

The Broken Promises of Prime Minister Harper

By Andrée Côté

Exactly one year ago, to the day, (January 18, 2006) in the midst of an election campaign, Prime Minister Harper declared:

"Yes, I am committed to supporting women's human rights and I agree that Canada has more to do to meet its international obligations on 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."

- Stephen Harper, January 18, 2006

On the federal election date of January 23, 2006, his party was elected to office. In spite of its minority government status, the Harper government was quick to set in motion a series of policy decisions that have sent a resounding message, namely: that women's equality and the promotion and protection of their human rights is not of concern to this government.

Despite the fact that 65% of women with young children are employed in the paid workforce, the Harper government chose to abolish the pan-Canadian childcare programme in the spring of 2006. Instead, he offered a taxable allowance of \$100 a month per child under the age of six. While this amount can help parents in Quebec pay for the \$7/day daycare, in Ontario, this allowance does not even cover the costs of two days of childcare costs.

In September 2006, the Harper government announced that it would not adhere to the recommendations of the Parliamentary Working Group on Pay Equity by adopting federal legislation on Pay Equity. Yet after more than three years of research and consultation, the Working Group has noted that the protections within the *Canadian Human Rights Act* have been a dismal failure, and that a major overhaul is needed to better protect female workers within the postal services, telecommunications, banks, etc. and other areas that fall under federal jurisdiction. The Working Group has recommended the adoption of pro-active federal legislation, similar to that adopted in Quebec.

In Quebec, the recent report by the Ministry of Labour, which reviews the progress of Quebec's Pay Equity Legislation attests to the positive progress made during the first ten years of the legislation: 28% of salaried workers in predominantly female occupations benefited from 2 to 14.4% adjustments to their salaries. Within the private sector, the average adjustment to wages was 6.5%. The vast majority of employers in Quebec acknowledged that, without the obligations imposed by pay equity legislation, they would not have implemented these salary adjustments. It is scandalous that the Harper government has refused to implement a legislative framework that would effectively protect female workers in the federal sector. Instead, Harper has chosen to maintain the status quo, to the benefit of employers.

In September 2006, the Harper government abolished funding to the Court Challenges Programme (CCP), which has funded important legal challenges to laws affecting women's equality, gay/lesbian rights, disability rights, the status of immigrants and detainees, as well as the rights of francophone minorities within Canada. Thanks to this programme, women's groups have been able to intervene in hearings at the Supreme Court of Canada to argue for non-sexist interpretations of the criminal code, labour laws, and family law, resulting in profound changes to Canadian

jurisprudence. Without the financial support of this Programme, women's groups would not have been able to initiate legal challenges to discriminatory legislation and policies, and intervene to promote equality-seeking interpretations of the law.

It was also this past September that the government cut \$5 million dollars from the \$13 million dollar budget of Status of Women Canada, effectively eroding its capacity to undertake research on necessary reforms, not to mention its ability to ensure that other federal ministries are evaluating new legislation with a gender based analysis in order to foresee and eliminate the discriminatory impact of the law on women. These cuts have also resulted in the closure of 12 of the 16 regional offices of the agency.

Finally, in early October, the government announced new funding criteria for the financing of women's groups. Consequently, the Women's Programme (WP) of Status of Women will no longer finance research or advocacy that promotes women's rights to the federal, provincial or municipal levels. In addition, a commitment to promoting women's equality was struck from the mandate of the Women's Programme, which will now only finance projects that encourage the economic, social and cultural "participation" of women in their communities. In light of the new criteria for the WP, public funds may now be given to for-profit entities and to religious groups. In so doing, the government aims to silence the voices of women's organizations, such as the National Association of Women and the Law, who promote legislative reforms that advance women's equality.

When questioned by opposition MPs of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on the Status of Women, the Minister for the Status of Women, Bev Oda, stated that women's equality had been achieved in Canada and that feminists who believed otherwise were "victimizing" women. According to the Minister, it is no longer necessary to adopt systemic measures to fight discrimination. In short, this government has renounced the approach of consecutive Canadian governments of the past quarter century, which recognized the fact that inequality between women and men persists as a societal problem and that the state must adopt systemic measures to promote women's equality.

As reflected in various reports on the status of women, we know that the battle for women's equality and human rights is far from over. The January 2003 Report from the United Nations' Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) called upon the federal government to "double its efforts" to put an end to the feminization of poverty and to reform laws that both directly and indirectly result in discrimination against Aboriginal women. The CEDAW Committee also recommended that Canada: i) improve its Live-in Caregiver programme by re-examining the legal obligation that workers live with their employers and by fasttracking access to permanent residency; ii) double its efforts to eliminate violence against women, iii) adopt measures to increase women's representation in politics and public life, iv) work harder to implement a national childcare strategy; v) increase benefits allocated for maternity/parental leave; and that Canada vi) double its efforts to achieve pay equity and increase funding for legal aid, notably, by restoring the budget to the Court Challenges programme devoted to addressing inequalities in the provinces.

At the same time as the Conservative Government is opening its doors wide open to fundamentalist right-wing and anti-feminist forces, it is crucial that women's groups continue to access funding that will allow for the defense of women's rights and for interventions in favour of

equality-seeking laws and legislation. It is not just women's equality that is being threatened, but the very functioning of democracy in our society and the preservation of hard won gains in human rights protections for all.

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