

*Supply*

applaud it sincerely for such a move. It takes courage to admit you have made a mistake.

I would remind the government that cancelling this program is a betrayal of the most vulnerable members of our society. The language and equality rights section of the charter were put there specifically to protect these groups.

The Court Challenges Program was intended to help these groups defend their rights because they are often financially unable to defend these rights themselves. It is safe to say that aside from the Reform Party, there has been overwhelming opposition across this country to this heartless decision. As I said yesterday, we know that respected groups such as the Canadian Human Rights Commission and the Canadian Bar Association have strongly criticized this move.

I want to quote from a few newspaper articles which give some indication of how Canadians feel about this decision. The following is from *The Ottawa Citizen* article of February 28. "A coalition of equality seeking groups condemned the program's death saying it makes a mockery of the charter. It essentially means that women and the disempowered groups such as the disabled community in this country do not have any access to their equality rights in the charter", said Shelagh Day of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women.

"Seven years after the introduction of the equality rights provision, we now have no way to use it whatsoever. How can anyone who is disadvantaged in this country use their equality rights? This was the one program we had". Day said the decision to cut the program had nothing to do with hard economic times. "This is just a straight ideological cancellation of a program that the government does not like. It seems to indicate that the law is for the privileged people and it is certainly not for people who are disadvantaged".

In a *Toronto Star* column on March 30, noted social policy writer, Leonard Shifrin, expressed his hope that the Standing Committee on Human Rights and the Disabled Persons can convince the government that "the price of wooing redneck votes is losing any vestige of respect from mainstream Canadians".

Mr. Shifrin quoted Jerome DiGiovanni, of the Canadian Disability Rights Council, who told the standing

committee on human rights that abolishing the program made the charter inoperative for the disabled.

I would like to quote further from Mr. DiGiovanni's testimony to the committee: "The Canadian Disability Rights Council is the legal tool which will for the first time allow 3.3 million Canadians to really have access to the courts and to equality rights without discrimination. The council has been in existence since 1988. We have just barely begun to understand how systemic discrimination excludes us. The case law has not yet been written. Take the Locas case, for instance, the Swain decision where the Supreme Court said that handicapped persons had been experiencing discrimination for centuries, that they were excluded and that the time had come to redress matters. Prayers and goodwill will not correct the situation but access to the courts will. That is really the basic tool that will allow us to achieve equality". This access has again been removed by the cancellation of the Court Challenges Program.

Mr. DiGiovanni also listed a number of important disability rights cases that will not be able to come forward in the courts because of the cancellation of the program. Cases involving closed captioning of television programs for the hearing impaired; the matter of sheltered workshops and the exploitation of disabled workers; the question of access to buildings and planes and buses are vitally important issues for disabled Canadians. They find it very insulting when the government says there is enough jurisprudence. The government seems to be saying that these cases are not important, that they do not matter and, following this logic a step further, the disabled community and their rights as equal Canadians does not matter.

The minister might be interested to know that Hugh Segal, chief of staff to the Prime Minister, told this group during a meeting last week that the government should not be in the business of funding groups that take the government to court. So it is true, the cancellation of this program has nothing to do with jurisdiction, nothing to do with cost but it is to silence dissent against the government.

Finally I want to quote from the editorial in *The Ottawa Citizen* dated March 3 which had the headline "Tories pick on the weakest".