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Canadian women — building a new sense of worth under Canadian law, 1

National Gallery shows Canadian painting of the Thirties, 3

New neuroscience centre at Toronto University, 4

Government-industry intensify effort to boost exports, 5

Canada and Sweden to co-operate in defence research, 5

Olympic Games sculpture stamps, 5

Euthanasia subject of Edmonton meeting, 6

Canadian women — building a new sense of worth under Canadian law

The following passages are from an address by Jeanne Sawé, Minister of the Environment, to the Canadian Conference on Women and the Law, February 1:

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We in Canada are very much a part of a world-wide catching-up process, much of which involves the changing of old laws and the writing of new ones. I would be less candid if I implied that we are anywhere near caught up yet. Institutions ingrained for generations, even centuries, do not change that easily.

The task involves building in female consciousness, a new sense of worth. Women's self-esteem has been damaged and continues to be managed in a multitude of ways, some obvious, some subtle. Particularly harmful in this respect has been a fostering of the concept of woman as a non-individual, as an appendage of her husband, as a dependent creature, as confined to one function — motherhood if she was married, or engaged in the nurturing profession if she was not. If freedom can be defined as the availability of options, then women have, through stereotyped definitions of their capabilities, through sex-typing, suffered a serious curtailment of their freedom.

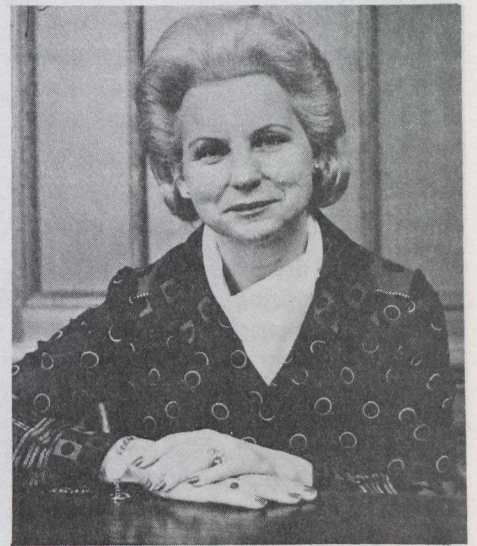
This state of affairs will not really change until basic myths about women are dispelled — not only from male minds, but female.

Women legitimately aspire today to direct involvement in the wider circle of human affairs. These aspirations raise questions: questions, for instance, about the structure of the society, about the integration of women in the labour force, about the traditional concept of the family.

It is important that the changes ahead do not take place in the absence of replacement values and structures. The place to begin this process is in the statute books.

Election Act changes

For instance, although the right of a woman to vote has been established for many years, we are still engaged in clearing away some of the chauvinistic vestiges of another era from the way we



Environment Minister Jeanne Sawé

manage this most fundamental of democratic institutions. Under the Election Act, women have been treated differently in subtle but important ways. The enumerator is required to demand information which is no business of the state's. The changes we are considering for the Act will alter this. The information required about female voters will cover no more and no less territory than that covering men.

A woman will be free to register under her maiden name if that is the way she is known in the community and if she so desires.

She may list her occupation or she may refrain from doing so. There will be no requirement to tell the Government whether you are Mrs. or Miss or for that matter, Mister.

Criminal Code

In law, as in life, some of the unfair limits placed on women — some of the putdowns — look at first glance like privileges. I remember that a few years ago there was a saying in the Women's movement that the price of having the door held open for you at the office was a couple of thousand dollars a year. There is a lot of truth in the con-