

*Employment Equity*

Unfortunately, this Bill speaks of a broad pattern of retreat on the part of the Minister of Employment and Immigration (Miss MacDonald). During the time I held her portfolio, I recall that she would rise to her feet while in opposition to make strong and sometimes eloquent claims on behalf of women, visible minorities and all those who were facing disadvantage or discrimination. She spoke of what she and her colleagues would do if and when they formed a Government. Well, they have formed a Government. Let us look at the record of the Government over the past two years.

We are all aware of the incredibly harsh and severe decision that was made regarding unemployment insurance benefits as they affect pension privileges. We are aware of the distortion that this has caused in the market-place. It is offsetting any opportunities for early retirement. We have seen what happened with the so-called Jobs Strategy. All of the special programs designed to help women receive training opportunities and to help the handicapped receive special access to the workplace have now been eliminated and cancelled. Under the Summer Jobs Program and the Canada Works Program, it used to be a requirement that every person proposing a project table an affirmative action plan. That has now been cancelled. In the past, the federal Government's own job-creation activities required the private, community and voluntary sectors to recognize inequities. Those requirements have all been wiped away.

Perhaps the greatest retreat we have seen is on the question of employment equity. That is mainly because the Minister has broken the momentum. Even earlier than 1980, the Bird Commission first identified these problems. During that period of time, there was a growing consciousness and awareness that the problems of inequality in the workplace were not necessarily a matter of overt bigotry or discrimination but were part of an entrenched system that had been around for hundreds of years. It was part of a whole set of precedents, an evolutionary process that allowed over the years certain practices in the workplace. Foremen would hire their nephews and not their nieces, there was apprehension at seeing someone in a wheelchair. There was no recognition of the need for remedial training for those with certain cultural backgrounds. By the end of the 1970s and the early 1980s, those things were recognized. The question was what to do about them.

I can recall very vividly taking over a Department in which there was a voluntary affirmative action program. We were providing resources and assistance to the private sector to work out affirmative action plans. It became quite clear that that did not work. At one point in 1980, only 35 or 40 contracts were signed. We had to ask ourselves why this was so.

At the time, I met with a number of private-sector organizations and asked what it was that prevented them from carrying on with voluntary affirmative action. They recognized the problem but I wondered what it was that was stopping them from doing anything about it. It came down to a fundamental human problem. They said that they did not practise affirmative action because it was too costly, and unless their

competitors were also required to practise it, they would be at a disadvantage. Many employers told me that even though they would like to do it and were prepared to do it, unless they were required to do it they would not do it. This goes back to some pretty basic matters of political philosophy. There are times when the Government, representing the public interest of all of Canada, must take action because we cannot expect the individual business person to provide solutions to basic fundamental social problems. It is not their responsibility.

The answer came to us and it was very clear. The only way the system would work is if all employers were required to begin following affirmative action plans. The private sector asked how this should be done. Businessmen wondered what would be the best way of applying affirmative action. They said very clearly that the federal Government must take the lead by showing them the best system. We began to do it.

In 1980, we introduced a trial program in three Departments of the federal Public Service. We tested out a complete and comprehensive affirmative action requirement on three key Departments. Once we began to see the success of that program, we then issued an Order in Council which required that it be undertaken in the entire Public Service of Canada. Those steps were an important prelude to what I think was the next most important step taken, and that was the establishment of the Abella Commission.

The terms of reference of the Abella Commission were crucial. It was not just another study or inquiry. The mandate of the Abella Commission was that it was to come up with a working formula that would apply to all activities under federal jurisdiction. I consider that to be one of the most important decisions made by the Cabinet while I was the Minister of Employment and Immigration. We were fortunate in getting someone of the calibre of Judge Abella to preside, and the mandate was set to provide an opening for a major extension based upon the previous activities that had been undertaken. Momentum had been created step by step.

Private employers could no longer use the excuse that affirmative action did not work, because we showed that it could work in the Public Service. They asked us for an example, and we gave it to them. Then we took the next major step by appointing the Abella Commission and we asked Judge Abella to talk to those in the corporate sector and return to us with a working formula.

We know that her report was a major milestone and it indicated very clearly what had been developing up to that point in time. It said that if we wanted to eradicate systemic discrimination in the workplace, we would have to apply a program that was comprehensive and non-discriminatory and all employers would be required to put it in place. That was the clear logic and compelling message of Judge Abella.

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The Government which assumed office in 1984 had that momentum upon which to build. It had the series of successive