



The Star-Ledger

Yes, Caroline Kennedy is qualified

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The widely dismissive and condescending reaction to the suggestion that Caroline Kennedy might be a good candidate to fill the soon-to-be-vacated U.S. Senate seat of Hillary Clinton comes as no surprise.

From radio and TV talkers to newspaper columnists to members of her own party, Kennedy has been brushed aside as a housewife and celebrity with nothing but her name to recommend her.

"Why would you put her in the U.S. Senate?" asked Mark Simone Sunday night on NY1. "She's just a Park Avenue housewife."

"I don't know what Caroline Kennedy's qualifications are," said Rep. Gary Ackerman (D-N.Y.) in a weekend interview on WOR. "She has name recognition. So does J.Lo."

"Her government service starts and ends at raising private money for the New York City schools," writes Creators Syndicate columnist Froma Harrop. "While a worthy endeavor, it's a socialite's job."

I'm not campaigning for Kennedy to succeed Clinton. A number of quality names have been floated. I just want to see the evidence Kennedy isn't one of them.

She's a lawyer and a member of the New York and Washington, D.C., bar associations.

She's a director of the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund.

She's an author. In the tradition of her father's "Profiles in Courage," her "Profiles in Courage for Our Time" (Hyperion, 2003) examined public people who risked their careers to follow their consciences on significant issues -- like former New Jersey governor Jim Florio and his fight to ban assault weapons.

She has continued her mother's crusade for historic preservation. She's been a community activist her whole adult life.

As for that "socialite's job," she raised \$65 million as vice chairman of New York's Fund for Public Schools. That suggests some skills at persuasion.

As for political experience, she is hardly a neophyte. When your father was president, your closest uncle is a lion of the Senate and your whole family is drenched in politics, she's hardly unfamiliar with the turf.

There's a long list of public officials who went to Washington with far more modest credentials than Kennedy's.

"My experience has been that most women back into running for office," says state Sen. Barbara Buono. "By that I mean they are drawn into politics because of an issue or a cause. For most of us, it is not a well-thought-out, strategic career move. This is not a bad thing."

Kennedy, she adds, "is no different than most women in that respect. She has been very focused and involved in raising her three children and supporting philanthropic causes up until the time -- at the urging of her children -- she took an interest in supporting Barack Obama. Like so many others, she was inspired and energized by this experience."

The problem that women like Kennedy face, according to the Eagleton Institute's Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics, is that the skills they bring to the table are undervalued.

"It's about how we define relevant experience," says Walsh. "A John Edwards runs for the U.S. Senate without ever having held office, but the perception is he's a lawyer, so he must be okay. The things more likely to be seen on a woman's résumé are not as valued or even understood. This has been an ongoing theme of women returning to the work force."

Ingrid Reed, director of Eagleton's New Jersey Project, regards even Kennedy's child-rearing years as relevant.

"I'm appalled at the perception that, as a wife and mother, she doesn't bring anything of value to the Senate."

"Women who have been teachers or volunteers," says Walsh, "need to make a case -- to men, to the media, to political parties -- that those experiences are valuable as well."

Fortunately, more and more women have been able to do that.

In 1992, when Washington's Patty Murray ran for the U.S. Senate, she was told she didn't stand a chance because she was "just a mom in tennis shoes."

Well, yeah, she said, I am. She ran as the "Sneaker Mom," beat her opponent and 16 years later is her state's senior senator.

A more local example is Highland Park Mayor Meryl Frank.

"She had degrees in international relations and experience in women's health," says Walsh. "But she was

seen as just a mother in town. She had been president of the PTO, then school board president, but she was underestimated in terms of her skills to be mayor."

Then she won.

"She beat the incumbent as a result of her organizing ability, her ability to take note of problems and solve them and her ability to build coalitions," says Walsh. "The women who organized her campaign were referred to as 'the mommies.' Don't underestimate the mommies."

Even if their last name is Kennedy.

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