

J Ruth Stokes
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Interviewer
Mary Kasamatsu

MK I'm with Representative Ruth Stokes here in the private dining room, what is it? And this is an interview for Green Mountain Chronicles about the Order of Women Legislators, we think, or about the Women's Legislative Caucus. At any rate, let's talk a little bit about the Caucus. How is it constituted now, how is it structured, what does it do?

RS Well, right now, we are not necessarily, we are not in fact affiliated with any national organization. The, caucus is made up of women, but our meetings are clearly open to everyone. The entire legislative bodies are invited to all meetings and forums and depending on the issue and depending on the topic, and depending on what we are doing, men do in fact attend. There are, I think the caucus serves a multiple, a variety of functions. We were talking before about, um the function that it used to serve in the way of orientation of new women legislators and I think that function truthfully has been taken over by the evolution of what's be known, what's come to be known as the freshman caucuses. They, I gather they have been done one of two ways. They have either been, there has either been a democratic and a republican freshman caucus. I gather at some, at some point there was some joint freshman caucuses, although frequently even when, even though they are organized separately if it's a topic of mutual interest they frequently do meet together, so I think that, that orientation function in terms of orientation toward legislative process has been kind of taken over in that sense although clearly I think the women's caucus even of today serves a, a function in that it's one of the first groups perhaps that is small enough and workable enough that the new women legislators get involved with and as um, ERA-orientated or as ~~uni-sex~~ a society as we like to think we are, I think there is still, remains an element where the sexes are comfortable in groups of their own sex at certain times and at certain points. And so that I think it just serves that function on occasion. However, you, I think that something called a women's caucus if you will is at a real turning point. At the beginning of the session which is now, almost two years ago, at the beginning of this biennial session, we had a discussion in fact, around the topic of whether or not we should continue to be organized as such. And this I think was along many different lines. The first, I mean, the first question that arises and that's frequently posed to us by men is you have fought so long and hard for "equal rights" and how would you feel if we chose to organize a men's caucus. You, ah, women legislators would probably be the first ones up, up speaking about, ah, how

wrong that was. Now clearly this is not a closed group by any means. We in fact have two male legislators who have chosen to say that they are "members". It is not a women's caucus in a sense that it is a closed and a exclusive group by any means and I certainly think that when the men talk about a men's caucus that's what they have in mind. So I think that it's somewhat of a fallacious argument, but nevertheless has some validity. And I think it does make some of the women legislators uncomfortable to be organized in this way. Um, they, they perhaps share, not in sort of the men's view what would you think about a men's caucus, but question the need to continue to be organized along the lines of sex, although again emphasizing that it's certainly not a closed kind of a situation. The other problem is that I again, this is only my fourth year, so I don't have a lot of basis of comparison, but things are enormously hectic. There just seems to be an enormous amount of pressure on all legislators' time. The women's caucus generally tends to meet at lunch time in that 12:00 to 1:30 time frame because that's basically the only time anybody's free. I mean we either on the floor or in committee. That time though is also sought after by all sorts of groups who are interested in meeting with groups of legislators to um, discuss issues. And this year has been, I mean it has been literally impossible to find a lunch time day where in fact there was no conflict. There was not some other event going on. I mean it was basically been I'm going to bite the bullet and schedule it, I know that X, Y or Z is going on also and whoever can come, can come and so be it. So it becomes even difficult in terms of continuing from a time perspective. Um, we tend to ah, try to focus on issue presentations, at least as long as I've been chair that's the focus that I've tried to be. Sometimes they have been what perhaps could be thought of and called "Women's Issues." Other times, they've been more generic issues, but something that this particular group of women was interested in pursuing. We generally tend to have speakers come in and then have discussions. We've talked about such things as surrogate parenting, legislation, day care services, day care provider regulations, all sorts of things which tend to be issues that this particular group is interested in and wants to pursue and learn more about. Um, we spoke before about how in previous years when they, oh how they found time to meet on a weekly basis is totally beyond me, but at that point in time, it served, it clearly served a, um, a special need and it was a high priority to be organized in that way and to make use of that as a support system and they clearly found the time. It was a priority enough that they did and given that kind of time frame you can use it which I think could be very

constructive for people to share what's going on in their committees and to discuss legislation and issues from that perspective. But we have tended not to feel we could possibly do it that often or I don't think there's a desire to do it that often. As I say, there is still ongoing concern at whether it's really appropriate to be organized in this fashion. Um, again, so we've tended to raise topics that we thought um, legislators perhaps need more information about and to try to bring in speakers to a discussion which is basically how we have operated. *albeit* on a very infrequent (at this point in time) basis and I think as I say, I think that's a function of the two things I've already talked about. Number one, a real severe time pressure, but also um, a sense of should we really be organized um, as a women's caucus. And you know, I'm sure the topic, at the beginning of a next biennium you will have clearly a new group of legislators, hopefully some of us old ones will still be here, but you will have a lot of new ones and I think it's appropriate truthfully to raise the issue again um, about whether this is something that um, that group of women legislators feels they want to continue. I mean, although we didn't talk about this aspect of it, I would assume that in the early years if you will, when there were so few women legislators, this was really a support group for them. I mean, they, if I was one of three, four, five, eight women legislators out of one hundred fifty, I could see that I would feel a great need, to have some kind of forum where I could come together with my women peers and you know just let your hair down and gripe and have the support and need the support in an organized way. Um, now we are you know, getting close you know heading toward a third of the legislature and I don't think we, I don't think women tend to feel the absolute need for that kind of support system. I mean, as I say, there is a certain comfort level when I would assume men get together and women get together and being able to discuss things in certain ways, but I don't think the, I don't think the what you raised before which was that this was a forum in which they could ask questions and operate as legislators in the different context. I don't think any of us feel quite that inferior at this point. I mean, we are I think, I think the vast majority at least of women legislators are very capable and confident people and are not hesitant to ask the right questions and the appropriate questions in the legitimate mixed legislative forum. So again, the need that I can clearly see would have existed back when women were in such few numbers, doesn't necessarily exist as a need. And I think that's why it's, I guess I can honestly say I don't see the women's caucus as a high priority item for any of us. Um, as I say when I have as the chairperson,

when I have sensed a need for that the women legislators shared with me in terms of requiring some, wanting to have some dialogue on a given issue that didn't seem to be offered somewhere else, then that's what I've tried to do is be topic orientated. Now for instance, we obviously just gone through several months of intense legislative activity around that whole growth legislation and there wasn't a single woman legislator who felt that we needed to deal with this as women legislators. Um, the forums, the information, the dialogue all of the process, um was adequately meeting their needs otherwise. They had absolutely no need to focus in on the growth issue as a women's caucus. Um, they were perfectly comfortable participating in the process as equals and didn't feel the women's caucus needed to serve a function, an information function, that they could certainly operate just as all legislators do. So I think we are at an evolutionary or transition stage for the women's caucus. I think probably um, we will continue to evaluate whether it in fact needs, needs to exist and as I say, when we, I did raise the issue at the beginning of this biennial session and at that time the decision was in fact to continue it, that while it may not have served all of the functions it always used to serve, that it certainly could be something where we could get together if we felt we needed some information on a particular issue or particular topic and use that as a forum to do that, but again it's clearly, it was certainly not, no one wanted it, nor is it a woman-only forum. In fact, this week we had the individual from the Division of Day care in to talk about the services her Department provides as well as the new regulations and we had several men who have an interest in that area and who attended and that's the way it should be. So I think the way I see us functioning now is that we can provide perhaps the forums and information on certain issues that where it's not being duplicated elsewhere and where people in fact um, have a need and it's clearly open to anyone who has an interest in whatever topic it is that we've raised. But I think in the more generic pieces of legislation, women legislators have reached a comfort level where they are perfectly willing to participate on an equal level and that's probably at least in my view to the good.

MK And I think probably you're right. That it has a lot to do with numbers.

RS Clearly, I mean, as I say even given that this is 1988, um, if I was only one of eight or ten, I probably would relish the support system that a very active and, um formerly organized women's caucus would provide, but now,

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you know, our numbers and our confidence level I would think not no longer being new, no longer it being a novelty if you will that women are elected and serve extremely well as legislators. It evolves to another role which again is perfectly appropriate.

MK That's interesting, It is not as though people have lost sight of the contributions of the first, the early women legislators, it's just that in fact a recognition that because there is that history there, you know that women have been in the legislature now since 1922 or whatever it was, so that now you can, you're not a novelty anymore as you say.

RS Right, exactly and the numbers are such and it's no longer considered a kind of big deal if a woman is elected as in the legislature. I mean it's just she competed for her seat in whatever context or election happened to occur and all to the good, nobody mentions that the woman candidate won or loss for the matter. It's no longer an issue. And probably truthfully, that's you know, that was probably the dream and the goal of those early pioneers that it become less and less and less and would in fact hopefully eventually cease totally to be an issue. And I think that's what provokes a sense of discomfort on the part of some of the women legislators that is they feel that that's the goal after all. That's what we have been trying to say, that it shouldn't even be an issue so why are we still organizing as women legislators when we've tried to achieve the goal of having it make no difference and there's validity I think to that point and it's something that I think future legislators as they come together will have to evaluate on an ongoing basis whether this is serving a worthwhile function and whether they want to continue to be organized in this way.

MK How important is the, there is a social aspect to the group as well, how important do you think that is just in terms of sort of greasing the wheels of the mechanism in the legislature?

RS Well I think, the, the friendships and the contacts if you will that as you have just pointed out clearly contribute to the legislative process and to be perfectly honest to one's effectiveness as a legislator. I mean the longer you're here, the more people you know, the more people who feel comfortable with you, the more people who you can go to, to either ask questions or to discuss legislation or to share a point of view, but I think those, those friendships first of all happen between men and women as well as between women and women and that women, women, um,

function as there are so many of us now that we certainly don't need to organize. I mean you can find a group to go out to lunch with, out to dinner with either both sexes or a group of women without needing to have that formal structure. I mean there's just enough of us that it, that social contact, um friendship, um occurs without, I don't think you need a women's caucus kind of a structure to necessarily have that happen.

MK In terms of the other traditions within the legislature that have not continued, you said you did feel that it would be nice if there were more social occasions.

RS Well I mean I think there are social occasions that are associated with legislative business. There are dinners sponsored by organizations and it does certainly give legislators a chance to get together, but I've sensed and I've at least it's been shared with me that there used to be more informal social bipartisan interaction. Now I'm not saying people are not getting together socially and except that anyone else who joins us accuses us of being political junkies and talking about nothing but shop and it's a valid criticism. Legislators tend to be like that. But I guess what I was expressing to you before was somewhat of a concern that I've sensed and that I gather is somewhat different since I've been here which is the four years is that there is not a lot of bipartisan, and now I'm not talking about the two sexes, I'm talking about the two political parties, bipartisan informal social interaction as apparently and as I say this has not been since I've been, as there apparently used to be. And again, um, I don't think that's good for the process because the more people you interact with, whether they think philosophically the way you do or not, the more understanding you have I think of, um the other point of view and if there is anything that I have learned as a legislator is that nothing is black and white. And that while you may come down on one side, and you always do on one side or the other of an issue, that's not to say that there are not valid points to the other position. And so that I've learned there is nothing that's black and white and the more I think you have the opportunity for that dialogue to take place on an informal basis in my own personal view the process would work better. As I think it's, as I feel that, that lack. I don't feel I have that, the opportunity for as much informal bipartisan dialogue as I think would be helpful to the process and that's, that's probably too bad. I haven't the vaguest, I won't even speculate with you as to why that is.

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MK Okay. Thank you. All I need to do now is get a couple seconds of sort of ambient sound of the room here.