

30. HUMAN RIGHTS

Background

Since the mid-1970s, four international instruments have addressed human rights issues: the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination, and for the countries of Europe and North America, the Helsinki Final Act of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE).

The Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights covers labour, social security, education, and cultural rights. The Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and its Optional Protocol covers the right to life, freedom from torture and arbitrary arrest, equality before the law, and freedom of movement and expression. Both Covenants entered into force in 1976. This was also the year that the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination came into force. The Helsinki Final Act, which contains provisions for the protection and promotion of human rights, (economic, social, cultural, civil and political) entered into force in 1975.

Adherence to the International Covenants and to the Convention is monitored by UN agencies, particularly by the General Assembly (Third Committee), the UN Human Rights Commission (UNHRC), the Human Rights Committee and the International Labour Office. Adherence to the Helsinki Final Act is monitored through the periodic meetings of the CSCE.

Since the ratification of international legal instruments in the human rights field has both domestic and foreign policy implications, and since human rights come under provincial jurisdiction, the Federal Government has worked with the provinces to formulate Canadian policies in this field. Several features have characterized Canadian policy since the mid-1970s.