

Supply

ism and meaningless rhetoric. Actions speak louder than words and it is on the government's actions that it will be judged by the women of Canada.

I want to concentrate my comments on one of these measures that I find particularly disturbing, the cancellation of the Court Challenges Program. The cancellation of this program is an outrage that shows a callous disregard for the rights of Canadian women. It was a unique human rights program that helped give disadvantaged Canadians access to their constitutional rights under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

The program has helped fund court cases for groups wanting to test the equality rights section of the charter. This is important because it establishes legal precedents that help prevent discrimination. The program has made the crucial difference between access to charter rights and no access. The program has benefited all Canadians and particularly disadvantaged groups in societies such as women. Groups, such as the Women's Legal and Education Action Fund, have used the programs to bring a number of important women's rights cases to the courts.

For example, on the very same day that the program was cancelled, the Supreme Court of Canada came down with the first high court decision in the world that linked hard core pornography with violence against women and decided that this should be a factor to consider in Canada's obscenity law.

The Women's Legal and Education Action Fund intervention in this case was funded by the Court Challenges Program. This intervention was crucial to the court's recognition of the harmful effects of pornography on women. In many cases, groups like this could not afford on their own the legal costs of initiating a court challenge. The total cost of this program is about \$2 million a year or about seven cents per Canadian.

According to the Canadian Bar Association, the program ensures that equality rights are clearly defined in the Constitution and enforced for all Canadians. Constitutional rights which are neither defined nor enforced are hollow and of little value. The bar association said it was a sad irony that the program was terminated the day before the release of the special joint committee on a renewed Canada which addressed the issues of inclusiveness and constitutional equality rights.

I believe that the cancellation of this program is a very negative signal to be sending out at this time in our

country's history. Just as we are approaching the conclusion of important and very difficult national discussions on our constitutional rights, the government is showing that its commitment to those rights is questionable.

Women's groups were already uneasy and concerned that they did not have an adequate voice in the process of constitutional reform. They are even more concerned now.

• (1640)

Even the distinguished former Supreme Court Justice Bertha Wilson has called for the program's reinstatement. She has written to the Minister of Justice to express her dismay and distress over the cancellation of the program. I want to quote from her letter:

I fully appreciate, of course, that all governments are currently in a period of financial restraint but I must say that I have difficulty with a policy that places the burden of that restraint on those who can least afford it.

The government has suggested this move was made because the program has served its purpose. Enough jurisprudence has been established. Legal experts have contradicted that claim. Many significant cases have yet to be heard and many of these will not be heard without funding from the Court Challenges Program.

The Canadian Bar Association, a retired Supreme Court justice, the Canadian Human Rights Commission, and countless other human rights groups across this country seem to disagree. I am not aware of any credible legal expert who does support the government's position.

Only two years ago, the Standing Committee on Human Rights and the Status of Disabled Persons agreed unanimously that this program should be renewed. In a response tabled by the Minister of Multiculturalism the government said:

There are still significant areas of language and equality rights which require clarification.

The government agreed to renew the program for a five-year period. What has happened since that time to change the government's position on this program?

The Minister of Justice has suggested that the government itself could fulfil the function of the program by supporting litigation on human rights cases. I have asked the government how exactly this would work, but I have received no response. It is anyone's guess. It would clearly be a conflict of interest for the justice department to challenge and defend the law at the same time. That is