

Maria Minna

A "Typical" Italian-Canadian

An Interview by Luciana Ricciutelli

A the "Women in Politics" conference held at Ryerson University last November, Maria Minna was the only Italian-Canadian woman giving a workshop — in fact, one of the handful of ethnic women conducting a seminar and among the less than ten percent of women from immigrant backgrounds attending the conference at all! Maria Minna was introduced as a "Liberal party activist;" her topic was "Running and Winning." Her discussion revolved around obtaining a political nomination and organizing a campaign.

Maria Minna knows whereof she speaks: she has managed three federal campaigns and won them all. Grimacing, she comments to me that she never received credit for any of the wins. Her success was brushed aside because the areas were considered "winnable liberal ridings." Even as the west-end chairman for the 1980 Art Eggleton mayoralty campaign, her success in organizing the campaign west of Yonge street was dismissed because Eggleton was simply "destined to win." Shrugs Minna, "this is the backwater of politics" and, as a woman in politics, it's what you put up with and learn to deal with.

Minna, with her dark hair and sparkling, big, brown eyes is unmistakably Mediterranean in appearance. So, too, are her gestures. Face animated, voice intense, she punctuates her discussion with her hands.

Minna entered the front line of partisan politics in 1984 when Jim Fleming, the



Liberal MP for York West, resigned. The riding association called for an emergency nomination. Jim Fleming rang up Maria Minna and asked her if she was interested. Minna jumped at the chance. She was ready. Although she didn't live in the riding, she was very familiar with the constituency.

Maria Minna has been president of COSTI-IIAS Immigrant Services since 1981; its head office has been located in Downsview for years. COSTI-IIAS is one of the oldest and largest Italian immigrant services organizations in Canada. It does everything from operating English classes for new immigrants and running rehabilitation programs for injured workers to providing counselling to immigrant families. Although originally founded by Italians, it presently extends its services to immigrants from all backgrounds. She thus knew the community in York West inside out. Whether or not the Liberal party executive felt she was the perfect candidate for the riding mattered little: the male Italian community did not. She was pitted for the nomination against not one, but *three* Italian men and one West Indian, also male. It was Minna's first confrontation with what she terms "ethno-cultural ghetto politics." Accused of having sold out to the "establishment," Minna was no longer considered an appropriate representative for the interests of the Italian community:

They were calling me 'establishment' because the assumption was that the party [executive] wanted me to win. In fact, there was no such endorsement. There was a tremendous amount of ganging up. While they were fighting each other tooth-and-nail for the nomination, they were still meeting, strategizing and agreeing to certain procedural rules without my presence. I was never invited to be a part of these discussions, so, while they were still competing with each other and against me, they were still helping one another. You know, networking.

Predictably enough, Minna lost the nomination.

Maria Minna was born in Italy and came to Canada in 1957 at the age of nine. She grew up in little Italy and still lives in the area today. Minna was the second of four children. Despite the fact she had an older brother, it was Minna who ran the household — which included everything from negotiating mortgages, filing income tax returns and attending meetings at her brother's and sister's schools on behalf of her parents. She calls this "becoming a partner with your parents,"

something many immigrant children had to do because of language barriers. Growing up in an immigrant family could be very difficult:

You are told, even as an adult, what you can and cannot do, even who you should marry. Although you are not allowed to date, you are expected to work. Education is not a primary goal because as a woman you are expected to marry. But, you are taught to deal with many other things. It affects your sense of self and how you cope with life. The advantage is you acquire a lot of skills and that gives you a tremendous amount of self-assurance, confidence, and ability.

1972 was a pivotal year for Maria Minna. Having graduated from a four-year commercial program in high school, she had worked for 4-1/2 years as a secretary with the Ontario government. "Bored to death" and feeling "extremely inferior... just a part of the office furniture," she decided to go back to school. It had to be the University of Toronto because she had heard it was the best: "it had to be the best, so that I could prove I was as good as anyone else."

She left the Ontario government when she was twenty-one and was obliged to wait until she turned twenty-four in order to enroll as a mature student. After taking a self-improvement course, she lucked into a modelling career that proved to be a very lucrative move. Laughing, she explains that "in those days," for her parents, "it was like being a street walker. Nonetheless, when my mother saw I was making money and spending a great deal more time at home, she began showing my portfolio to anyone who came to the house." Minna quit the modelling business as soon as she started university, with enough savings to embark on a program of study.

1972 was also the year that Minna became politically involved for the first time. She explains that, by "fluke," a postman working her street knocked on her door one day and asked her if she would help elect Ying Hope as alderman. Minna quickly agreed, eager for the opportunity to learn the ropes of municipal politics. After Hope won the election, she became part of a small group of Ying Hope supporters that ran his constituency office. "Within a couple of years," she says, "I really understood how to deal with city politics backwards and forwards. Many times I was tempted to run municipally, but I always felt that it was much too limiting. There wouldn't be enough for me to do!"

Minna has, in fact, an astonishing capacity for doing a remarkable number of different things at the same time. 1972 was also the year that she became involved with the Ratepayer's Association in her neighbourhood; she served as its president for five years and resigned in 1978. She exclaims, "I have always found that my studies never took up enough of my time!"

In 1974, the executive director of COSTI, Bruna Smith (the first woman to be an executive director of an organization within the Italian community) was looking for someone to coordinate a woman's program that she wanted to establish at COSTI's North York office. Maria Minna was recruited. While completing her second year at the University of Toronto, Minna became the coordinator of the "Centro Femile," a drop-in centre aimed at bringing Italian immigrant women out of the vacuum of their homes into an environment where group discussion could foster deeper self-awareness and help them to deal better with the problems of living in a new and strange country.

Still, she wasn't busy enough: also in 1974 Minna threw herself, body and soul, into federal politics. "By this time I knew I wanted to become more involved. I just hadn't quite consciously decided how I was going to do it." Paul Hellier, the former Liberal member of Trinity, had crossed the floor and joined the Conservative ranks. He needed someone to manage his campaign; Ying Hope suggested Minna. When Paul Hellier approached Minna, she replied that, if she was going to work on a campaign, it would be for Aideen Nicholson and it would be for free! She claims that to this day she doesn't know why she answered that way; remembering, she laughs out loud: "I hadn't even met Aideen Nicholson and I wasn't even a member of the Liberal party yet. It just suddenly clicked." She telephoned Nicholson's office immediately and volunteered her services. Minna was subsequently assigned a poll and became an enthusiastic canvasser. Thus began her involvement in party politics. At the end of the campaign, Nicholson offered her a part-time job in her constituency office.

Minna graduated from the University of Toronto in 1976 with an Honours B.A. in Sociology. She worked for Nicholson full time for a year and then took a sabbatical, which included an extended trip to Italy in order to rediscover her roots. When she returned to Toronto in the spring of 1979, Aideen Nicholson asked her to manage her campaign for the up-

coming federal election. Minna agreed and Nicholson won. In the fall of 1979, the government fell and Minna managed a second campaign for Nicholson. Again, she won. By now her name had spread; in 1980, following Nicholson's election, Art Eggleton asked Minna to be the west-end chairman for his mayoral campaign. The rest, as they say, is history. After losing the nomination in York West for the 1984 federal election, Minna managed a third campaign for Nicholson and won that one, too. She is proud of having been the "female organizer for a female candidate." In the meantime, Minna was scoring incredible successes within the private sector as well.

Just after accepting Eggleton's offer to work on the mayoralty campaign, the National Congress of Italian Canadians approached Minna and asked her to become their executive director. The N.C.I.C. is also one of the oldest and largest Italian organizations in Canada; it acts as an umbrella organization for all the Italian associations in the country. She would be in charge of the Toronto district. She at first declined, but when they approached her again in 1981, she accepted. Although leary of the confrontation with the Italian old boys' network that informed the structure of the Congress, she felt she might be able to make a few changes — one of which was to ensure that more women became board members of the influential Italian organizations that were mushrooming all over Toronto. At the same time, she was still deeply involved with COSTI and was, at this point, its vice-president for specific programming. In August 1981 she was nominated president of COSTI as well. Her involvement with the Congress lasted until 1983. She is still the president and chairman of the board of COSTI-IIAS Immigrant Services today. For a full two years then, she was the president of two of the most influential Italian organizations in the city of Toronto. An amazing feat, particularly for a woman who had to stand her ground with often traditional all-male boards:

In my involvement with COSTI, I was never held back because of being female. I was always fortunate to have worked with very sensitive people. I am the first Italian woman to be president of an organization within the community and I have had my run-ins with very macho boards. For example, many times I would come up with a solution to a problem that would be totally ignored. The next week, a young male would voice the same solution and suddenly it was brilliant. In my own

community, what I encounter is sexism, pure and simple. Outside of my community, it's sexism and ethnic-related discrimination. Not only am I a woman, I'm also an immigrant. I'm still, a lot of the time, just a nice little Italian girl, especially to men in the professional establishment world. I remember attending an United Way meeting and the president of one of the main-line agencies said to me, after coming out of a seminar, "you articulate very well." It

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was a bit like — pat, pat, you're a nice little girl, and you speak very well, you have no accent! Well, I've lived here all my life. Of course, I have no accent!"

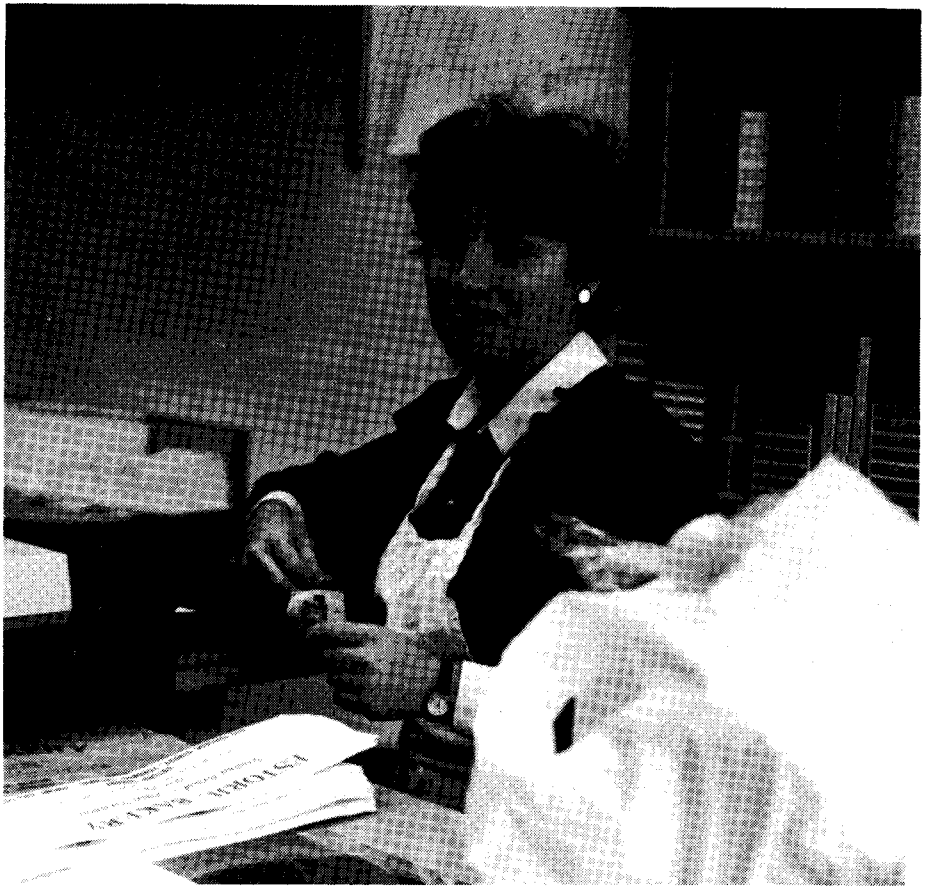
Maria Minna is, as always, a very busy woman. She has become an influential advisor to government and private sector organizations on immigrant community development. She is currently, as well as Chairman of the Board of COSTI-IIAS (and among other things), secretary for the Italian Canadian Women's Alliance; a member of the strategic planning committee of the National Congress of Italian Canadians/Toronto District; a member of the Advisory Group of the Salvation Social Services Organization (which is helping the East Indian community rebuild their social services organizations); on the Board of the Azorian Organization (which is helping the Portuguese develop community programs); acting as an advisor to the Continuing Education Division of Ryerson Polytechnical Institute on adapting programs to better reflect the needs of the immigrant community; and is actively involved with the National Action Committee for Immigrant and Visible Minority Women and the Committee of '94 (a group of professional women committed to ensuring that half the House of Commons will be female by 1994). She comments that she has, in fact, cut down her involvement in community projects by a great deal, in favour of short-term commitments — such as the workshop she prepared on ethno-cultural and ethno-racial communities for the United Way's seminar on "Multiculturalization of Main

Stream Organizations" held in May.

Minna has, however, remained traditional in other ways. Until 3-1/2 years ago, when she married Robert McBain, a Scottish-born public relations consultant, she lived at home with her parents. She admits that she always dated non-Italian men because she wanted to meet someone who wasn't concerned with "all the traditional things that go with being married in an Italian home." When she was twenty-one she became seriously involved with a divorced man: "My mother was going to commit suicide, my brother disowned me, and for two years I wasn't allowed to see my nieces and nephews." Minna didn't marry; years later she met McBain, who is also divorced. This time, there was no resistance from her family: "I'm not so sure how much that was determined by the fact they had given up on the idea that I would never marry at all. So they thought it was just as well. I was getting kind of old!" She grins mischievously. "My family loves me," she says, "they admire me for the crazy things I do even if at the same time, they are not so sure why I do them."

Last year, Premier Peterson asked Maria Minna to co-chair the Ontario government task force on rehabilitated and injured workers. Minna agreed and the job is now winding down to a close. It has been, in typical Minna fashion, a complete success. Her plans for the future? In the summer she's organizing a family reunion to celebrate her parents fiftieth wedding anniversary. Politically, she's still looking for a main-line role for herself. She intends to run in the next federal election. She is looking for a riding. The one in which she lives, Trinity, has recently been re-distributed: three-quarters of it has gone to Davenport, whose long-time incumbent is Liberal MP Charles Caccia, also an Italian-Canadian. The remaining quarter has gone to Spadina, which with its incumbent Dan Heap, is a traditional NDP seat. In any case, the next campaign she intends to work on is her own.

"I don't see how you can be a politician and be female and not be a feminist. Whether you like to admit it or not — and some female politicians don't like to admit it — if you're going to be a politician, you have to be a whole host of other things. It takes a lot of courage, determination and strength. You have to be a feminist in that sense." Thoughtfully, she adds: "Quite often I get the comment, aren't you atypical for an Italian-Canadian woman? Aren't you unusual? I say, I'm not at all atypical, in fact, I'm very typical."



Top: woman worker at Estoril Bakery on College Street, Toronto. **Bottom:** bakeries, fruit and vegetable stores, meat and fish markets proliferate all along this stretch of College Street in Little Italy.

Photos: Charisse de Freitas

