

# Canadian MP Kirsty Duncan advocates that 'science is for everyone'

Canadian Minister of Science and Minister of Sport and Persons with Disabilities, **the Honourable Kirsty Duncan** has been the driving force for putting science front and centre in the federal government's agenda. In this exclusive interview with *Research Features*, Kirsty explains why she left academia for politics, her role of rejuvenating Canadian science and also discusses what ultimately needs to be done to ensure that women continue to enter STEM education and careers.

**M**inister Kirsty Duncan was an Associate Professor of Health Studies at the University of Toronto and the former Research Director for the AIC Institute of Corporate Citizenship at the Rotman School of Management. In 2015, Minister Duncan was appointed by Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to serve as Minister of Science in the new Liberal government following his election.

In addition to delivering on her commitments of strengthening science and curiosity in Canada, Minister Duncan is taking action to improve equity and gender diversity in the sciences. Minister Duncan discusses with *Research Features* how the Canadian government strongly believes in science and is striving to improve the number of women in science in Canada.

*Hi Kirsty! Can you tell us about your role as a Member of Parliament for the riding of Etobicoke-North and the Minister of Science*

*and Minister of Sport and Persons with Disabilities?*

It has been one of my greatest honours to serve the people of Etobicoke-North and to have been appointed as the first full Minister of Science and, recently, Minister of Sport and Persons with Disabilities.

As the Member of Parliament for Etobicoke-North, I make every effort to support the diverse and vibrant community of people who call our riding home. It is a sincere privilege to help the members of our community achieve their greatest dreams; from opening a new small business and taking care of their families with the support of our government's Canada Child Benefit or welcoming new relatives from abroad and pursuing new opportunities in education. Whatever their goal, it is my duty to assist them and share their remarkable stories of success on Parliament Hill.

As Minister of Science and Minister of Sports and Persons with Disabilities, I am proud to serve the outstanding researchers,

**While we have women entering studies in the STEM fields in near equal numbers as men, specifically at the bachelor's level, these numbers drop dramatically as they progress through the academic ranks**



*You were an associate professor at the University of Toronto, University of Windsor and an adjunct professor at Royal Roads*

scholars and students in Canada whose hard work is leading to incredible discoveries: new technologies, new medical treatments, new ways of understanding each other and the world around us. It all starts with science.

My mission is to rebuild our culture of science and curiosity after ten years of neglect under the previous government. We've come a long way in our two years as a government to earn back the trust of our scientists. I know there is much more to be done but I'm proud of what we've accomplished so far.

*University, where you taught global environmental processes and medical geography – what made you change your career and enter politics?*

At the end of many lectures, I encouraged my students to make a difference in the world. At a certain point, I realised I needed to follow my own advice.

Under the Harper Conservatives, I witnessed the pressing issue of climate change and the needs of the environment take a back seat to the interests of industry. It became clear to me they had no concern for science and evidence. Rather than watch silently from the sidelines, I decided to take action. That's when, in 2008, I ran for a Liberal party that



Minister Kirsty Duncan with a group of young coders at the annual Code on the Hill event for elementary school students in Ottawa.



Peter Fragiskatos, Minister Kirsty Duncan and Parliamentary Secretary Kate Young visit the headquarters of Let's Talk Science in London, Ontario and meet a group of young scientists.



The Honourable Kirsty Duncan, Minister of Science and Minister of Sport and Persons with Disabilities.

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mirrored my values, that believed in science and climate change and that was committed to taking these issues seriously.

**What has your personal experience been as a woman in a leading role both in politics and in science?**

I consider myself fortunate for having the opportunity to work with so many astounding, inspirational women in science and politics; women who have acted as role models for me and for many other aspiring young women interested in making a career for themselves in these fields.

I have also faced many challenges because of my gender. For example, when I was teaching at a university, a fellow faculty member shot a question at me during a staff meeting: when did I plan on getting pregnant? On other occasions, I was asked how I wanted to be treated: as a woman or as a scientist. Later, when I asked a university official why I was being paid in the bottom

**When I asked a university official why I was being paid in the bottom tenth percentile, I was told it was because I was a woman**



Minister Kirsty Duncan meets Aida, a nine-year-old girl with juvenile idiopathic arthritis, at an event to announce more funding for genomics research to study diseases like Aida's.

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tenth percentile, I was told it was because "I was a woman."

In the early days of my political career, I and many other female Members of Parliament faced an outdated attitude on the Hill that needed to change.

We're working hard to change that political culture so that it is more open, transparent, welcoming and safe for all people. Perhaps the greatest symbol of the rising importance of equity and diversity in politics was when our Prime Minister appointed a Cabinet that had equal numbers of women and men – the first time in history. Since then, our government has taken strong action to support women in Canada, be they innovators, entrepreneurs, teachers, mothers, engineers and scientists.

*You've noted Canada lags behind other nations when it comes to women in science. Why do you think that is? How is*



**the Choose Science campaign helping to change this?**

A strong performance in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics is essential for a healthy, globally competitive and innovative Canadian economy – one that works for everybody, women included.

While we have women entering studies in the STEM fields in near equal numbers as men, specifically at the bachelor's level, these numbers drop dramatically as they progress through the academic ranks.

For those women who choose a career in STEM as many as 50% of them will leave their field entirely, whether due to pay inequities, the workplace culture, not seeing themselves reflected in leadership or a lack of role models and unconscious biases among their colleagues.

That's why our government remains committed to strengthening science in Canada and improving the representation of women in STEM disciplines.

I took action to support women and girls in science by creating the #choosescience digital advertising campaign. The campaign encourages young women to consider a career in the sciences. It also asks their parents and siblings, their relatives, teachers,

coaches and mentors to support them as they express their interest in science and research at a young age.

Our goal is to start a national conversation about the power of science to transform lives. Science is that much stronger when all people are invited to be curious, to ask bold questions and make astounding discoveries.

**How can schools and universities create an environment where more women are likely to apply for STEM subjects?**

All children are born curious—they want to discover and explore. It's up to us, their parents, teachers, and guides, to foster that excitement through elementary school, high school, and beyond.

In fact, parents have, by far, the greatest influence on their children's educational direction. That's another reason why the #choosescience campaign was created, to support parents who want to encourage their children to study STEM. It starts in schools across the country where students first begin to learn about the wonders of science, but it's up to those of us who help to raise today's youth, outside of the classroom, to keep sharing the importance and wonder of science.

*What ultimately needs to be done to ensure that women continue to enter STEM*



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Minister Kirsty Duncan at the launch of Maker Mobile, a travelling classroom and innovation hub created by Actua.



Minister Kirsty Duncan high fives a young student at Carleton University's Codemakers camp.

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**education and careers in Canada?**

Today, jobs in almost every field call for people who are analytical, creative, curious and critical thinkers, all qualities that can be nurtured through STEM education. STEM is required to actively participate in finding solutions to critical issues including climate change, energy sustainability, agriculture and healthcare.

As these issues become more important into the future, having more women in the field to help address them will lead to diverse and unique solutions.

My message to the young women of Canada: follow your passion for politics, science or any other field. Know that there may be barriers or 'speed bumps' along the way. Your challenge is to find a way over them or around them. I want you to know that our government will be cheering you along and that you can count on me to be your greatest champion as you strive to fulfil your dreams.

For more information on Minister Duncan and Canada's Fundamental Science Review, please visit the following websites: <https://www.canada.ca/en/government/ministers/kirsty-duncan.html> and <http://www.sciencereview.ca/eic/site/059.nsf/eng/home> respectively.



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