

By SUE VALENTINE

THE next few months in South Africa's constitutional development could be the most critical for securing representation of women at the highest political level.

This is the view of visiting US political scientist Professor Robert Darcy who has done extensive research on why women are largely excluded from political life in the world's oldest democratic nations such as the US, Canada, Australia and the UK.

According to Darcy, the point at which a country draws up its constitution or redefines its electoral laws is the point at which women, if well organised and clear in their demands, could secure meaningful political gains.

He said the traditional explanation (defined by Maurice Duverger and published by Unesco in the mid-1950s) for why women were not incorporated into the political life of most democracies centred around three issues:

- Voter hostility (a reluctance to vote for women candidates);

- Male conspiracy (male-dominated political elites which do things in a 'male' and exclusive way);

- Lack of skills or disinterest among women themselves (a 'blame the victim' theory).

Darcy disputed Duverger's arguments, saying candidates in the traditional Western democracies evoked the same, if

not better, responses from the electorate, demonstrating that voters were not responsible for keeping women out of office.

Similarly, while acknowledging the power of male-dominated party elites, all parties since the 1960s had been anxious to put forward female candidates. Women candidates had also demonstrated that they were able to raise as much money, if not more, than male candidates.

He then proposed that the reason why women are largely absent from political office in democratic countries lay in the political context in which women gained the franchise.

Women came into political life roughly at the turn of the century, at a time when party politics in countries such as the US was 'cor-

rupt, violent and rotten', said Darcy. Rather than involve themselves in it, women avoided party politics, preferring to work in other organisations. 'They thought that if they had the vote, the elected officials would listen to their presentations.'

However, this did not happen. Other means of influencing politicians and legislators, such as forming a women's party or utilising existing political mechanisms like referenda and petitions, also failed.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, said Darcy, the consensus among women writing about women's issues was that women had successfully marginalised themselves. 'Where power is, women are not.' It was

Reichstag comprised women representatives – the US House of Representatives has only now reached this level! In Finland in 1993, 38.5 percent of the national assembly is made up of women representatives.

Explaining why the democratic process in the Anglo-American countries still has not incorporated women, Darcy suggested that it was due to the political stagnation of the '70s and '80s.

Darcy said in mid-1992 the US House of Representatives comprised 6.8 percent women. In New Zealand women made up 16 percent and in Canada 12 percent of their members of parliament were women. The election cycle in New Zealand and Canada

was three years, producing a more rapid change in government. In the USA it was four years.

'Electoral volatility and turnover are the programmes by which to bring women into power. We need to level the playing field and find ways of taking away incumbents' privileges.'

Darcy said that the point at which it was easiest to ensure turnover and to 'shake up the system' was the point at which a country drew up its constitution or its election laws.

All the countries in which women tended to be most strongly represented were those which drew up their constitutions at roughly the same time as women received the vote.

Asked about the need for supportive infrastructures to allow women to participate meaningfully in politics, Darcy said women should examine the most strategic way of lobbying for their demands.

He said if political parties were *obliged* to field a certain number of women candidates, the necessary infrastructure – creches and child care – to enable women to make themselves available could easily be provided.

'All the parties of the left in Europe are talking about quotas for women, all parties of the right abhor quotas.'

In South Africa, said Darcy, women were likely to make 'more progress in the next five months than in the next 10 years' in their efforts to gain political representation.

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Women: it's now or never (well almost)



Voters are not responsible for keeping women out of political office, according to a US expert. PAUL WEINBERG, Southlight

only in the early 1970s that women began to be appointed to positions of political power and the situation began to change.

By contrast, far more women were represented in politics in the European democracies, Darcy said. Explaining the disparity, he said that when women received the franchise in Europe early this century, party political democracy was a new system, emerging from the monarchies and autocracies that had dominated Europe.

It was not tainted by the violent, corrupt legacy of party politics in the English-speaking democracies. Instead political parties were viewed as instruments of democracy and women immediately demanded representation in them.

In 1918, 10 percent of the German