

A DVANCING WOMEN'S RIGHTS

This year Canadian women will be celebrating an important anniversary. It is just 60 years since they became "persons" — recognized as individuals in their own right. That momentous decision came in 1929 after five women from the province of Alberta appealed to the Privy Council in England — then, the highest court of appeal for Canadians — against the decision of Canadian courts that women were not "persons," and since only "persons" could be appointed to the Senate, women were not eligible.

Women in Canada have been fighting successfully for their rights ever since. In the 1960s, individual women and women's organizations convinced the federal government to establish a Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada. That commission's landmark report, published in 1970, was a blueprint for policy and legislation to ensure equality for women.

Many of its recommendations have been implemented. And as new issues have surfaced, demanding attention, women themselves have kept up the pressure for action. Most recently, a major achievement was the implementation of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, with clauses to ensure the equality of women before and under the law. Intense lobbying by women themselves made sure that those clauses were included.

Equality under the Law

The impact of the equality clauses now is apparent as test cases are brought before

the courts. Women's organizations are identifying these cases and supporting claimants as they pursue their complaints through the court system. One case being prepared in Ontario, for instance, argues that provincial laws permitting mandatory retirement have an adverse impact on women. Lawyers for a woman plaintiff will argue that since women are more likely than men to be poor in old age, laws requiring retirement at age 65 will disadvantage women much more than men.

Federal, provincial and territorial governments increasingly recognize that issues such as pay equity, employment equity and child care provision are important items on political and legislative agendas. Progress in these areas benefits not only women but society as a whole. These jurisdictions have appointed ministers

responsible for the status of women whose departments provide their governments with expertise on women's issues.

The National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC), a non-governmental grassroots organization, originally established to ensure the Royal Commission's recommendations were implemented, acts as an umbrella organization for more than 560 women's groups, representing more than three million women.

Issues that had formerly been regarded solely as "women's issues" are increasingly seen as national concerns and occupy centre stage on the political and legislative agenda at all levels of government. Issues such as day care have figured prominently in televised election debates between federal party leaders

Equal rights ensure that women are full partners in society.

and show the fundamental changes in attitude that are occurring.

Employment Equity

Providing equality for women in the workplace (employment equity) is a key objective of government policies. More than 75 per cent of women aged 20 to 44 now work outside their homes. Only about 10 per cent of the labour force — mainly in banks, transportation and communications companies — comes under federal government jurisdiction. But federal laws often set the standard for provincial jurisdictions.

Employment equity legislation was passed in 1985 covering all employers with more than 100 employees — both in the public and private sectors —



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