

HUMAN RIGHTS AND AGING IN CANADA

I. INTRODUCTION

Ageism — an embracing cultural devaluation of the aging and elderly — remains a prevailing reality in Canada, and is a fundamental source of many of the specific problems identified in this study. During the investigation which has led the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Rights to this conclusion, witnesses have provided the committee with evidence of the persistence in Canada of discrimination based on age. They have also told the committee of a wider failure of Canadians, in our treatment of many older members of our community, to fully live up to nationally and internationally recognized standards of human rights.

We believe that the time has come for resolute action against age discrimination in Canada, and against the ageist attitudes which underlie it. This is so, in part, because of demographic realities which now face Canadian society. Canada's population is steadily aging, and will continue to do so until well beyond the year 2000. The proportion of Canadians vulnerable to the human rights problems discussed in this report is thus destined to increase substantially in coming years. The numbers actually experiencing an erosion of rights will likewise increase, unless action is taken to prevent this.

The evidence we have heard suggests, as well, that population aging will merely deepen problems of age discrimination, and other age-based human rights abuse, which should even now be intolerable to Canadians. These problems violate human rights standards which Canada has affirmed, both domestically and internationally, and which remain precious safeguards of civilized life. If potential realities did not compel action, present realities would still demand it.

We recognize that Canada has come to provide an impressive range of programs and benefits to its older citizens, which might seem to imply correspondingly positive attitudes. Nevertheless, we submit this report with a strong sense that more fundamental progress remains to be achieved. The concerns of which witnesses have made us aware prescribe a broad agenda of human rights issues related to age and the aging. Progress is needed in virtually all sectors of government, and in institutions and practices outside the governmental sphere, if Canada is to fully meet the human rights challenge posed by the aging and elderly.