

Status of Women

role in the life of Canada and in the raising of the consciousness of Canadians about the plight of women in many cases.

In the past the council gained the credibility and confidence of women and women's groups through advice given to the government on many issues including the following: adult occupational training; the appointment of women to boards, commissions, courts and the Senate; equal pay for work of equal value in the labour force; unemployment insurance criteria; maternity benefits; child care and the proposal for a national day care act; changes to the Criminal Code, including rape and prostitution legislation; employment programs and career upgrading for women; changes to the Income Tax Act, particularly as they affect dependent spouses; pension plans and the eligibility of housewives; benefits to female survivors; native women's rights; economic hardships facing older women and single parent families; and last but not least, the widely-acclaimed paper directing attention to the implications of the constitutional proposal. I mention these to show the significance of the council's work, that it is not in one corner or somehow a group merely directing its comments to an interest group, but widely affects the Canadian population.

When the council was first established, members were recognized for their expertise and their previous involvement in the concerns which I have just outlined. They brought stature to the advisory council; they gave it a reputation because of their own reputations. One might think of Sophie Stedman, the 1980 persons award winner, who had years of experience with business and professional women. One might think of Grace Hartman, the present vice-president of CUPE or the past president of the National Action Committee, who is recognized by feminists. There are many others who could be mentioned, but if we look at what has happened to the council from its beginning, we find that too many of its present appointees had little previous connection with women's groups, or at least they are not recognized contributors. They have had little previous experience and expertise with the issue facing today's women.

They attain their stature and expertise from their appointments to the council as a result of the politicizing of the Advisory Council on the Status of Women. It is politicized by the appointment of friends of the minister and campaign workers. This has meant that there was an easy possibility of interference by the minister which, after a long and subtle progression, has led to the resignation of the chairman, Doris Anderson.

A second result is that women's groups and other voluntary agencies across the country do not feel they were represented as they used to be. In the last few days, since the resignation of Mrs. Anderson, there have been comments from those who contribute to the awareness of women's issues across the country. Lynn MacDonald, President of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, a voluntary group representing 150 women's organizations across Canada, said the postponement of the proposed conference showed "a lamentable loss of credibility" for the council. She added:

The time for regional conferences proposed as a consolation prize to the women of Canada has long past. From the beginning the government failed to consult us, failed to consider us, and for a long time refused to hear us in discussion of constitutional change.

Miss MacDonald concluded that her group would:

—re-think its position on the government-appointed advisory council . . . whether such councils appointed by politicians from among their political friends can reasonably be expected to speak for women is open to question.

● (1550)

Miss MacDonald's concerns were echoed by Linda Ryan-Nye, co-chairman of Women for Political Action, and Mary Cornery, co-ordinator of the Canadian Congress on Learning Opportunities for Women, and Laura Sabia, first and former chairman of the Ontario Status of Women Council.

What should the council be? First and foremost it should be an effective voice for women and women's groups. It must be, and must be seen to be, an independent and impartial advisory body. It must be viewed as a credible force in order to maintain the necessary liaisons and information ties with women's groups across the country. It must be seen as a body which can speak freely, even sometimes to the embarrassment of the government.

I would like to remind the House of the events which have led up to the discrediting of the council and to the questioning of its integrity. If we go back for a moment and think about the matter of constitutional input and discussion, we find that in September of 1980 the advisory council planned a national conference on the constitution for September 5. This was cancelled on September 2 due to the translators' strike. It was rumoured by several women's groups that political pressure caused the postponement.

I would like to move on to October, 1980. The National Action Committee's national conference on the constitution, to be held in Winnipeg, was cancelled when a request for \$22,000 from the Secretary of State (Mr. Fox) was refused. This was money which would normally have been made available for groups such as this. The minister was asked to intervene on the committee's behalf, with no result. In comparison, other groups were receiving funding from other government sources in order to make their presentations before the constitution committee. We find that \$1.2 million is allocated to the native peoples in order to allow them to travel and prepare their representations.

Later in October the National Action Committee held a small consultation conference for members in the Toronto area only. The minister was the guest speaker at this conference. He is quoted in the press as having "misjudged his audience, pompously talked down to them, patronized them, insulted them and then had the colossal effrontery to tell them to blindly accept the proposed charter of rights in the Constitution as a 'great leap of faith'."

Moving on to December, the advisory council rescheduled its September conference for February 13 and 14, 1981. It hired an organizer for the conference and speakers were lined up. Notices were sent out across the country. The minister agreed to host a reception and a luncheon. Then, in January,