

*Private Members' Business*

● (1810)

In the recent past a backlash has occurred against employment equity. This is unfortunate because the principle behind employment equity is a noble and valid one. It aims to correct discrimination, both intentional and systemic, directed toward designated groups, in other words, persons with disabilities, aboriginal people, visible minorities and women.

Critics of employment equity charge that it is reverse discrimination against white males. They argue that it lowers standards and promotes mediocrity. This is clearly a simplistic and unfair assessment of employment equity.

This is not to say that employment equity programs are perfect and are not in need of some refinement and fine tuning. Presently there are some potential negative consequences which may result from employment equity policies. These concerns need to be taken into account and addressed.

An example is the instilling of deep resentment among non-designated groups. Another one is the decrease of the workplace morale for employees from non-designated groups when the mistaken belief occurs that designated groups receive preferential treatment for promotions.

The above are some factors which need to be overcome in order to ensure that employment equity is implemented in an equitable and fair manner. It is very clear that in order to correct these backlashes more public education and workforce education programs are absolutely essential. Also, we should attempt to implement enrichment programs for disadvantaged persons from designated groups at all levels of formal education so that they may obtain the tools to become more competitive.

When implementing an employment equity plan, we need to keep in mind that the existing workforce did not create the discrimination that employment equity is attempting to eliminate. If the rights of the existing workforce are respected, one can avoid resentment upon the implementation of an employment equity policy.

An alternative solution which could be employed to fine tune employment equity would involve instituting a program that would be representative of how qualified persons from designated groups are distributed in the local labour market.

For example, if 5 per cent of the country consists of persons with disabilities and only 1 per cent of a local community consists of disabled people with engineering degrees, it is clear that only 1 per cent of the workforce in a local engineering company should consist of disabled engineers. Certainly, it would not be fair to non-designated groups if 5 per cent of the engineering company's workforce included disabled persons drawn from other communities, unless of course the very best people were available in this specific group 5 per cent of the time during hiring.

By keeping the above in mind, it could be ensured that local communities are not prejudiced, that the most qualified are always chosen and that discriminatory hiring practices are eliminated.

Despite some very minor fine tuning, the evidence clearly indicates that employment equity is beneficial to both employers and Canadian workers. Studies have demonstrated that substantial gains have been made by members of the designated groups since the introduction of the federal Employment Equity Act. We will continue to work toward full employment parity for these groups.

The intent of the act is not to provide preferential treatment. It is designed to ensure equal access to opportunities for all qualified work ready Canadians, regardless of their race, physical attributes or gender. It is about removing, not erecting, barriers to employment.

The act was not developed overnight. It was a product of a comprehensive review of the Canadian workplace in 1984 by the Royal Commission on Equality in Employment headed by Judge Rosalie Abella. In the course of its review the commission looked closely at affirmative action programs in the United States. Canadian commissioners wanted to learn from the American experience in order to avoid some of the problems associated with that legislation.

Judge Abella quite correctly concluded that Canadians would resist the American approach, given its overly interventionist government policies and the imposition of quotas. She recommended instead that Canadians adopt the employment equity model which focuses on the elimination of discriminatory employment barriers.

● (1815)

In the United States, affirmative action targets particular groups for special treatment because of a previous history of discrimination. Employment equity, on the other hand, attempts to ensure in Canada that all qualified job applicants receive a fair shot at available jobs. The employment equity program in the United States, and rightly so, is to be destroyed simply because it is a destructive model, a model that has been introduced based on a former model that was introduced regarding the discrimination of certain classes of people, a model of desegregation that tore the very fabric of American society, a model that destroyed community after community, all because of a quota system.

Our approach to achieve equality is far more progressive than the American model. It has led to greater partnerships among groups pursuing fair access to employment opportunities and has also led to far greater success.

For example, often workers, union leaders and employers will work together in unison to establish a fair equity plan. In this way, employment equity works as much to the advantage of employers as it does for the members of the designated groups.