

UN Forum on Minorities and Effective Political Participation
Agenda Item V. *National Practices and Real Experiences ...*
Presentation by Mary Anne Chambers

Ladies and gentlemen.

My name is Mary Anne Chambers. I am Jamaican by birth, but have been a Canadian citizen for the past 30 years. I have served as the Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities and the Minister of Children and Youth Services, in the Government of Ontario. Ontario is one of Canada's 13 provinces and territories. Ontario has a population of approximately 13 million people.

I would like to speak about *“meaningful representation and empowerment”* for *“effective political participation”*.

My first 26 years in Canada, were spent in the financial services sector, where I rose from the position of Computer Programmer Analyst to Senior Vice-President of one of Canada's largest Banks. I was the first and still am the only black woman to have attained that level of seniority in that sector of Canadian business. I had no difficulty securing employment with the Bank upon arriving in Canada, but within a few weeks, a colleague told me that I should

not be disappointed if I didn't get very far despite my competence and work ethic, because I was black, a woman, not Canadian born, married, a mother and Roman Catholic! This was my first real indication that my race, while irrelevant in Jamaica, might matter in Canada.

In 2003, constituents ... white constituents, in the electoral riding in which I sought to be elected to political office, informed me that the incumbent, a white man who had held the position for the previous 8 years, while campaigning, had chosen to use my race as a reason why people should not vote for me. But I had also been encouraged to run by people who told me I didn't "fit the profile". They also told me that I should not let political office change me. Public opinion polls conducted while I held political office, revealed that I would have been re-elected, if I had run again in 2007.

Currently, the only black member in the Ontario Legislature is a woman who I invited to run in my riding when I decided not to seek re-election. There were a number of other black candidates who ran in other electoral ridings, for all three Political Parties, but none of them were successful. Had my Party not accepted the person I proposed, the current Ontario Legislature might today, be

without a single black Member. While approximately 22.8 percent of the population of Ontario are visible minorities, there are only 11 persons of colour among the 107 Members of the Ontario Legislature. Most of the visible minority Members are of South Asian heritage. One Member is Chinese.

In Canada, visible minorities make up approximately 20 percent of the population. Approximately 4.1 percent are South Asian, approximately 4 percent are Chinese, approximately 3.8 percent are Aboriginal and approximately 2.5 percent are Black. As is the case in Ontario, visible minority representation in the Parliament of Canada, does not come close to being reflective of the country's demographics.

Visible minorities, also referred to as racialized groups, face a variety of challenges, in disproportionate numbers, significantly limiting their opportunities to participate fully as members of Canadian society, and profiling them as somewhat inferior to others who are not racialized. Between 1980 and 2000, the poverty rate amongst racialized families in Toronto, the capital city of Ontario, and Canada's largest city by population, rose by 361 percent, while poverty amongst non-racialized families fell by 28 percent. Approximately 47 percent of Toronto's residents are

visible minorities. Poverty among racialized groups in a developed country like Canada, is linked to lower educational achievement, poor mental health and general well-being, conflict with the justice system, the need for social services and supports, sub-standard housing and underemployment. Ultimately, poverty means the absence of both economic and political influence, making effective political participation difficult to achieve for members of racialized groups.

When I was invited to run for political office, I said “yes” because I saw political office as one of the ways in which I could serve the public good.

As we focus at this Forum, on **Minorities and Effective Political Participation**, I must express caution against the ease with which the focus that we could and should be bringing as voices for those who typically have no voice, can be forgotten if we allow ourselves to be co-opted or submerged by the dominant culture in which we find ourselves.

But while I always remembered that there were voices, Minority voices, that I needed to bring to the table, I also knew I had been elected by a broader society. I believed it was my responsibility to

unite the needs of the Minority voices with those of the broader society, so that all could understand the importance of improving the quality of life not just for some people but for as many people as possible. In doing so, I served not only Minorities, but also the broader society. I served the public good.

It is not easy being a Minority in politics. You need to be very strong. You need to stay true to your desire to serve, and you need to avoid being overcome by a desire to feel accepted or popular.

I believe all who hold positions intended to serve the public good, must take care not to view themselves or the office they hold as important, but rather to always be aware of the burden of responsibility they bear, to serve the public good.

The burden of responsibility is even greater for Minorities. Members of Minority communities expect Minorities in positions of influence and authority, to make their particular needs their priority. I constantly found myself wishing that there were others like me, to share the burden.

There were people who lived outside my electoral riding who would pretend to be my constituents so that they could meet with

me to discuss matters of importance to them. They would tell me that they did not feel comfortable speaking with the elected members in their own electoral ridings. I would often also discover that they didn't vote. Their excuse was that they believed that their votes didn't matter because their voices were never heard. I would tell them that they could only expect to be taken seriously if they voted. Votes are important. Votes are powerful. Votes matter to politicians.

But when I would passionately advance the issues of those whose voices had often been ignored, with strong and convincing evidence-based arguments for my proposed solutions ... good public policy ... not only for the good of those Minorities, but also for the good of the broader society, I would find little or no resistance from my colleagues in elected office. Instead, I think I earned their respect, because I always kept at the forefront of my mind, why I had sought elected office ... the desire to serve the public good. But it was also obvious to me, that had I not brought those policy proposals forward, no one else might have done so. The Minority voices might not have been heard.

These are just a few of the realities that I think we need to understand as Minorities if we are to achieve “*meaningful representation and empowerment*”.

Thank you.
