

Will it make a difference?

By PARKINSON
Media Person

On April 7th of this year, Section 15 of the Charter of Rights comes into force. This is the section which guarantees equality before and under the law, as well as equal protection and benefit of the law, regardless of race, national or ethnic origin, age, sex, colour, religion or mental or physical disability. Recently a conference was held in Fredericton to discuss the effects of this section on the status of women in Canadian society. One point that seemed to come across at the conference was that the Charter alone cannot guarantee equality for women.

Back in the days of the constitutional debates, the federal and provincial governments thought that it might be wise to put off implementation of Section 15 for 3 years so that they would have time to amend any laws which might violate Section 15. At present, Parliament is considering a bill (C-27) designed to remedy any such built-in equalities. To make things even more confus-

ing, there are two apparently conflicting sections, each vying for superiority. Section 28 states that, notwithstanding anything else in the Charter, male and female persons are to be considered as equals. Section 33, however, allows either the federal or provincial governments to over-ride Section 2 and Sections 7-15, which "entrench" various rights and freedoms.

Even if Section 28 eventually wins out over Section 33, many issues relating to sexual equality will remain. Major problems face women in the area of employment especially. In a money-based society, economic independence becomes central to any pragmatic concept of equality. For women, economic independence has not been considered the norm and changes in this attitude have only been changing recently.

There is a general idea in this society that a woman is the economic dependent of either her father or her husband. This is reflected in the popular conception of the "housewife" and

of the value of her work. While it is rarely denied that raising children is a very important job, there is generally no financial acknowledgement of this. Further, there is very little in the way of child rearing options. Day-care generally meets only 10% of the need; it is basically only very low-income families who qualify for government subsidized day-care. Also, women are almost always given the responsibility for child-care. This is certainly implied by the fact that maternity benefits are paid only to women (except when the child is adopted in which case the either parent may receive benefits).

Economic independence is very difficult for women to achieve even if they are working outside the home. Because of the fact that women have been perceived as dependents of men, because of the stereotypes of "women's work" and because women give birth to children and men simply do not, the pattern of female employment is different from that of men. Women tend to work in low-paying, semi-skilled jobs, often on a part-time or temporary basis. Since UI benefits are tied to previous income, women usually receive lower rates than men. Women are in a disadvantaged position with regards to pensions as well. Because of their part-time or temporary nature of much of "women's work", pensions are very difficult to build up. Further, due to the view of women as dependents of men, there is discrimination against widows. While widowers continue to receive all pension benefits after their spouse's death, widows generally lose all private pension benefits and receive only 60% of Canada Pension Plan benefits. Divorce and separation confuse the issue even more. Some suggestions which have been made which would remedy the situation are:

- including homemakers in the Canada Pension Plan
- considering the years taken for raising children and/or caring for sick or disabled relatives when calculating one's total life earnings
- splitting benefits in case of marital break-ups
- extending private pension benefits to the survivors of the recipient
- allowing for portable pensions

These would all help alleviate the poverty situation in this country, especially as it relates to women. Women do, after all, make up about 60% of Canada's poor adults and 95% of single-parents (a group disproportionately affected by poverty).

The economic situation for women is hardly the only problem-area which can be pointed to. Many other situations exist and they cannot be legislated out of existence. While the entrenchment of equal rights under Section 15 represents an important achievement, many have call-

ed for more action against discrimination. The attitude of these people seems to be that the Charter must be a dynamic document, capable of changing as Canadian society progresses. Whether or not this will be the case will rest upon the actions of citizens and the interpretations of the courts.

POLITICAL PERSPECTIVES

By R. HUTCHINS

Douglas Jerrold once said "A Conservative is a man who will not look at the new moon, out of respect for that ancient institution, the old one." With the death of Constantin Chernenko many analysts in the West are hailing Michael Gorbachev as a new moon, a younger more flexible generation of communist. I would whole-heartedly disagree that a new, younger leader will drastically change the direction of Soviet foreign and domestic policy. The Communist party inner circle, or Politburo is still dominated by the same gerontocracy, the old guard of party hard-liners who have been in control for generations. Unlike the United States, where the head of State defines policy initiatives and elections are fought on leaders platforms, the Communist system remains orthodox, bent on pulling the party line and staying the course laid out by the inner circle of the communist party.

Gorbachev is inheriting a Soviet leadership that has seen the power of the head of State dwindle with the death of Brezhnev, Andropov and Chernenko within the leadership of one U.S. president. While ill health lowered the influence of these leaders, the Central Committee took more charge in running the government of the Soviet Union, and thus now Gorbachev is faced with re-organizing support for his reform promises out of a central committee dominated by hard-liners, held-over from the days of Brezhnev.

Where I do see some room for change in Soviet policy is at the domestic policy level. Gorbachev's area of expertise has always been agriculture and agra-business, therefore he has made promises to the Soviet people that he will modernize the agrarian policy. This will be difficult to do since venture capital is not readily available and 35% of the G.N.P. is tied up in the military complex.

Gorbachev is also faced with an increasingly influential military establishment. The Soviet Union can ill-afford to escalate the military spending battle with the U.S., especially since the economy is in such bad shape. For this reason I believe Gorbachev will remain firm in the area of foreign policy while trying to curb the power of the military, in the running of his government.

One cannot expect drastic changes out of a system that has rejected change for almost 80 years, the Soviet Union's communist regime has seen the results of economic reforms in countries like Poland and realizes that a touch of Capitalism will only fuel discontent with the limiting communist economy.

As far as the on-going nuclear arms negotiations are concerned I do believe some sort of accord will be reached, not because of a new Soviet leadership but because with his "Star Wars" were to be implemented the present balance of nuclear power would be shifted to the Americans' favour. Gorbachev, as I noted, can ill-afford to release more money for military spending and thus may instigate a new era of Detente.

As I mentioned earlier Communism is an orthodoxy, it does not change or sway with public opinion nor does it give all-power to the head of the state. Although Gorbachev is hailed as a moderate, reformist, he must convince the politburo that reforms will not undermine the power of communist ideology. Let us consider the philosophy of George Santayana that; "Government is the political representative of a natural equilibrium, of custom, of inertia; it is by no means a representative of reason."

The Soviet system is dominated by the past, a system long-entrenched, with an inner mechanism to destroy deviance from the party line, a system designed to fight change and most importantly a system built on fear more than "reason."

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