

*“I was permitted to hire her because she was a talented young journalist and (more important) because management knew they could pay her \$10 less a week”*

## THE OTHER SIDE OF THE STORY

I'm researching a biography of Alexa McDonough, the former Nova Scotia and federal New Democratic Party leader. There's plenty to research. Her elective political career alone spanned nearly 30 years of Canadian political history from her first failed run for parliament as a 35-year-old in 1979 to her eventual retirement in 2008 as the still-engaged senior stateswoman in Jack Layton's pre-Orange Wave caucus.

As I began rummaging around in the musty attic of news clippings from the late 1970s and early '80s, I couldn't help but be struck by the descriptors reporters routinely hung on McDonough: she was “the daughter of a millionaire socialist,” “the wife of a prominent Halifax lawyer,” “the sister of a former top aide to Premier Gerald Regan,” “the mother of two sons,” and, oh yes, “attractive” and “pretty.” Don't forget pretty.

Not that she wasn't all of those, of course, but she was far more than the sum of her appendage parts. She was the first female leader of a major political party in Canada and one of the few women politicians anywhere, and yet she was inevitably pigeon-holed and diminished as the-something-of.

No one in the media then seemed to know quite how to deal with a woman as politician.

When I say no one, I mean men. At that time, most political reporters were men, as were virtually all the newsroom leaders who ultimately decided what was news and, as importantly, how that news should be written.

Back in 1970, I hired the first female reporter at a small local radio station in Halifax. Conventional wisdom at the time was that listeners didn't want to hear women on the air. They sounded... well, like women. Imagine... I was permitted to hire her because she was a talented young journalist—she was—and (more important) because management knew they could pay her \$10 less a week because... well, she was a woman.

It would be comforting to argue such things couldn't happen today. They probably wouldn't. They would almost certainly be called out publicly for what they are. Partly, that's thanks to our great 21st century leveler, social media, but it's also partly because newsrooms themselves are very different places than they were 40 years ago. As a certain prime minister noted when he unveiled a gender-balanced cabinet almost four years ago “because it's 2015.”

The mere presence of more women, not only inside newsrooms but also, increasingly, in positions of power in news organizations, has changed our definition of news for the broader and better.

Can you imagine the *New York Times*, circa 1979, committing the resources necessary to uncover bad behaviour by the likes of Harvey Weinstein, Bill O'Reilly et al? And giving those stories such prominent display we are now in the middle of an historical #metoo reckoning? I can't.

Or how about the managers at the *Globe and Mail* allowing reporter Robyn Doolittle to spend 20 months gathering data from 870 police forces, crunching numbers and writing previously unwritten stories demonstrating conclusively how our police forces consistently refused to believe women who said they'd been raped?

Changing the composition of newsrooms changes our definition of news. For the better. The same, of course, could/should be said of businesses and boardrooms.

We should be celebrating—or at least marking—those changes, but we should also be noting just how much work we still need to do. There is still a distinct lack of diverse voices (indigenous, African Canadian, those of other colours, immigrants) telling their stories and making those stories part of our shared experience. In the media. And in the business world.

We've come a long way, baby, but, baby, we still have a long way to go.

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### FEEDBACK

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