

Canada received funding to challenge aspects of the Indian Act.

Aboriginal people have received funding to challenge issues related to voting rights, exclusion from programs, cultural rights, language rights and aboriginal customary law. Inuit, Innu and aboriginal women prisoners have also received assistance from the program.

I want to conclude my presentation today with some comments made by a very distinguished and respected Canadian.

Former Supreme Court Justice Bertha Wilson now heads the royal commission on aboriginal peoples. She had this to say about the cancellation of the Court Challenges Program:

As a Supreme Court Judge, I saw what an invaluable contribution this program made. It was exciting; it made you think government can't be all that bad. And then—bingo! This policy makes the people who can least afford it bear the brunt. There's no point in giving people rights if they don't have the wherewithal to go to court.

It is totally illusory to confer rights on people who do not have the means to enforce them—

I have difficulty with a policy that places the burden of—restraint on those who can least afford to bear it.

There is still a need for this program. The clarification of the rights and responsibilities of Canadians is an ongoing process. A committee of this House, the Standing Committee on Human Rights and the Status of Disabled Persons, has strongly supported the program. There is no other comparable program existing in Canada. The Government of Canada must not cancel this program because it is too important for ordinary Canadians. The necessary refinement and elaboration of human rights in Canada must not be cut off at the knees by withdrawing the only possible source of funding from those who need it the most.

I call upon government members to support this motion. The Court Challenges Program must continue and minorities must continue to have the tools they need to defend, protect and enhance their rights.

Mr. Francis G. LeBlanc (Cape Breton Highlands—Canso): Mr. Speaker, I would like to begin by complimenting my colleague from Nunatsiaq for a very moving and informative address on this very important Court Challenges Program.

Supply

I also wish to mention how valuable he is in this Chamber in defending the interests and rights of that large part of Canada to the North that is such a rich part of our heritage. I was particularly struck in his speech by his enumeration of the cases that have been brought forward with the assistance of the Court Challenges Program affecting voting rights, minority rights, and the rights of the people that he represents in Canada's North, as well as minorities across this country.

It was a very eloquent testimony to the value of this program, particularly in an age in which our democracy is increasingly being defined by the court system, and in response to litigation in a very complex court process.

One of the disturbing things that took place in this budget and that is taking place in the actions of this government is that the ability of ordinary Canadians to participate in this new kind of democracy through the courts is being undermined.

In Nova Scotia, in my own riding the Minister of Justice has been taking over a year to fill a judgeship appointment. The consequence is that there have been cases which have not gone before the court on sexual assault matters, on family violence and on many very important matters affecting ordinary Canadians because they have no access to the court system.

The second disturbing development is that there has been consolidation in my province of Nova Scotia making it more difficult for people to access the court system. This decision by the government to cut out the funding from the Court Challenges Program is another way in which this government is undermining the abilities of ordinary Canadians to participate in this new aspect of democracy, which does not only take place in this Chamber but in a very complicated legal and court system.

I come to my question, which I know my friend from Nunatsiaq is waiting patiently to hear. That question has to do with the list he enumerated. Somebody told me when this was announced that it was as if the federal government had decided that all charter questions had been decided, that there was no need for further clarification of charter provisions on equality rights. Clearly my colleague has already enumerated a long list of concerns which are very much related to the charter.