



As they were . . . Robert Kennedy and family (Kathleen, age 11, bottom left)

A family affair

Sharon Krum talks to Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, the first Kennedy woman to run for high political office

Teddy Kennedy once said if you took a secret ballot of the Kennedy family, Kathleen would be voted most responsible. He didn't say she would be voted Our Next Political Star, because the family business simply didn't work that way.

Since 1938, when Joe Sr became the American ambassador to London, Kennedy politics has always been men's work. Jack, Bobby, Teddy, Joe Jr, Patrick, Mark: they have all held office from the presidency down, but Kennedy women? Their job was to nurture the dynasty, hit the campaign trail, devote themselves to social causes, and turn a blind eye to Kennedy infidelities. Power was not theirs to have, but to facilitate.

But this month, in what political historians are calling an earthquake long overdue, a Kennedy woman has finally entered the big-time political ring. Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, eldest daughter of RFK's 11 children, announced she is running for governor of Maryland. The election is in November, but polls already have her beating her Republican rival, Robert Ehrlich, 49% to 36%.

"I grew up in a family that loved

politics, but Kennedy women did not run for public office," says Kennedy Townsend, 50. "But you have to look at it in context. Politics before the women's movement was a male domain. The women's movement changed everything for me. Women went into worlds they hadn't gone into before, including politics. I saw then I could have a role in public life."

Kennedy Townsend, who was 16 when her father was gunned down by an assassin's bullet the night he won the California presidential primary, says that as a young girl she thought of becoming a nun. But her father's mantra - "It's only God and angels who are lookers-on. Each of us must get involved" - and the influence of the feminist movement, drew her into politics.

Married to university professor David Townsend, and the mother of four daughters aged 10 to 24, Kennedy Townsend, a lawyer, started her political career working as a staffer at the Maryland legislature and the state education department. She became deputy assistant attorney general at the US justice department, then ran and lost a Congressional race in 1986 (in a safe conservative seat). "The lesson I learned was

that I should have run in a Democratic district," she says.

Although he barely knew her, in 1994 Maryland Governor Parris Glendening tapped her to be his deputy. (In the US the post is termed lieutenant governor and is largely ceremonial.) He hedged his bets that as a woman and a Kennedy her presence on the ticket would vault him to office. It did.

As the governor's deputy she was viewed as energetic and committed, displaying both her father's passion for reform and his magnetic smile. But minutes after announcing her own candidacy, the compliments were off the table and the carping began in earnest. Critics suggested that Kennedy Townsend was running on little more than the lustre of the Kennedy name, with neither the experience or spine to handle the big issues.

"There is no question my family name opens doors," she says now. "I know a number of people love what my family did. But you simply can't run on a name. Voters want to know what I am going to do about economic development or crime."

But Baltimore Sun state political reporter David Nitkin says he under-

stands why her Republican rivals feel she has an unfair advantage. "I have seen her visit black communities, and they say to her, 'Kathleen, I heard your father speak on the day Martin Luther King was assassinated and it changed my life.' There is enormous political value in the family legacy," he says.

But as they say in America, what you pick up on the swings, you lose on the roundabouts. If Kathleen's name is a political bonanza, her gender is not. Despite a weighty political resume, Kennedy Townsend is being called a lightweight, lacking the requisite toughness for the most powerful job in the state. (Translation? She's a woman.)

"You wouldn't hear that criticism if she was a man with her credentials," admits Nitkin. So while the magic of the family name is undeniable, it is Kennedy Townsend's credentials that will, barring a dark

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horse upset, propel her to the governor's office. As part of a deal struck with the governor for joining him on the ticket in 1994, Kennedy Townsend had the traditionally ceremonial role of lieutenant governor upgraded to tackle real portfolios.

She took on the issues of crime, economic development and character education, creating crime-fighting programs, anti-drug initiatives and a police corps for students. Unlike her more liberal uncle Ted, Kennedy Townsend is a "new Democrat", favouring gun control and abortion rights but also capital punishment and business tax breaks.

While Nitkin says her work on economic development allowed her to build up business and political support across the state, he adds: "The race isn't over yet. They [her opponents] will point out that the office of lieutenant governor has no power over budgets, she cannot hire and fire, she has no direct control over other portfolios. They believe she doesn't have enough executive experience."

And her opponents have another card up their sleeves, a 1999 scandal involving teenage bootcamps in Maryland. They were exposed as



Kennedy Townsend . . . 'The women's movement changed everything for me'



PHOTOGRAPHS: (MAIN) GREG WHITESSELL/GETTY IMAGES; AP

being hotbeds of abuse, and Kennedy Townsend, as supervisor of the state's juvenile justice programs, came under direct fire. "She claims they have worked to overhaul the system, but they will use it against her," says Nitkin.

Interestingly, while Republicans draw up battle plans to torpedo her candidacy, Democratic kingmakers are already whispering about moving Kennedy Townsend from the governor's office to the vice-presidential ticket in 2008. When asked, she politely deflects all talk of wanting, let alone occupying, an office in the same building in which her father and uncle once worked.

"I haven't even become the governor and I have a long campaign ahead of me," she says, just like a true politico. Though she performs a deft sidestep around the White House question, Kennedy Townsend laughs

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knowingly when you broach the one issue that dogs every female candidate, left or right, Kennedy or not - fashion.

When she first entered politics, she was taken to task over everything from her hair (not neat enough) to her clothing (not smart enough). Quelle horreur: once she had her slip showing! She has since adopted the classic business suit as her uniform, but doesn't it hurt when they bark that her shoes don't match her dress?

"I ignore it. But the real trick is to get up early enough to make sure they do match," she says.

Beyond the nuts and bolts of running for governor, Kennedy Townsend says she is fully aware that something larger is at stake here. While more women in the US are entering high stakes political races, the numbers are still painfully low. No female candidate since Hillary Clinton ran for Senate has created this much buzz, and Kennedy Townsend hopes the media attention pays off in ways beyond the personal.

"The job of governor in the US is such a visible post. So when a woman does it and does it successfully, it changes people's expectations for all women in public life."