of these women to his first cabinet -- including the first female Finance minister in the history of Canada.

Romanow's government ensured that nearly half of its appointments to government boards were women. It also legislated pay equity within the public sector, implemented programs to train women in skilled trades, and passed laws to prevent sexual harassment and protect women who were victims of spousal violence.

When Lorne Calvert took over in 2001, his administration followed up on the Romanow government's women's policy by releasing an action plan on women, enhancing maternity leave benefits, increasing day-care funding and legalizing midwifery.

However, the number of women elected by the NDP and in NDP cabinets remained virtually frozen over their 16 years in office. Further, the Romanow government was criticized by women's groups for not creating a broad-ranging day-care program, and the Calvert government was criticized for shifting the previously free-standing Status of Women's office into the Department of Labour.

There are four primary factors which explain the evolution of women's representation and women's policy in Saskatchewan. First, the increasing number of women in the workforce since the 1970s has encouraged governments to implement improved labour standards specifically targeted at women. Also, government's responsiveness to women's issues rose as the numbers of women in the legislature, cabinet, and high positions in the bureaucracy increased.

On the other side of the ledger, however, traditional ideas concerning gender roles seem to be firmly entrenched in Saskatchewan's political culture, and this prevents the adoption of feminist policies. Indeed, a recent analysis of polling by Michael Adams found that Saskatchewan displayed the most traditional ideas concerning women in Canada.

Finally, ideology matters. While it's evident that CCF-NDP governments have a mixed record when it comes to improving the status of women, it's still better when it comes to both women's issues and electing women, when compared with Liberal, Progressive Conservative or Saskatchewan Party governments.

The Saskatchewan Party government elected eight women -- fewer than the previous NDP governments -- and Wall appointed four women to cabinet, about the average of the Romanow and Calvert governments.

While it remains to be seen what the new government will do to improve the situation of women during the next four years, it is clear the Wall government has not got off to a promising beginning.