

Update on International Women's Year

National and international experience with women's rights

By Florence Bird

The Canadian Human Rights Commission administers the Canadian Human Rights Act, which prohibits discrimination on grounds of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, sex, marital status, conviction for which a pardon has been granted and, in-matters related to employment, physical handicap. The appointment of the Commission in September 1977 was the culmination of a series of steps that had been taken by the Federal Government of Canada to provide equal opportunities for women. Although the pressure for reform has come largely from within the country, the example of other nations and the influence of international organizations have always supported the demands of Canadian women for equal rights, privileges and responsibilities. In recent years, the setting-up of machinery leading to steady progress has enabled Canada to provide valuable "feedback" to other countries.

Suffragette campaign without demonstrations and martyrdom

In the distant past, a handful of tough-minded, persistent women spearheaded the women's suffrage movement in Canada. They conducted a quiet, orderly campaign without the demonstrations and martyrdom of the Pankhurst suffragettes, while, at the same time, gaining publicity from the violent activities of the British women. They won the right to vote and hold public office in the Prairie Provinces as early as 1916 and throughout the country as a whole in 1921.

After the acquisition of the franchise, the cause of women's rights floated in the doldrums until after the Second World War, when women who wished to go on working as they had during the fighting years found that, though they had won their political

rights, they did not have economic rights since they continued to be regarded as members of a pool of cheap, docile labour. Consequently, as the Forties drew to a close, the battle was rejoined.

Annual briefs

In Canada it has long been the custom of the National Council of Women, the Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs and the Federation of University Women's Clubs to present briefs to the Federal Government. Their executives go annually to the Parliament Buildings to meet with the Prime Minister and several members of the Cabinet; there is usually lively and informative discussion of the resolutions adopted by the associations.

In the early 1950s, thanks to the remitting pressure from these national women's associations, a Women's Bureau was set up in the Department of Labour. Equal pay legislation was passed by Parliament. The demands of organized women had been encouraged by the example of the United States, which had set up a Women's Bureau in the 1940s, and by the equal conventions passed by the International Labour Organization. A continuing stimulating interplay of ideas about the needs of women in a changing society and how to meet them had been provided by conferences of the international associations which the Canadian associations belong to, and by the attendance of their representatives as NGO (Non-government organization) observers at meetings of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women. Great inspiration was provided by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, unanimously passed by the UN Assembly in 1948.

As time went on, an increasing number of women in Canada, as in other countries, became indignantly aware that there was still discrimination against women and that prejudice was still very much alive. For example, though there had been a tremendous increase in the number of women, particularly married ones, in the labour force

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