

NAWL Report Card on the Throne Speech and the Harper Government Agenda for the 40th Parliament

Budgeting and Fiscal Management : D

Against all evidence, the Harper government continues to insist its previous tax cuts represent good rather than bad fiscal management. While the government correctly refuses to commit to a balanced budget at all costs, it fails to recognize the need for gender-based analysis in future budget planning, a measure recommended by the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and one that is urgently required to ensure that women don't bear the brunt of government spending and program cuts to address the current financial crisis.

Jobs and Well-being : C+

The Throne Speech prioritizes the recognition of foreign credentials, a long overdue step that will benefit new immigrant women facing employment barriers in Canada. The Harper government also promises to improve economic opportunities and education for First Nations – a significant issue for Aboriginal women and girls, a third of whom now live in poverty. While public infrastructure projects – a source of traditional employment for men – are identified as a key job-creation measure to help deal with the economic downturn facing Canada, no mention is made of the need for equal investment in social infrastructure projects in health, education, social assistance, child care and other areas, which are a major source of employment for women and of benefit to all Canadian families.

Participation of Canadians : C-

The Harper government's 'equality of opportunity' agenda is a step backwards for women's substantive equality in Canada. The dual pressure of holding down a job and caring for family, alluded to in the Throne Speech, is faced primarily by women, and federal government policies should recognize that fact explicitly, especially in the current economic climate. The Throne Speech sets out a vague commitment to improving the Universal Child Care Benefit and EI maternity and parental benefits. With the Harper government's cancellation of the national childcare program, access to childcare services and maternal/parental EI benefits remain woefully inadequate outside Quebec. Although the Homelessness Partnering Strategy has been extended, Canada still lacks a national housing strategy to deal with the problems of homelessness and affordable housing that have a severe impact on low income women and their families, especially Aboriginal women, women escaping violence, and women with disabilities who are at greatest housing risk. The Throne Speech also ignores the urgent need for changes to the federal Employment Insurance regime, under which two of three unemployed women do not receive EI benefits.

Crime and Safety: D

The Harper government claims to be improving public safety yet continues to reject calls for greater gun control, a measure supported by women's organizations and most Canadians. Instead it vows to continue its 'tough-on-crime' agenda, although research shows that this approach does not guarantee women's safety in their homes or in their communities. Violence against women, particularly against Aboriginal women, requires federal leadership and systemic solutions to deal with poverty, housing and racism that are nowhere evident in the Harper government's agenda.

Building Stronger Government Institutions : D

The Throne Speech announces that steps will be taken to constrain the federal spending power, which has been used historically to create key national programs such as medicare. Yet the Harper government has done little to promote national social programs for which provincial support already exists, such as pharmacare or a national childcare program. Instead of reforming the Canadian electoral system to introduce proportional representation, the Harper government plans to address Senate reform and to tinker with the existing first-past-the-post system that reinforces systemic barriers to representation of women and their concerns within the federal political system.

Promoting Equality for Girls and Women : F

In its recently released *Concluding Observations* relating to Canada, the UN CEDAW Committee criticizes the Canadian government's lack of compliance with the *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women*, including the Harper government cuts to funding for equality rights research and advocacy and its inaction on issues of violence, poverty, access to justice, and racism faced by Aboriginal and other women. The Throne Speech and the Harper government's agenda for the 40th Parliament do nothing to respond to these serious concerns, or to promote real equality for women and girls in Canada. In times of fiscal restraint, those who are already disadvantaged are at greatest risk of having their human rights diminished even further. The implementation of 'cost control measures' in Ottawa could leave girls and women in jeopardy of a further erosion of their rights. Now, more than ever, women and girls in Canada need the Harper government to meet its commitments under the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women*.

FINAL AVERAGE : D

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