

Employment Equity

that it was their own fault, as he was wont to say in publications a few weeks ago, for which I gather he is now in front of the courts. He put the responsibility on them, not on the fact that there was systemic discrimination in the system which did not provide education or eliminate discriminatory practices in the workplace. We will lose those talents. Similarly, within the federal Public Service the incredible experience built up by many people in the clerical ranks, which could have been applied to management and supervision if the doors were open and support had been given, will also be lost.

In other words, we are guilty of considering today at final reading stage a Bill which does nothing to open the door to the full talents and abilities of Canadians. We are still saying to over a third of Canadians that we really do not need them or want them in the workplace. If we want them, it is only in a marginal way. The real message in the Bill is that we will maintain a closed system and only allow them into the cracks and crevices, not into the mainstream. That is the problem in relation to the Bill on employment equity. It does not really meet the problem or target the real requirements so that the country will make use of every Canadian regardless of sex, handicap, or which cultural minority they come from. We need those people and their talents and abilities. We also need to ensure that we have a piece of legislation which keeps open the door and provides the incentive and support to make it happen. Instead, we are reverting, retreating or withdrawing back to a previous age and a previous set of concepts and notions. The Canadian Human Rights Commission will tackle the problems one on one. Some companies will put information in front of everybody, and many will say that we must rely upon the court of public opinion, which has a fat chance of working.

I can only rise and say that this debate has been an incredibly frustrating and disappointing process. I only hope that a lesson has been learned, and that lesson is that if we are to do a job, let us do it properly and effectively. In particular, I wish the Minister of Employment and Immigration would read what she was saying four years ago so that when she is in opposition a few years from now she will support a brand new employment equity Bill that we will bring in that will really work.

● (1600)

Mr. McCurdy: Mr. Speaker, I was rather surprised to hear the Member for Winnipeg—Fort Garry (Mr. Axworthy) indicate that New Democrats and Liberals believe the same thing. I am sure that is true from odd week to odd week. I am sure that on this issue what he says does represent in substance the true state of affairs and that it is a fact, in the present context, that only the Conservatives are dissenting from the point of view that an employment equity Bill ought to be mandatory with respect to the achievement of certain goals after the implementation of certain processes and that this should be included in the Bill.

The Member said that a momentum was developed during the course of previous Governments which has been somehow

interrupted as a result of Bill C-62 which really fails to provide very much progress over the past. There are few in the House who would not recognize that in general with respect to women, the disabled and native people, such a momentum was developed.

Having taken credit for the development of that kind of momentum with respect to those three designated groups, surely the Member is aware that from 1968 onward the visible minority group representatives of this country asked the previous Government to implement affirmative action programs for minority groups in the federal Public Service. With the exception of Nova Scotia, no such program was implemented. There was a consistent denial of the concerns and needs of visible minority groups with respect to employment in the federal Public Service. Certainly they were not given the kind of attention that was needed in fostering employment equity. It was directed toward women and others among the designated groups.

Will the Member admit, at least in this respect, that the new Government has taken a step forward, even if it is only to mention a group that at times many of us thought were not sufficiently mentioned in the past? Perhaps he can explain and accord us some understanding of that policy and why that was the case. Why were the visible minorities excluded from a deliberate program of affirmative action in the Public Service by the previous Government?

Mr. Axworthy: Mr. Speaker, that is a fair question. When we were introducing the changes through the Treasury Board in 1980, first on the trial program and then when we applied it to the entire Public Service, as I recall the discussions with the Public Service Commission and the Treasury Board, certain questions were related to the way in which the Public Service Act itself read. Because of the merit system principle that was put in the legislation, the question of visible minority status was not recorded. Matters of sex, male and female, were, but it was not a requirement when someone made application or that they be designated on their file as a "visible minority". That was the rationale at the time.

It seemed to me after looking at the rationale for a period of about 18 months or two years that it was not acceptable. I would remind the Hon. Member that when we established the Abella Commission, visible minorities were part of the terms of reference. It was the first major recognition of the importance of affirmative action for that group.

I can recall having discussions with a gentleman, whom the Hon. Member probably knows, Tom Sosa, who at that time was Chairperson of the Advisory Committee for the Department of Employment and Immigration. He made recommendations to me about the establishment of this commission, which clearly emphasized the importance of having visible minorities as part of it, and they were included in the terms of reference of the Abella Commission.

The Abella Commission itself was not another royal commission or a study or an inquiry, its mandate was different.