

*Government Orders*

barriers and obstacles which prevents people in the workplace to get their full rights to participate.

Numbers of women, aboriginal people, disabled people and visible minorities have been denied equal open access to fully develop and explore their potentials in the workplace.

Ten years ago I had the privilege of establishing the Abella royal commission, headed by Judge Rosalie Abella from the court of Ontario, to look into this large question of systemic discrimination in the workplace. Justice Abella tabled a very historic report. Unfortunately by the time the report was tabled the people of Canada had decided in their own good wisdom to send me and a number of my colleagues on an extended sabbatical on the other side of the House. Therefore I was not in a position to fully implement those recommendations. It was up to the previous government to implement the recommendations of the Abella commission.

It brought in the Employment Equity Act which passed in 1986. It required employers in the federal jurisdiction that employ over 100 people to implement employment equity and to report on their progress.

If we look at the original Employment Equity Act, while it was full of wonderful language and high sounding objectives and phrases, it lacked some very major components. It was a form of legislated volunteerism. There was no enforcement. It was simply a good wish list of things people were allowed to do.

Therefore when it came time when we wanted employers to take positive steps to improve the access and openness of the workplace and they refused, there was nothing to be done. As a result there have been over the years a number of incidents in which employment discrimination has continued to prevail.

The other major flaw in the 1986 legislation is it did not apply to government. It was the classic case of do what we say, not do what we do.

It was in recognition of those two major flaws of the original bill that in the red book we put forward to the electorate in 1993 we committed ourselves to making major changes in the Employment Equity Act.

The legislation before us today on final reading is designed to meet those two major omissions. It is to fulfil the commitment we gave to the Canadian people in 1993 when they gave us a mandate to implement it. It is to give the Employment Equity Act some authority to carry out measures to reduce discrimination and to make it applicable to the federal government in its own workplace.

The bill increases the authority of the Canadian Human Rights Commission to conduct an audit of public and private sector employees to ensure they are in compliance with the principle of employment equity.

• (1515)

It also provides that the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal, when needed, can in effect transform itself into an employment equity tribunal to guarantee that the legislation respects the rights of all Canadians regardless of whether they are employees or employers. There is a right of appeal.

[Translation]

This bill will have a positive impact on Quebec. More than 150 employers and approximately 350,000 employees will be affected by this initiative.

Those Quebecers will be entitled to a stronger system, with the human rights commission and a tribunal if necessary to ensure that employment equity is being implemented.

As well, application of employment equity measures within the public service will be fairer. It will give women, the disabled and other designated groups equity in employment, training or promotion. I feel that this represents a proper response to the demands of Quebec women and the needs of the disabled, aboriginal people and visible minorities.

It is my belief that the bill demonstrates the commitment of the federal government to take progressive measures for Canadians and for Quebecers.

[English]

Despite some of the comments concerning the bill, it is not about quotas. Let me make that very clear. That language was used in debate yesterday. It is not about quotas. In fact the legislation specifically prohibits quotas. Anybody who attempts to insert the notion that we are following in some cases the example of the legislation the Americans introduced 20 or 30 years ago is not being fair or straightforward when the word quotas is used since the act specifically prohibits them.

Neither is the bill about reducing qualifications to allow more non-qualified people to enter the workforce. It is a bill about lowering barriers, not lowering standards. That is the basic purpose of the bill.

We are attempting with this legislation to make sure the Canadian workplace fully reflects the richness and diversity of our population, that all individuals will have an equal chance of being considered for a job, a promotion or a chance to improve their specific place and status in the workplace.

The bill is not about replacing the merit principle with something else, far from it. I make the case it strengthens the merit principle by making sure in no uncertain terms that everybody who has merit will not be overlooked. Over the years people with enormous qualification, with enormous merit, with enormous sense of ambition and motivation never had the chance to fulfil that potential because in the workplace have been obstacles, barriers, filters and screens that oftentimes have been built up without people noticing they were there.