

CUPE PEI Division President Donalda MacDonald's Speech at the Federation of Labour's Annual International Women's Day - 2007 Luncheon

Status of Women Canada

“Yes, I’m ready to support women’s human rights and I agree that Canada has more to do to meet its international obligations to women’s equality. If elected, I will take concrete and immediate measures, as recommended by the United Nations, to ensure that Canada fully upholds its commitments to women in Canada.” So said Stephen Harper in January of 2006.

If he had kept his promise we would be celebrating the gains made by women as was intended on International Women’s Day. Instead we are calling on Canadians to fight back to put women’s equality back on track!

In just one year as Prime Minister, Stephen Harper’s minority government has cut and distorted many programs that are key to promoting women’s economic, social and legal equality in Canada.

I would like to talk about three of these areas to you today – Status of Women Canada, Child Care and the Court Challenges Program.

In September Harper’s government announced a cut of \$5 million to the operational budget of the Status of Women Canada and made significant changes to the terms and conditions for the Women’s Program.

All activities linked to advocacy, lobbying and most research have been excluded from the new terms and conditions. It is for this reason that many women’s groups will find it extremely difficult to secure funding through the Women’s Program. By no longer funding advocacy, lobbying and most research, the Conservative Government of Canada is ensuring that coordination of activities and campaigns does not happen.

The new terms and conditions aim to provide ‘direct’ and ‘local’ assistance and is based very much on a charity model which ignores the systemic issues behind the problem. For example, when considering women’s poverty, the charity model approach is about ensuring that women can find a donated business suit which will allow them to access a minimum wage job. What women’s groups have been working on over the last few years is how women’s poverty cannot be addressed solely from the vantage point of finding a job – but by addressing the multiple forces that affect women’s economic well being.

Local work clearly needs to happen. However the women providing local services, often with little pay and job security cannot be expected to add advocacy work to their plate. Women's equality work must also take place at the policy, research, legal, lobbying and advocacy levels. Providing short term services will not address long term, systemic discrimination issues which allow women's poverty and violence against women to prevail.

Child Care

Is Harper upholding his promise to women and their children? I think not! Quality child care has been called the 'ramp' to women's equality. Without it, women can't participate fully in economic, social, political and cultural life. That's why Canadian women need – and deserve – a publicly-funded and publicly accountable, non-profit, child care system.

Child care is not a 'hand out'. Child care is not a babysitting service. Good quality child care, whether provided by parents, other caregivers or both, ensures healthy child development and maximizes young children's intellectual, social, and emotional growth. Good quality child care has a positive impact on a country's economic development and stability, not just a personal impact on the children and families involved.

The first act of the Harper government after taking office was to announce the cancellation of Early Learning and Child Care agreements worth \$1 billion per year between the federal and provincial governments after 2006. Instead of a system more in keeping with other industrialized countries, Harper's government announced that individual families with children under six would get a taxable allowance of \$100 per month to provide 'choices' in child care. Well what 'choices' does \$100 per month give? It does not replace the wages of any parent who wishes to stay home, it represents a very tiny fraction of the actual costs of child care and does absolutely nothing to create child care spaces. In addition, this taxable \$1200 per year is counted as income, so some families may even lose their child care subsidy if the amount puts them over the threshold. Although this additional income may be helpful for some families, it is not a child care program.

Court Challenges Program

And, lastly, I want to talk about the Harper government's decision to immediately end all funding for the Court Challenges Program of Canada and how this is a bad decision for women which must be reversed.

The court challenges program is a very important program that funds test cases initiated by individuals and groups to challenge federal laws and policies that violate their constitutional equality rights. With the help of this funding, women's organizations and

other equality-seeking groups have been able to access the justice system, and present progressive interpretations of the law. This has resulted in better outcomes for women, persons with disabilities and other disadvantaged groups.

For example, the court challenges program provided funding for the women's legal and education fund (LEAF) to argue against the use of sexist myths in sexual assault trials. LEAF intervened before the Supreme Court of Canada in the Ewanchuk case, where the accused argued that the way a woman is dressed for a job interview can imply that she consents to having sex with a potential employer. Fortunately, the Supreme Court agreed with LEAF arguments and rejected this sexist defense.

This is the second time that a Conservative government has abolished the Court Challenges Program. The first was in 1992. That decision was condemned from all quarters and intense lobbying was successful in having it reinstated by the Liberal government in 1994.

The United Nations has repeatedly recognized the vital role that the Court Challenges Program has been playing in the respect and promotion of human rights in Canada. If you can't challenge programs and laws that violate your constitutional equality rights – then you really don't have access to these rights.

Conclusion

Brothers and Sisters, maybe Harper's Conservatives believe women and men are already equal. Unfortunately, the facts tell us this is not the case. Women working full time year round still earn only 72 cents for every dollar that a man earns. Only 15% of children under the age of 12 have access to regulated child care services. Women make up over 50% of the population of Canada, yet we hold only 20.8% of the seats in the House of Commons.

On International Women's Day, 2007, I ask you to join with men and women everywhere in Canada and Quebec in opposition to these anti-equality policies of the federal Conservative government. Together we will put equality back on track!