

Status of Women

one series of events, devastating as they are. We are not witnessing an isolated incident of ministerial manipulation but, rather, a situation which is endemic to this government's attitude toward the status of women, that is to say, to speak down to it, patronize it, and to take little heed of it. That has been symptomatic of the government throughout. Ministers have tried to put the whole council and, in fact, issues of interest to women, in a subservient role.

I imagine this is the beginning of some kind of plan which the government has which, I think, has probably got a more sinister purpose in the long run. I have no doubt that the minister's goal throughout all of this is to demolish the Advisory Council on the Status of Women completely. His goal is to do away with its independence, first of all, and to challenge its president and force her resignation, and then to let the council drift in limbo until such time as he suddenly emerges with a new role for it, that role to be a kind of mini-department which would, perhaps, be glossed up to say it has its own minister. Then it would come completely under the domination of political partisanship. That is probably what the minister has in mind. That means that any kind of independent body, such as exists today, would certainly disappear.

How different is that from the original intention of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, to have a powerful body speaking and operating independently within public view. I would like to remind the minister of what the Royal Commission on the Status of Women recommended back in 1970. They said:

We recommend that a Federal Status of Women Council, directly responsible to Parliament, be established to advise on matters pertaining to women and report annually to Parliament on the progress being made in improving the status of women in Canada.

We certainly did not see any sign of that yesterday when the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) responded here in the House, comparing the Advisory Council on the Status of Women to advisory councils on trade, health and welfare, immigration, and sports. The Prime Minister, the minister's leader, sees no difference between the way in which government deals with the problems of women in society and the rights of women—their human rights—and the problems caused by trade regulations on manufactured commodities.

In fact the Prime Minister puts the rights of 52 per cent of the population of this country on the same level as building a sports arena. That is what he did here yesterday when he compared advisory councils to trade and sports councils. He put the Advisory Council on the Status of Women in a very secondary and second-class position. But that, of course, is to be expected from a Prime Minister who never once, in the 12 years he has been in office serving in this House, rose in his place to speak on the rights of women, in any debate on this issue.

When the advisory council was first set up the spokesman for my party, who is now the Human Rights Commissioner, warned that these things might happen. He said that, indeed, the government was ignoring what the Royal Commission on the Status of Women had recommended, by appointing instead

a committee to advise through a minister. Mr. Fairweather said the government of the day:

—ignored that good advice and took a different route appointing what is, in reality, a committee that is to report to the minister. The results will enable us to judge who is right.

● (1720)

That is what Mr. Fairweather said back in 1973. Judgment day has come and we are only too painfully aware of how right the royal commission was.

Mr. Fairweather made another statement seven years ago which is now being borne out:

I hope the ACSW members never let up on their recommendations to the government and that they push this minister until he wonders why he ever made the appointments.

Every minister up until now has been able to survive the push of the Advisory Council on the Status of Women except this minister. He has not been able to take that push, to respond to it or learn from it. Instead, he dealt with it in his own inadequate fashion, which is by changing his position and using that position of power in influencing the council and directing it against the challenger, against the president of the Advisory Council on the Status of Women. I have no doubt that he expected her to cave in. What must have surprised the minister was that the president of the council stuck to her principles and resigned.

But where does that leave us? I realize that I have only a few minutes left, and I would like to finish by saying that with the advisory council now in a shambles, with its credibility severely eroded, with women across the country condemning the blatant manipulations of the council by the minister, we must try to undo the damage which has been done. It will be difficult to find a successor of the calibre of Doris Anderson. But the government will stand a better chance of recruiting such an appointee if that person can be assured from the outset that the council will be truly independent, that it will not be manipulated, that it will in future be able to report directly to Parliament. Only then will the council's credibility be restored, but the minister's credibility will remain in limbo for much longer.

Hon. Judy Erola (Minister of State (Mines)): Mr. Speaker, I rise with mixed feelings this afternoon, feelings of sorrow and anger. I feel that the two hon. members who have raised this issue so eloquently and in such a damaging way to the women of this country have also damaged me to some degree. I have always been an independent thinker. I have worked very closely with a number of women who have served on this particular advisory council and have had a number of conversations with them. I feel that there has been a great deal of damage done to all of those who serve on this committee and, indeed, to all the women in the country.

It is unfortunate that the opposition only become interested in issues affecting Canadian women when they perceive that they may be able to score a few cheap political shots.

Miss Jewett: That is about as cheap as you can get.