

*Mary O'Hagan is the Country Director for the National Democratic Institute in Georgia. She previously served as NDI's Senior Resident Country Director in Russia and as Director of Research for the Liberal Democratic Party in the UK.*

### **Against the Grain: Rhodes Scholars and the Political Arena**

Mary O'Hagan

"I feel that [in America] you are justified in looking into the future with true assurance, because you have a mode of living in which we find the joy of life and the joy of work harmoniously combined. Added to this is the spirit of ambition which pervades your very being, and seems to make the day's work like a happy child at play."

**Albert Einstein (1879 - 1955)**

"In America any boy may become President and I suppose it's just one of the risks he takes."

**Adlai E. Stevenson Jr. (1900 - 1965), *Speech in Indianapolis*, Sept. 26, 1952**

This short essay uses data collected by the Rhodes Project to explore the extent to which the women who are the subject of this study have tried to follow the stereotypical Rhodes path, described by one interviewee as the: "male trajectory...Oxford, McKinsey and then politics or something like that."<sup>1</sup> Political office is defined for this purpose as election or appointment to a position exercising political power. This has been chosen as a topic because, rightly or wrongly, political office has long been associated with the Rhodes Scholarship. Some quantitative evidence from the two surveys carried out by the Rhodes Project in 2004-5 is included, but this essay is based as much as possible on the voices of the women themselves, as captured by interviews conducted in 2005-7. No attempt has been made to conduct any independent analysis of the survey data and there are limits on the nature of the conclusions that can be drawn from it. It is not possible to know whether Rhodes women elected after 1995, which is the survey's cut off date, display the same attitudes as the group that took part in this study. Equally, because only Rhodes women were included, it is not clear whether these respondents have either formed or pursued political ambitions to a greater or lesser extent than their male peers. Nor can we say whether these Rhodes women approach these questions differently from other women, or, if so, whether the Scholarship itself is the reason for any differences.

Nevertheless, it is possible to gain a qualitative impression of why the overwhelming

---

<sup>1</sup> Rhodes Scholar (USA 1989) East Coast interview. 18 July 2005.

majority of the participants in this study, in spite of their qualifications and abilities, their access to the Rhodes network and the high expectations they seem to associate with the Scholarship, have either not sought, or have not attained, political office.

Cecil Rhodes expressed the hope that Rhodes Scholars would fight the world's fight and come to "esteem the performance of public duties as [their] highest aim." Neither esteeming "public duties," nor fighting the world's fight, necessarily mean becoming a political leader, of course. They must mean different things at different times to different people. Today, in the Scholarship application form, the Rhodes Trust puts it this way: "From [Cecil Rhodes'] statement one may infer that he expected his Scholars to play an influential part in the betterment of society, wherever their careers might take them. It does not necessarily presuppose a career in the public sector."<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, an association between winning the Scholarship and eventual attainment of high public and political office has stuck, not least in the minds of some of the women who are the subject of this study. One interviewee (USA 1989) resented the Scholarship itself as a result: "It afforded me great opportunities but, for a while there, I really hated it because...[of the] tassel-loafered, glad-handing types who just had these...vainglorious fantasies of world domination and they drove me nuts."<sup>3</sup>

Connections between the Rhodes Scholarship and political ambition may have arisen partly because of the aims of the founder and partly because some very prominent politicians have been Rhodes Scholars. Another interviewee (USA 1983) put it like this: "I think Bill Clinton's made it hard for everybody, because for so many people success now as a Rhodes Scholar means you have to be President."<sup>4</sup> Defining success as attainment of the highest office is obviously problematic, particularly for women. It is a fact that no woman, Rhodes Scholar or not, has yet become President of the United States. So, to the extent that the American women in this study have had that as a yardstick against which to measure themselves, they have been set up for failure. However, even if this definition of success is relaxed to include less elevated political offices, it is clear that Rhodes women are not so different from women generally. Many have found that this goal is either undesirable or unattainable.

---

<sup>2</sup> See "Memorandum of Regulations and Application Form." July 2007. *Office of the American Secretary of The Rhodes Trust Web Site*. 4 February 2008 <[www.rhodesscholar.org/PDF/2007\\_application.pdf](http://www.rhodesscholar.org/PDF/2007_application.pdf)>.

<sup>3</sup> Rhodes Scholar (USA 1989) East Coast interview. 18 July 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Rhodes Scholar (USA 1983) U.K. interview. 27 February 2006.

Nearly half of the women who responded to the survey would like to crown their careers with a period of public service. When asked what type of organization they hope to work for at the high point of their careers, 43 percent of respondents opted for “public (government).” However, when asked whether “women like you are less likely than men to be interested in pursuing traditional positions of power,” 77 percent of respondents agreed. The gap between these two responses could be explained by the number of women in this survey who work in public institutions, such as universities, which they do not associate with traditional positions of power. But it is possible that some female Rhodes Scholars prefer to service political power rather than exercise it themselves. One woman (USA 1979) involved in public policy at a senior level wants more recognition in her career but may choose not to rise any further, citing: “...the pressure and simply the time that’s required to go higher than I am, and the question of impact.”<sup>5</sup> Overall, 13 percent of all respondents have been appointed to political or judicial office. Many of those have made spectacular contributions in their field already. However, to date, only five percent have run for election and, of these, only two individuals were successful.

When asked to select one of eight reasons why many more male Rhodes Scholars have been elected or appointed to public office, the respondents’ answers were fairly evenly spread. “Being less involved in family” was selected by 23 percent, “Having different interests” by 17 percent, “Discrimination/sexism” by 16 percent, “Ambition” by twelve percent and “Gender/Personality differences” and “More male Rhodes Scholars” by ten percent. Few people selected either a lack of spousal support (four percent) or the absence of a network (eight percent) as reasons for staying out of professional politics.

It may be that over time, these statistics will change. Of those that have not run for office, 45 percent would consider doing so. One interviewee (USA 1990) believes it is too early to compare the political achievements of male and female Rhodes Scholars: “So the women ...are being compared to the [men] and the question is being asked why hasn’t there been a woman President? Well it is because Bill Clinton got the Scholarship when women were not allowed to do so. There’s a self-comparison problem but there’s also [a problem] in the broad definition of success because a lot of the women [who] are finding their way and trying to live up to the ideals of the Scholarship [are] engaged in things like teaching and school boards.”<sup>6</sup> Another

---

<sup>5</sup> Rhodes Scholar (USA 1979) Telephone interview. 22 July 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Rhodes Scholar (USA 1990) East Coast interview. 18 July 2005.

interviewee (USA 1978) described some of the factors that can drive women to seek political office later than men: “I think the one area where I sometimes feel a sense of disappointment is that I had, in my earlier years, hoped to be in the public domain, or serve at a higher level in government ... maybe when my kids are older that will be more viable, because I know that those high-powered jobs are all-consuming. ...I sometimes feel [that I haven’t done all that I hoped to do] but then I think, well, there’s still some time.”<sup>7</sup>

The evidence of the interviews bears out the conclusion, reached in many studies of women’s political participation,<sup>8</sup> that there are several routes that lead women away from elected or political office. Rhodes women who have not exercised any political ambitions have done so for a number of reasons, including the way they view their own personality, their interest in other professions, and rejection of political office as a means of making a difference. There are some Rhodes women who have made a conscious choice not to pursue high office of any kind. One interviewee (USA 1978) was blunt about it: “I’m not willing to pay any kind of a price, family-wise, to advance myself professionally.”<sup>9</sup> Another politically-engaged woman (USA 1987) has rejected elected office as irrelevant. She said: “I don’t think you can get elected as a reformer in this country [the U.S.] now.”<sup>10</sup> Others think that female Rhodes Scholars have different ambitions from their male counterparts. One (USA 1977) said: “More of us are interested in a good, solid, productive, happy life, but we’re not interested finally in blazing through the sky like a comet... women just don’t do it.”<sup>11</sup> Others found that their goals had changed over time. One woman (USA 1993) said: “To the extent that I had ideas of what I’d do, [they were] probably a bit more grandiose than [how] I ended up ... being at Oxford, and being among the Rhodes people, you’re sort of trained to think big thoughts regardless ... what I quickly realized is that while I’m kind of ambitious, I’m not — I don’t have a strong need to be very publicly ambitious, like to be an elected official for example.”<sup>12</sup> Another (South Africa 1979) although influential in the

---

<sup>7</sup> Rhodes Scholar (USA 1978) East Coast interview. 19 July 2005.

<sup>8</sup> For comparative information visit the iKNOW Politics portal launched by the National Democratic Institute, International IDEA and the UNDP in New York in 2006 <[www.iknowpolitics.org](http://www.iknowpolitics.org)>.

<sup>9</sup> Rhodes Scholar (USA 1978) East Coast interview. 20 July 2005.

<sup>10</sup> Rhodes Scholar (USA 1987) East Coast interview. 15 July 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Rhodes Scholar (USA 1977) East Coast interview. 21 July 2005.

<sup>12</sup> Rhodes Scholar (USA 1993) East Coast interview. 18 July 2005.

development of public policy, did not think of herself as a potential leader: “No, I would not run for office. I have been much more involved in developing policies in the past year or so. But I am not, I have never been, a leader in that sense, in the political office sense.”<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps the more interesting respondents, for the purpose of understanding why so few female Scholars are yet exercising political power, are those who have formed some kind of political ambition but have not realized it because of compromises they have made, often for the benefit of their families. Sometimes family has prevented a woman from attempting to climb the ladder at all. At other times, women have demonstrated considerable success but been prevented by family commitments from realizing their full potential, at least for a while. The message that can be derived from the sum of these interviews is that if the “joy of life,” as Einstein put it, is one’s family, and the “joy of work” involves political office, harmony is likely to prove elusive. One interviewee (USA 1981) was clear that those with high political ambitions cannot have it all: “At some point [they] have to [knuckle down] and say, if they want their legacy to be [that] they were the first female President of the U.S., then it’s probably going to be at the expense of just about everything else in their lives.”<sup>14</sup> One woman (Australia 1993) described the process of compromise which had been similar for several Scholars: “About four or five of us all at a very similar stage in life, all sort of mid-thirties, all recently had children, all had these strong burning ambitions to do amazing things with our careers and all now looking back and saying we are not quite getting where we want to get. It is not that any of us would regret or trade what we are doing but there are some fundamental compromises that we’ve had to make.”<sup>15</sup> One woman (USA 1983) with a distinguished record in public life said: “I just haven’t wanted to intrude on [time with my children] in a way that running would intrude.”<sup>16</sup> Another woman (Pakistan 1993) said: “One of the things that I really wanted to do was to...go back to my country and go into politics. I never did that...I met somebody here and I married him. It was a choice: go back to my country or marry the right man, so I married the right man.”<sup>17</sup> Another interviewee (USA 1984) who achieved political success early in her career simply said: “Motherhood destroyed my

---

<sup>13</sup> Rhodes Scholar (South Africa 1979) U.K. interview. 26 April 2006.

<sup>14</sup> Rhodes Scholar (USA 1981) West Coast interview. 18 July 2005.

<sup>15</sup> Rhodes Scholar (Australia 1993) Telephone interview. 25 July 2005.

<sup>16</sup> Rhodes Scholar (USA 1983) Telephone interview. 10 March 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Rhodes Scholar (Pakistan 1993) U.K. interview. 19 July 2005.

career.”<sup>18</sup>

It is interesting to compare these results with the responses to broader questions about whether women feel they have lived up to the expectations of the Scholarship. When asked a direct question, more than half of the respondents say they do not feel that they have lived up to the expectations of the Scholarship. However, when asked a broader question about whether they have made a positive difference to society, 73 percent agree and only six percent disagree. It would be necessary to have results for their male contemporaries in order to reach firm conclusions about these responses. For some female Scholars, there seems to be a significant gap between making a positive difference to society and meeting the expectations of the Scholarship. For them, perhaps only spectacular success would be enough to meet both tests. The political impact of their most high-profile male predecessors may have influenced responses like these but it should not be assumed that men with the same achievements as these women would come to the same conclusion. Nor should it be assumed that this is a manifestation of guilt or regret amongst women who may feel they have not met the lofty goals they were encouraged to set for themselves by virtue of winning the Scholarship. Most of the women interviewed for this study who have put family ahead of their political ambitions seem not to regret their decision. To the extent that guilt may drive some responses, it seems sometimes to be connected with an absence of political engagement. However, it is not necessarily associated with either a sense of failure in general, or disengagement from professional politics in particular. One woman (USA 1978) probably spoke for many when she said: “I find myself these days feeling really bad that I’m not involved in politics...[but] I don’t think that I have time to be.”<sup>19</sup> Another (USA 1977) just said: “I wish I thought more about the world’s future.”<sup>20</sup>

Rhodes Scholars are supposed to leave Oxford believing that they can, and should, make the world a better place. Many of these women have done just that. This essay does not cover those who are breaking new ground in medicine, the law, business, or academic life. It simply shows some of the reasons why very few, so far, have been either willing or able to fight the world’s fight via the stereotypical political route.

---

<sup>18</sup> Rhodes Scholar (USA 1984) Telephone interview. 28 March 2006.

<sup>19</sup> Rhodes Scholar (USA 1978) East Coast interview. 24 March 2006.

<sup>20</sup> Rhodes Scholar (USA 1977) East Coast interview. 15 July 2005.