

Bologna Institute for Policy Research

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Speaker: RH Kim Campbell, 19th Prime Minister of Canada

Chair: Professor Erik Jones, Professor of European Studies and International Political Economy, Johns Hopkins SAIS Europe

“Democracy, Justice, Leadership and Gender:
Global Politics and Public Service, from the Cold War to the 21st Century”

This was a conversation focused on the leadership experience of the Right Honourable Kim Campbell, who was one time the 19th Prime Minister of Canada, the first female to hold the role and the first female Minister of Defence and Attorney General.

She began the conversation with a historical background of the processes that led her to take on those leadership roles, and how her status as a woman in a male dominated arena did not deter her. She asserted: “I did not choose my timing to enter politics, but when the time was right, and there were polls in Canada that showed that I had high approval ratings, and given that the then Prime Minister was becoming very unpopular, party supporters said to me it was time for my leadership and I accepted.” Before entering the general elections, RH Campbell said she considered what the possibility of a loss would mean for the women who looked up to her. Whether her loss would shatter their hopes, or whether it would calibrate their ambitions, that indeed terrains that had been traditionally touted as “males-only” were also available for women. Although she considered those possibilities, she did not have a choice but “to answer to the moment.”

RH Campbell described her ascendancy to the leadership roles in her country as an impetus for women. Although she did not win a subsequent election, she asserted, her work inspired women in Canada, who now see her as an icon. RH Campbell stated: “In the end, what matters is the fact that I have been in those positions, and this has become a motivating factor for women in the country considering careers in politics and public service.” She told the students not to be deterred by failures, but they should be moved by their pure desire for service. “Failures will come along the way, but with determination and never giving up, students should aspire and go for what they want.”

The former Prime Minister expressed concerns about the attacks on democracies around the world. This she decried. That Europeans, Americans and Canadians gave their lives in world wars to live with governments that are democratic, and the current attacks on democratic institutions, from Russia, to Hungary and to the United States, the moments in the 21st century were very concerning and terrifying to her. RH Campbell’s parents were both veterans of World War II, and her career in public service was motivated by the fact that she did not want to witness a carnage like the wars in her lifetime.

The speaker gave two pieces of advice to students who are aspiring to be leaders: “Get out of your envelope, and interact with people in different disciplines who do not share your perspectives; and second, look at the literature about decision making and the barriers to effective decision making.” RH Campbell also expressed concerns about how social media was becoming pockets of disinformation around the world and welcomed efforts by Governments to now begin to regulate social media.