

## Harper runs roughshod over women's rights

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After three decades of (admittedly uneven) progress towards full human rights, women now must contend with the agenda of Stephen Harper. The Prime Minister's disdain for women's equality is one of the most dramatic examples of his wider assault on democracy.

Democracy is not just political parties, voting and Parliament -- it is a whole panoply of institutions, practices and traditions of the country and the evolution of norms in society. Specifically, it encompasses human rights and civil liberties. The Charter of Rights and Freedoms is relatively new institution in Canada but when it was enacted in 1982 it both reflected and helped establish in law, the changes that Canadian society was already going through. One of the most critical areas of change was that of women's rights and equality. The Charter merely recognized that Canadian society had moved on from the period where women were treated as second class citizens with impunity and discriminated against as a matter of course.

Like the earlier struggle of women just to get the right to vote, this was a classic example of how society changes through the influence of powerful democratic movements and how the law is then obliged to catch up. Indeed, even before the Charter became law, the federal government, in 1981, ratified the United Nations Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women -- a convention that itself reflected the strength of the global women's movement.

In the very first year that Stephen Harper was prime minister he moved in many ways to halt the course of progress for women. His government summarily cancelled the multi-billion dollar national child care program that the previous Liberal government had spent years negotiating with the provinces (and women's groups had fought for, for decades). It also had the support of the vast majority of Canadians.

This program was hardly a radical proposal. Canada is one of the most backward countries among Western developed nations regarding early childhood education. This program would simply have begun to close the gap.

- According to Sharon Gregson of the Coalition of Childcare Advocates of B.C.: "Other countries are able to provide child care for up to 100 per cent of children between the age of three and six. Other countries, like Belgium, Denmark, Italy, Sweden, even England and the United States, invest more per capita in early childhood development services than Canada does."



- The universal program was "replaced" by a taxable \$100 a month payment to parents of kids under six a pittance compared to the cost of professional child care (but an approach recommended by the right-wing group [REAL Women](#)).

### **Shutting shelters, stifling advocacy**

Other cuts were part of a one billion dollar assault on things that the Harper government didn't like, and were implemented in spite of the fact that his government had inherited a \$13 billion surplus. Amongst the programs eliminated was the Court Challenges Program (CCP), one of the most effective and innovative programs in the world promoting and facilitating human rights. The CCP had, since 1978, provided funding for individuals challenging government legislation that was discriminatory. In short, it made constitutional rights, and rights under the Charter, accessible to ordinary people. Amongst its major beneficiaries were women. To ensure that it would not have to accept any outside, citizens-based advice on changing the law, Harper also eliminated the \$4 million in funding for the Law Commission of Canada, formerly the Law Reform Commission.

The government also closed 12 out of 16 regional offices of Status of Women Canada across the country as well as eliminating the \$1 million Status of Women Independent Research Fund. Changes were imposed to the criteria for funding for the Status of Women Canada's Women's Program which precluded support for advocacy or lobbying for law reform. That meant that dozens of women-run NGOs would no longer receive funding because virtually all of them combined advocacy with the provision of services -- such as women's shelters advocating for an end to violence against women.

One of the most cynical efforts by the Harper government to turn back the clock was its decision -- again, with no reference to Parliament and no consultation with women or women's organizations -- to simply refuse to take the issue of pay equity any further than the law already allowed. Harper, breaking a promise made in the 2006 election, simply rejected recommendations from a federal task force to move toward a "proactive pay-equity system." Shelagh Day, one of Canada's foremost feminists and a human rights scholar, told a [Vancouver forum](#) in December 2006: "The Harper government has come forward a few months ago and simply said they're not going to do anything on pay equity. The law will stay the way it is."

In 2009 the Harper government took pay equity backwards when it introduced the Public Sector Equitable Compensation Act. According to human rights advocates the bill emptied "the right to pay equity of its meaning. The new legislated criteria for evaluating 'equitable compensation' will reintroduce sex discrimination into pay practices, rather than eliminate it." The law (passed by stealth by placing it in the 2009 budget where it could not be voted down) introduced additional criteria that would allow public sector employers to consider "market demand" in determining compensation -- in effect ensuring higher pay for men even if the work was of equal value.

## What REAL women say real women want

While women's groups organized forums across the country to draw attention to this deliberate social engineering from the right, Harper has not listening to them. He was, however, listening to a group that had demonstrated its full support for Harper and the Conservatives during the election: REAL Women.

Responding to the \$5 million in cuts to the Status of Women, [REAL Women stated](#): "This is a good start, and we hope that the Status of Women will eventually be eliminated entirely since it does not represent 'women', but only represents the ideology of feminists."

REAL Women also congratulated the government for cancelling the "troublesome" Court Challenges Program, declaring: "the Court Challenges Program was a profoundly undemocratic use of taxpayers' money to restructure society ... The elimination of the Court Challenges Program will go a long way to promoting democracy in Canada."

If there was any doubt that it was Stephen Harper's personal determination to set back women's equality, Garth Turner, a Conservative MP who eventually left the caucus, left none. He told the *Georgia Straight*: "[Harper]said, 'We have determined a series of cuts, ... which will be announced... They are our position. And...anyone [who] has got any problem with that -- who says anything about it -- is going to have a short political career.' He said that in caucus."

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