

Status of Women

Mr. Axworthy: Fine. I would certainly invite the hon. member to go out and have some of her refreshment, but I would point out that there has just been a recent study I am sure the hon. member would be interested in, which indicates that smoking is not really very good for your health.

An hon. Member: Try not to be patronizing.

Mr. Axworthy: Let us deal first with some of the initial testimonials being offered to try to demonstrate that somehow there is this great, universal sort of overwhelming antipathy or sense of frustration about the work that we, as a government, and I, as a minister, have been trying to do.

I do not have all of it here but I do happen to have within my notes a letter from the Native Women's Association of Canada, because I will be addressing that group tomorrow evening. That is a group representing the entire range of women who have perhaps been the most deprived and the most discriminated against, and who have perhaps suffered and been the most serious victims of society's indifference. If I might, Mr. Speaker, I would like to read into the record what they have to say. I do not usually do this, but seeing that members opposite were so anxious to rush to the quotes from Laura Sabia, that well-known objective reporter of events, I thought perhaps they might be interested in hearing what the native women of Canada think. They said:

Dear Mr. Axworthy:

In recognition of your positive actions on behalf of native women, the Native Women's Association of Canada would like to invite you to speak to the Board of Directors in Winnipeg, Manitoba, January 23-25, 1981.

I would like to quote further, if I might:

The programs and activities you have initiated for the training and employment of Native women and your philosophy of consultation with the NWAC on this matter is of great significance to the NWAC. We would like to provide you with the opportunity to speak with native women from across Canada to elaborate on your plans and to hear from women working in the communities their concerns and ideas.

There is one example of a group which I think should be treated with great respect in this House. I do not pretend I have universal popularity with the Laura Sabias or the NACs of the world, but I do say there are a number of women's organizations I have also received communications from which do have some degree of support and some degree of good reaction for the initiatives we have tried to introduce.

I would now like to come, if I might, to the so-called record, because the hon. member for Waterloo was very anxious to read what he thought was a refutation of the kind of initiatives we have introduced, and tried to provide an ongoing commentary or criticism of them.

First I would like to explain to members of the House that part of the responsibilities of the minister responsible for the status of women is not just to take direct initiatives on his own but, in addition, to try to co-ordinate the activities of the entire government; to bring information, to make interventions, and to try to support the work of other ministers who are working in an equal way. So much of the work is not necessarily on the visible side because much of it takes place around the cabinet table, takes place in correspondence, and takes place in direct

communication trying to bring to their attention concerns that are raised.

In that case I think the role to be played is one that is not necessarily identifiable by achievements or track record. Even saying that, I think it is possible for us to demonstrate that the commitment we made in the throne speech has gone a long way toward being carried out. I would contrast it very dramatically with the record of the previous government, which also had a similar nine months in office. If you look at their exact achievements for women and the number of initiatives that were introduced, it comes up to a big fat zero. They were very good on talk, very big on rhetoric, and they made a lot of fine speeches, but when you look at the record there was not one single important initiative taken on behalf of the women of this country during that nine months in office. In fact some of the things we have done were opposed by the Conservative Party.

At the very first meeting I had with Mrs. Anderson of the advisory council, she brought to my attention the major concern women had about the issue of minimum insurability and the fact that the statute removed some 200,000 women from eligibility for unemployment insurance.

I have here a statement made by my predecessor in this position, Ronald Atkey, when he was speaking to a meeting at St. Andrews-by-the-Sea last September in which he indicated that the Conservatives did not plan to change last year's Unemployment Insurance Act, a statement which infuriated women's groups. Mr. Atkey, my predecessor, said it was not in their interest to do that.

I did make the change. I did reduce the eligibility to bring large numbers of women under the coverage of the Unemployment Insurance Act, contrary to the advice and position taken by my predecessor in this office on behalf of the then Conservative government. I would suggest to the hon. member for Waterloo that when he takes a look at the record he should begin to look at the record of his own government, and make an interesting contrast and comparison of what they did not do with what we have done.

The hon. member spent some time trying to disparage our initiatives in the area of affirmative action. I could provide you with the commitment made by the Conservative Party in the May election campaign as to what they would do in the way of affirmative action. It was far less than the steps we have taken. They would set up additional things for the office of equal opportunity. Let me quote from the news release issued by the Conservative Party on what they would do. They said that the Progressive Conservative Party would provide more clout to translate rhetoric into an affirmative action program within the federal public service. They were going to provide more clout. That was their commitment to the women of Canada.

What we have done is introduce a well-designed program of affirmative action beginning with three departments, as I have said in this House many times, because that was the limit of our resources. That program will provide the ability to make changes in the Public Service Act and to make changes in legislation and regulation to bring about substantial reform in