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HARVARD UNIVERSITY
JOHN F. KENNEDY SCHOOL OF GOVERNMENT
COUNCIL OF WOMEN WORLD LEADERS



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Ms. Melanne Verveer
Assistant to the President and
Chief of Staff to the First Lady
Office of the First Lady
Washington, DC USA

Dear Melanne,

I understand that you might be able to attend the reception and dinner for President Vigdis Finnbogadottir being held at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University on September 23, 1997 to announce the Council of Women World Leaders. It would be wonderful if you could attend; you would enjoy President Vigdis and she would be very interested in your work.

I would also like to invite you to a very small (10 person) lunch with President Vigdis and Dame Eugenia Charles (PM Dominica, 1980-1996) on the same day, September 23, 1997 at 12:pm at the Kennedy School. We have invited several Harvard faculty members including Roger Porter, Ron Heifetz, Pippa Norris along with Theresa Loar from the State Department to think creatively about how the Council can be most effective. We want to explore the challenges women leaders face and what major initiatives and resources can be brought to bear on them. The Harvard faculty members have done extensive research on leadership and been practitioners and advisors to heads of government.

You would add substantially to the conversation and you would meet individuals who can be helpful as you and the First Lady continue your work in this important area.

No doubt, your schedule is extremely busy that day, but if you would join us, we would look forward to your participation.

Hoping all is well,

Best regards,

Laura Liswood
Laura Liswood

A woman leader of substance and symbol

By LAURA LISWOOD
Special to The Times

WHEN Princess Diana was buried in the Spencer family plot on Saturday, the funeral procession had taken a 77-mile route to accommodate millions of Brits who wanted to bid farewell, while in "the states," millions of Americans woke before dawn to watch the live broadcast.

Like many other leaders who are women, Princess Di drew us in. Would we have paused at the picture of a man in protective clothing checking for land mines? Probably not, but it was quite another to see a woman take those steps, or in the early days of the AIDS epidemic, actively hug patients.

The truth is that part of the power of Princess Diana and a good deal of the loss is because many people relate differently, more easily and more deeply to women than to men. Women seem to lead a life closer to ours, and perhaps like the princess, they are less able or willing to separate the personal from the political. We can imagine borrowing sugar from Princess Di, not from Prince Charles.

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We reflect ourselves in our leaders. We learn from them, model ourselves with their behavior. It is only recently that we have women in these symbolically and politically leading roles. Because we have learned or believe we can no longer trust the words of our public figures, we look to their actions as a way to judge their priorities and their values. That's particularly true of women in power. Diana, though not elected or appointed, had that power.

I have known or met 15 recent women presidents and prime ministers, nearly all of whom have taken symbolic action, clashed with the power elite or the status quo, overcome terrific obstacles, and in some interesting ways, become dearly beloved by their constituents.

Remember the tea Mary Robinson, then the president of Ireland, held for the women of Northern Ireland and Ireland in her country? It was a simple gesture that became a powerful symbol of peace. She began shining a light in the president's house 24 hours a day to symbolize that all Irish diaspora are welcome home.

Robinson, who is now head of human rights for the United Nations, was initially not seen as a serious presidential candidate. But by the time she had visited more small communities than other politicians, she was already unbeatable and her party was forced to support her. She became the most popular president in recent history.

Her approach is not completely unique. The former prime minister of the Netherlands Antilles, Maria Libera Peters, covered the walls of her ministerial offices with pictures of her children and their handiwork. Filipino President Corason Aquino chose not to live in the Presidential Malacanang Palace as her predecessor Marcos had done, but rather worked out of a small office, making a visible and memorable contrast to the opulent days of the Marcos.

And Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, former president of Nicaragua,



Princess Diana talks with AIDS patient Wayne Taylor at the Casey House AIDS Hospice in Toronto in 1991.

gua, has four children — two of whom were contras and two of whom were Sandinistas. Every Sunday night, they sat down at the dinner table, and that family ritual became symbolic of the possibility of unity in Nicaragua.

Women leaders more often seem to have nicknames — a sign of comfort and informality, or approachability and shared experience. So, Mary Robinson was "Our Mary"; Eugenia Charles, former prime minister of Dominica was "Granny"; Violeta Chamorro was Dora Violeta. So Princess Di.

Women gain power in alternative ways. Princess Di didn't seek out her role as a powerful individual, but her actions created the persona, and her power was already established, beyond anything the royal family could do, once they even realized it.

Men do many of the things that these women leaders do, including the good works that Princess Di dedicated herself to. But women are still new to us as public figures and we allow them to travel beyond the traditional; and we are almost disappointed if they do not. We grant them freedom to break the bonds of tradition. Indeed, we rely upon them to pave the way for us.

Princess Diana was a mother, a young woman learning to live life fully and by her very nature, a symbol. It should not surprise us that we feel we have lost someone close to us.

Longtime Seattle resident Laura Liswood is founder and executive director of the Council of Women World Leaders at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. Liswood also serves as an adviser to Gov. Gary Locke to the Governor's Executive Women's Council.