

# Catherine Holt: Women leaders are no longer rare — and that's

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Catherine Holt is the CEO of the Greater Victoria Chamber of Commerce.

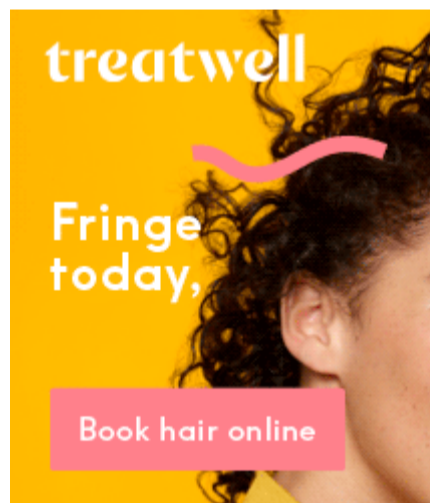
Photograph By CHRISTIANTISDALE.COM, CHRISTIAN TISDALE

An event I was at shortly after International Women's Day was exciting because of what did not happen. I have been waiting for this particular thing to not happen my whole adult life.

It was a very well organized and well attended reception hosted by Pearson College for senior representatives of United World Colleges International, in town for their biannual meeting.

The leaders giving speeches included Gov. Gen. Julie Payette, who is a UWC alumnus; Lt.-Gov. Janet Austin; and Pearson College president Desiree McGraw. Other leaders were acknowledged, including Pearson College chair and former deputy prime minister Anne McLellan, Victoria Mayor Lisa Helps and Esquimalt-Metchosin MLA Mitzi Dean.

You'll notice that all of those leaders are women. That's not what I found remarkable.



The remarkable thing was that no one commented on it. It didn't come up.

I'm aware that my commentary on this lack of commentary might seem contradictory. But what I'm saying is: Maybe we've finally got to the point where those who make the decision to appoint, hire or recruit a woman can stop congratulating themselves for taking some kind of perceived risk when they give a woman an opportunity historically reserved for a man.

A decade or two ago, all of the women I mentioned would have been seen as groundbreaking — and there probably would have been no more than one woman on stage. Certainly, all these positions were held by men for a long time. Have you seen the wall of official photos of mayors of Victoria at city hall? Dozens and dozens of men, plus Gretchen Brewin from 1985 to 1990 and now Helps.

It's hard to be the only one, the first one, the pioneer, the exception, the risk. That takes a brave person. Not just a competent, experienced, capable person, but someone who is willing to risk public scrutiny, criticism and humiliation.

After the first woman comes and goes, and then the second and the third, it is no longer news. Over the past 20 years, many of these positions have been held by women. It's much more comfortable being one of a long line, one of many, the normal, the expected. And that's what happened at this event.

Of course, we still have a long way to go. According to the recent report titled *The Best and Worst Places in Canada to be a Woman in 2019*, by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, women in Victoria earn, on average, 75 per cent of what men earn. As well, 70 per cent of female workers have full-time jobs compared with 85 per cent of male workers. Only six per cent of women work in management roles. The lack of accessible and affordable child care continues to have a disproportionate financial impact on women.

Despite this, Victoria ranks as the third best city for women in Canada. That's due to our high ranking when it comes to leadership. Women account for 43 per cent of local elected officials. The City of Victoria has five women out of nine positions on council.

The presence of so many women in leadership positions will surely help normalize it in those places that are lagging behind. Are we finally approaching a time in Canada where we recognize that all walks of life do best when the best are allowed to lead — in business, politics, science, education, trades, sports and arts?

In the face of so much bad news on International Women's Day about the desperate situations for many women in this world, in many cultures and religions and countries that seem stuck in another millennium, I'm glad to have this sign of hope.

When the leadership of women is not remarkable but normal, that is true equality.

*Catherine Holt is the CEO of the Greater Victoria Chamber of Commerce.*

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