L. Byrne, “Making a Difference when the Doors are Open: Women in the Ontario NDP Cabinet 1990-95,” in S. Bashevkin, ed., *Opening Doors Wider: Women’s Political Engagement in Canada* (Vancouver UBC Press, 2009)

**Overview**

By examining the Ontario experience of 1990, and the years that followed, Byrne argues that “it becomes clear that nominating, electing, and appointing significant numbers of women to the provincial cabinet contributed to significant policy innovations by the Rae govt.” In spite of disappointments expressed by women’s movement activities and others, many important accomplishments of the era still stand – including groundbreaking midwifery programs and public health insurance coverage of elective abortions.

**Background**

* NDP govt in Ontario appointed highest proportion of women (11/27 – 42.3%) to Cabinet. Rae cabinet was a turning point in both symbolic and substantive levels
* Cdn cabinet is known as the “focus and the fulcrum of the system” – and cabinet ministers are so significant that one study uses appointments to that level to gauge political influence of electoral districts –
* Members of Rae’s govt long placed women’s issues at forefront
* By 1995 Rae govt was history and Harris promised to abolish employment equity legislation, which had formed the cornerstone of Rae govt’s feminist initiatives
* Question of the study: did NSP women who were elected in 1990 make significant changes to provincial politics (including content of public policy and/or tenor of legislative debate)?
* According to Sandra Burt and Elizabeth Lorenzin, the combined efforts of a poor economic climate and political inexperience led the govt away from its pre-election commitments to women and the women’s movement objectives
* Byrne’s interviews point towards a distinct gender division in cabinet on the importance of fiscal restraint vs social issues, with women generally more concerned than men about the latter.
* In the interviews, every NDP minister noted (unprompted) the male culture of the Ontario legislature – whenever a woman minister rose to speak, ambient noise of the chamber rose suddenly; male opposition MPs often commented on the dress of female ministers; many of the women MPPs in cabinet were unaccustomed to angry, argumentative, and inflamed rhetoric of parliamentary debate, etc
* Women MPPs found stronger informal networks outside the institutional setting