



PENNY COLLENETTE

PORTRAIT OF A POLITICIAN

Penny Collette ('91)

Captivated by the “Great Flag Debate” as a teen, Penny Collette ('91) knew from an early age that she had political aspirations. When the Diefenbaker government refused to accept the invitation to adopt a new flag, Lester B. Pearson made it Liberal Party policy and the party's platform in 1962, and again in 1963. When Pearson became Prime Minister, the debate ended in December 1964 with the adoption of the new maple leaf national flag. It was this debate that became a defining moment for Ms. Collette: it was very clear which party she would choose. She saw the Canadian flag as a “marvelous

icon,” and, to this day, feels that “we need to find more icons.”

Penny Collette will seek the federal Liberal nomination in the riding of Ottawa-Centre in the next election. She emphatically states that it is “something I always wanted to do.

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Ms. Collette is striving to update the job description for a Member of Parliament in 2007 because she feels, “we’ve perhaps forgotten some of the reasons MPs are there. Besides advocating for constituents, they are also there to be legislators, to draft legislation, as well as private members’ bills. And, I feel that legal training is really beneficial in this role.”

The downside, however, is that many lawyers run for office, and often, this can be seen as an “overweighting of one profession in parliament.” Ms. Collette notes that this is a “fair comment” but, in her case, her law training is balanced with an equal number of years in both the private and public sector. She has a B.A. in Law and Political Science (Carleton), and at age 37, having worked in the corporate world as Vice-President of George Weston Ltd., and in government, she decided to pursue a law degree at uOttawa. She took a year off between second and third year to support Jean Chrétien’s leadership ambitions, graduating in 1991. Ms. Collette was then offered a position in 2002 at the

Kennedy School of Government (Harvard University) as Senior Fellow. Upon her return, she was invited to teach at the Faculty of Law as well as the School of Management at the University of Ottawa.

This “package” of public and private sector experience along with her legal training and teaching empowers Penny Collette. She hopes to inspire people to think about political office as an alternate career. “It’s tough and risky,” she notes, “but there are many tough and risky aspects in life. We have a participatory democracy, and at some point, those of us who are interested really have to put ourselves forward and take the risk.” Ms. Collette additionally noted the importance of public service: “it is enshrined in our legal profession, whether it is pro bono work or working in government, it should be part of our DNA as lawyers.”❖