

Routine Proceedings

Once again, I thank the hon. member for Gander—Grand Falls for his diligence in guarding the privileges of the House by bringing this matter to my attention.

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

[Translation]

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO PETITIONS

Mr. Peter Milliken (Parliamentary Secretary to Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 36(8), I have the honour to table, in both official languages, the government's response to three petitions.

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[English]

WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH

Hon. Sheila Finestone (Secretary of State (Multiculturalism) (Status of Women), Lib.): Mr. Speaker, today we are celebrating Persons day, the highlight of women's history month.

This is a time to celebrate the contributions of women to Canadian society, a time to be proud of the remarkable progress Canada has made toward equality for women and against actions of racism and sexism.

[Translation]

The Fathers of Confederation made the original blueprint of Canada in 1867. However, it took until 1921 for women to earn the right to vote.

Nonetheless, throughout history, the women of Canada—in all their diversity—have prevailed. They have shaped the values of this great country: democracy, tolerance, generosity, fairness, and respect for human and minority rights.

Today we celebrate five intrepid women from Alberta who won a court case in 1929 that changed the lives of all Canadians. The court's decision made women legal "persons" under the constitution. And that made them eligible for appointment to the Senate.

Today we have the largest representation of women ever in the Parliament of Canada, in the Commons as well as in the Senate. With the charter of rights and freedoms, the constitution now guarantees women and men equal rights and freedoms as full partners in our society.

[English]

Women have made great progress toward equality, and that means progress for Canadians and for all of Canada.

• (1540)

Today we recognize women's issues as societal issues. We recognize and realize that women's equality is in the best interests of Canada. All our talent and all our potential in all the socioeconomic and cultural fields of activity must be used as we progress to face the challenges of the 21st century. That is why we must keep up the momentum toward our global goal of the universality of women's human rights, for they are inalienable, integral and indivisible.

The government has approved a plan of action to ensure that women's equality is kept on track. The federal plan for gender equality, equality for men and women, which was tabled prior to our departure for the fourth world conference on the status of women, deals with the real issues of the day. Those issues are action for the economic empowerment of women, action to support women entrepreneurs, action to promote employment equity so women can have a fair chance at the jobs of today. These measures and others, along with social support systems, can help women and their families rise out of poverty.

Make no mistake, the family is the basic unit of society and must be supported in all its forms. We need healthy, vital families and women's economic independence. That can help. It can allow women to escape domestic violence. There is a direct link between economic independence and violence. That is just one reason why we will continue to work on eliminating the violence that limits women's ability to participate in and contribute to society. We have taken measures such as stricter firearms control, a new anti-stalking law, federal subsidies for shelters for battered women.

Economic empowerment means recognizing and valuing the important role of women's unpaid work as homemakers, as caregivers, as volunteers, as those who look after the elderly. This work has value of great worth in our caring and sharing society.

[Translation]

That is why the 1996 census will include a question on unpaid work.

The federal plan also puts women at the heart of government decision making. It requires that every policy, program and law be developed with the impacts on women, as well as men, in mind. Let us not forget that women represent half of Canadian society. We are not a society of special interests but a society built by both men and women over two centuries.

We also have a global plan: the platform for action on women's equality adopted at the recent UN World Conference on Women in Beijing.