

Adjournment Debate

I should point out that this was the first time on the base in question that a woman had achieved the job of lead hand in this particular Department. It was especially important for the Department to ensure that she was able to perform her duties without harassment.

It took a long time to investigate this case. I do not want to blame the Canadian Human Rights Commission for this. It had to set up new procedures for dealing with sexual harassment. Finally, the Human Rights Commission did come up with this decision of the review tribunal. It is now nearly a year old, dated February 21, 1983, yet the Department has still not acted upon it, but is appealing the case further.

The appeal which the Department has prepared shows gross insensitivity to the whole issue of sexual harassment. The Department seems to question the credibility of the complainant when she was reticent to give details on what is clearly a most threatening, difficult and delicate matter, or when she tried to solve the matter quietly, which was most understandable under the circumstances. The Department seemed to condone the inaction on the part of the authorities. The Department whitewashed the whole situation. The Department founded its arguments on very trivial, legal technicalities.

Women need jobs. They need non-traditional jobs and they need the protection of the employer to be able to achieve them. The Government ought to be a leader in this respect. The taxpayers' money is paying all of the people involved.

Before closing I want to point out another irony. It is the involvement of the public in all of this. Here we have the Canadian Human Rights Commission, which under the act prohibits sexual harassment, funded by the taxpayer. This is public policy. Yet we have the Department of National Defence, also paid by the taxpayer as an employer condoning the matters. We have the Department now appealing the decision with legal advice from the Department of Justice, also paid by the taxpayer. Here we have the taxpayer paying one Department trying to defeat the efforts of another to promote equality of women and reasonable working conditions in their work environment. This is a situation which has been allowed to continue far too long. When a case finally is won, the Department of Justice either appeals it or participates in the preparation of that appeal. That is hypocrisy of which we have had far too much.

• (1825)

Mr. Stanley Hudecki (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of National Defence): Mr. Speaker, the Hon. Member has raised a subject which is very important and timely. It does require continuing scrutiny.

The Hon. Member knows very well that in anticipation of the human rights legislation covering personal harassment, which was proclaimed on July 1, 1983, Treasury Board did issue policy directives to all Departments based on the amendments before Parliament at that time. A complaint system was set up which provides at the regional and central levels the means for people to complain formally.

In so far as the Department of National Defence is concerned, these Treasury Board guidelines, as far as I have been told and have found upon investigation, were acted upon promptly and efficiently, as was the case in other Government Departments. It must be pointed out that the Canadian Armed Forces, through provisions of the National Defence Act, have had in existence a grievance system very similar and compatible with the one directed by Treasury Board.

Within the Department of National Defence, the Department's policy on these matters has been disseminated by letter from headquarters to command headquarters, bases, stations and units. It has also formed a part of the syllabus of various courses given to different levels of management, both civilian and military. Relevant articles have been published in departmental publications for both the military and the civilian members.

Even though both the military and civilian complaint systems are very similar, very minor differences between the two systems do exist and corrective steps are being taken within the Department to develop some uniformity of implementation. It is understandable that such minor differences should exist because of the differences between the civilian and military philosophy and objectives. Until this case, we know of no incidents where these differences have created problems or have come into play, and I would not expect them to negatively affect the results of any cases of harassment brought to adjudication.

I can assure the Hon. Member that the records show that this type of personal harassment has not been a major problem in the forces. Adequate means are being provided, and implementation of them is being improved. The current step of bringing together the two systems is being worked out in detail. I thank the Hon. Member for bringing this case to the attention of the Department of National Defence.

[*Translation*]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Herbert): The motion to adjourn the House being deemed to have been adopted, this House stands adjourned until tomorrow at 11 a.m.

At 6.27 p.m. the House adjourned, without question put, pursuant to Standing Order.