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THE EVOLVING ROLE OF THE CANADIAN WOMAN

An Address by Prime Minister the Right Honourable
Pierre Elliott Trudeau in Toronto, March 3, 1971.

Canadians by and large tend to think of Canada as a land of immense potential. Not just as a big land, which it unquestionably is. Or a privileged land, as many others enviously regard us. But as a land of limitless promise. A land, perhaps, on the threshold of greatness.

This attitude sets Canada apart. Canada becomes identified as a land in transition; one with a brilliant future. To much of the world, Canada appears to be the land of opportunity.

A country does not achieve greatness by itself, however. It requires the application of human resolve. Opportunities must be seized by people. Promises must be redeemed by individuals.

Our national performance can never exceed the sum of our individual performances. There is no alchemy available to governments (or to statisticians) which can make Canada something other than the product of our talents, our efforts, and our accomplishments. If Canadians, individually, perform badly, Canada cannot be otherwise. If Canadians, individually, are indifferent -- "copping-out" is the expression of the "Woodstock generation" -- then so will be Canada. There can be but a single aim for Canada and for Canadians -- a standard of excellence.

Canada is not so wealthy in human or in material resources that we are able to cater to mediocrity in any of its manifestations, or to ignore or misuse the talent in our midst. No society is that wealthy; none has ever so acted without suffering as a result. Canada must somehow offer challenging opportunities to all its citizens and must foster within them the desire to perform well.

One need not look far in this or any other Canadian community to find evidence of low standards and poor performance, of misused or wasted skills. We cannot claim with honesty that our present level of achievement is the best we can attain; that our accomplishments in the arts or in science, in business or in government, are adequate. They are not. They are not

for several reasons, one of the most unfortunate of which is society's refusal to offer to all Canadians an opportunity to participate and to contribute to the extent that they are capable and to the extent that they desire. This refusal reflects a variety of circumstances -- sometimes prejudice, sometimes nepotism, sometimes indifference, sometimes economic fallacy. Whatever the circumstance, however, society suffers and Canada is less than it might otherwise be.

Measured on the scale of human history, society has been slow in identifying these factors and even slower in moving to overcome them. Active programs to combat discrimination on a variety of grounds have gained widespread acceptance only in recent years.... Concern about the plight of the unemployed and the under-employed has a much longer history in the Western world, but even so there has not been sufficient thought given to some of the basic conditions of human activity. The industrialized states are only now coming to grips, for example, with questions about the appropriate use of a person's time; with the unnecessary inconsistencies between employment for economic gain, on the one hand, and occupation for human or social benefit, on the other. There is still another, and even broader, area of human activity which until recently has been almost ignored in this country and, as a result, has denied to countless numbers of persons adequate opportunity to contribute to Canada as they are capable of doing. This area of activity affects personally at one period or another in their lifetime fully one-half of our population. Every woman in Canada possesses skills, competence, energy, knowledge, warmth, and abilities which are of immense value and yet which are often under-utilized because they are all too often either channelled thoughtlessly and automatically or are underestimated in their importance.

So long as these circumstances continue, we are denying to our society benefits which we can ill afford to lose.

I am convinced, however, that those circumstances will not be permitted to continue. I say this because, in my view, one of the most heartening and exciting aspects of our age is the willingness and the desire of people, and especially of young people, to look at old problems in different perspectives and to approach conventional wisdom and attitudes with a refreshing and questioning candour. This challenge to convention is apparent in many areas; it is, for example, causing us all to reconsider the manner in which we regard the role of women in a modern community. It should cause us to question the social effects and liabilities of traditional attitudes.

I think it can be said with certainty that our society would not now be as it is if, in the course of the last half-century, women had occupied a large number of positions of influence and decision in government and industry. Would we, for example, be experiencing today the same threat of environmental pollution, which is largely attributable to a male-dominated technology? Would it have taken so very long for governments to have become aware of the need for extensive protection of the consumer? One might even conjecture that policies in the broad areas of administration of justice, correction of offenders, and criminal rehabilitation would now evidence more compassion and, perhaps, more success in their aims, had women's special qualities been introduced and utilized by the community. In short, would we as a society have laid greater emphasis upon quality as a factor in the lives

of Canadians had women been given the opportunity to play a more influential role? We do not know, but we do know that immense numbers of talented persons have not had a chance to compete and contribute in the fields of their choice, whatever bent their contribution might have disclosed.

Convention, ignorance, fear, lassitude, acquiescence, and even prejudice -- these and other factors have combined for centuries to deny to women equal opportunity to choose without restriction their own careers and to develop without discrimination their own abilities. Society has paid a heavy price for these policies. Part of the price is reflected in the fact that there is still no force strong enough to overcome instantly such an accumulation of attitudes. Yet there is ample force to disclose the heavy toll in unused human potential which is the product of these attitudes. And, fortunately, it is this force which is now being brought to bear in the form of thoughtful studies which reveal the cost of our past and the penalty which we shall pay in the future unless we change, and change rapidly.

It is always easy to talk of change. Talk is often an excuse for inaction. Creating the conditions for change is something that can be accomplished by talk, however. It helps, for example, to recall how iniquitous was the legal position in Canada of women even a few years ago. In 1928, a date well within the lifetime of many in this room, the Supreme Court of Canada was still able to interpret the word "persons" in the British North America Act as not including women for purposes of appointment to the Senate. If ever a reply were needed to the often-voiced male contention that women themselves have chosen their limitations, then this is surely it: that the highest court in the land could decide solemnly in the year 1928 that women are not, under the Constitution of Canada, persons.

Changes have of course come but they have come ever so slowly. It has been 55 years since the franchise was first extended to women in Canada (in Manitoba), yet in that entire interval only two women have served in federal Cabinets, and today, of 264 Members in the House of Commons, only one is a woman. Indeed, in the half-century between 1920 and 1970, only 18 women have been elected to Parliament.

It was in 1916 that Emily Murphy was appointed by the government of Alberta as the first woman to hold judicial office in Canada, yet in the 55 years since that event only one woman has been seated on the bench of a superior court in the entire country (in Quebec in 1969).

In these circumstances, it is perhaps not surprising that there exists in this country an air approaching unreality in many public discussions of the stature and role of women. Arguments are voiced, on one hand, that women -- all women -- are or should be fulfilled only in the role of mother and homemaker. At the same time, one hears on the other hand allegations that laws regarding women are not to be respected because they are the product of male-dominated legislatures. In extreme instances these opposing views are voiced with considerable vehemence. And, following the pattern of all extremist groups, governments are described as non-representative by persons who claim through some undisclosed authorization to be themselves truly representative of all the members of their generation, or their linguistic group, or their sex. There is nothing new in this respect, it appears. I was

amused to learn that, in 1912, Sir Rodmond Roblin (then Premier of Manitoba) complained that he was "opposed by all the short-haired women and the long-haired men in the province".

There is no known ideal remedy to correct the injustices now accorded to both women and men by society's continued division of so many activities on the basis of sex. As we search for remedies we should be guilty of intellectual dishonesty if we underestimate the weight of tradition or the depth of bias -- both conscious and unconscious -- which permeates each of us. There can be no expectation that any of us, men or women, can overcome these attitudes in a period of months or even years. They have been part of us for too long.

There are, of course, remedies and influences which can be, and are being, brought to bear. Some of them -- many, I hope -- will have immediate effect, but others will require a long period of application because of the very nature of the attitudes to be changed. Some of these attitudes, I venture to guess, are apparent at this moment in the minds of some of you. Were we involved in a psychiatric exercise, I could ask who of you at this moment are saying to yourselves: "Women! Why doesn't he speak on an important subject?"

Attitudes of this sort, shared by women as well as by men, originated in the earliest phases of human evolution. The human race developed then patterns of behaviour to guarantee its existence as a species. Those patterns have continued in varying degrees in many societies throughout the world. It would be senseless for us to ask now if the species could have survived some other way. We need bear no feelings of guilt for attitudes that developed through history, but surely now that we have escaped from pure necessity we would be guilty should we refuse to question our present attitudes; should we refuse to regard women as persons in the total sense of the word.

In these circumstances, it may be too much to expect -- of government, of women, of society -- that we achieve more in the near future than a mere beginning of understanding. But how important it is that we try. And how momentous if we do achieve more, as the open and healthy attitudes of younger people convince me we shall.

Perhaps this generation has recognized, as past generations have not, that discrimination based upon sexual or racial reasons lasts for a lifetime. There are, after all, only two permanent conditions attributable to human beings. One is sex. The other is race. All other distinctions from which discrimination may grow are temporary in nature or are subject to change. Education, religion, language, age, health, economic stature, experience -- all are or can be transient. Discrimination based upon sex or racial origin is thus doubly unfair. The person against whom the discrimination is practised had no choice of origin and has no option of change.

For the same reason, because of this permanence of condition, none of us -- men or women -- are able totally to understand the view of the other sex. It is impossible in this realm for either of us to perceive objectively; none of us can remove ourselves from our bastions and look in from a neutral vantage point. Yet we must try; we must begin to try. Unless we overcome these barriers to understanding, we are less than we might be -- less than we should be. Society cannot become mature without the full participation of women. Society will not become mature without a sharing of experience.

In mechanics, when two equal and parallel but opposite forces are applied to the two ends of a lever, they are said to form a couple - a dynamic system.

The basic forces in society obey similar laws. The two elements that compose society - men and women - form a couple - or system - of forces, even at the group level. When these forces are combined, their efforts are multiplied, and acquire new and previously unsuspected dimensions. Together but different, equal but distinct, men and women can discover each other, can have a mutually creative influence on each other, and can thenceforth discover and create an infinitely more exciting and fruitful world than they could acting independently.

Participation in human activity by women is, therefore, not only valuable but indispensable.

The participation will be based upon equality, not upon identity. Women are not men; they have not demanded that they be treated as if they were men. They ask only, and deserve, that we remove the remaining barriers to their full participation in the Canadian community. Barriers put in place by a society which purports to educate women on the same basis as men and then denies to those women the chance to do the tasks for which they have been trained. Barriers which, in many instances, have been maintained -- even though not raised -- by women.

Some of the barriers are of recent origin; others have beginnings shrouded in the mists of early history; some are the product of "male chauvinism"; still others are rooted in social patterns that have remained distinct and viable from century to century. Each category requires separate appraisal. The conception of the family unit, for example, has resisted change in almost every society in every country in every age of recorded history. Certain skills are required in the raising of children, certain functions demand to be performed. The nominee to supply these skills and perform these functions need not be determined by a sexual qualification, but equally these skills and these functions cannot be overlooked or rejected in our desire to overcome the shortcomings of the past. The role of the family and the place of children must be examined at the same time as we examine the role of adult persons.

This does not assume a "place" for women; it accepts distinctive contributions. The challenge should be to accept distinction through accommodation, not to petrify it through discrimination.

Are we right in assuming, for example, as so many persons now do, that employment, rather than occupation or contribution, is the primary criterion of usefulness; that motherhood and the education of children is not a task as important, as challenging and fulfilling as any in the world? I am sure we are not. Are we not remiss in our oft-repeated failure to recognize spontaneously and more enthusiastically the immense contribution to society made by women through their participation in volunteer activities? At the same time, are we confident that our society could not become more rewarding -- perhaps even more productive -- if it dropped its insistence on standard 40-hour work weeks and permitted variable work schedules to many women who have some time, much talent and considerable incentive? Are we even aware of

the range of rich benefits that we deny ourselves by restricting so severely and casting so rigidly relations between men and women? Do we think of one another as persons?

In sexual discrimination, as in racial discrimination, the stature of the person discriminating suffers as much as that of the person discriminated against. Both persons are losers in the process.

And society is the loser as well. The entire community is denied the contributions of large numbers of women in capacities that we in Canada for decades have regarded as masculine preserves. There is no evidence, for example, that the standards of health-care in the Soviet Union, or the durability of Soviet bridges, are less than what they might be because of the large -- in one instance, overwhelming -- number of women in the medical and engineering professions. There is no evidence that the people of India, of Ceylon, of Israel are less well served by governments headed by female prime ministers than would be the case had men retained those offices. Indeed, from my own recent meetings with Prime Ministers Gandhi, Bandaranaike and Meir, I would suggest that the evidence is quite the other way. Yet in Canada we have permitted ourselves to develop attitudes which are hostile to the reception of women into a number of professions and trades and into politics. In the result, each one of us, men and women, is demeaned.

Attitude has been the contributor of most of the obstacles which now confront women in Canada. But more than a change of attitude is required in order to overcome discrimination and to provide opportunity. Some laws will have to be changed to eliminate the anomalies and inconsistencies which have crept into our common-law system from days when women were regarded as legal chattels -- regarded, virtually, as the property of their husbands.

We should examine with care all aspects of equality and partnership embodied in the marital state. Some special protections and features will always be necessary, but we should be performing a disservice if we introduced into our laws even more inconsistencies, as could happen by the adoption, say, of both the concept of community of property and the suggestion of state payments to wives for household services.

Some of this necessary examination of the status of women has recently been performed, and performed very well, by the Royal Commission under the chairmanship of Florence Bird. The Commission recommended a number of changes which it regards as essential in order to continue the process of placing women on an even footing with men. Forty of the 167 recommendations are directed to levels of government other than the Federal Government. A number of others are directed to the private sector, and to agencies such as the Senate and the House of Commons, which are not within governmental control. The balance, however, are recommendations for the consideration of the Federal Government, either by itself or in conjunction with the provinces or territories.

In the short interval since the report was tabled, a number of steps have been taken to ensure informed and co-ordinated Federal Government action in response to it. Most important of those steps is the Government's announced decision to give priority consideration to the recommendations.

We have already appointed within the Privy Council Office a highly-qualified person whose responsibility it is to ensure informed and co-ordinated Government action with respect to the report. An interdepartmental committee will examine those recommendations directed to the Federal Government. It is under instructions to complete its work as quickly as possible and to submit reports periodically to Cabinet.

A number of the recommendations of the Royal Commission already have been made the subject of proposed Government action. The White Paper on Unemployment Insurance proposed broadened coverage and provisions for interruptions of earnings due to sickness and maternity. The Speech from the Throne in October revealed that Parliament would be asked this session to consider a new set of labour standards for industries within federal jurisdiction. The Speech from the Throne and the list of bills tabled in the House of Commons thereafter included references to citizenship; the draft legislation will attempt to meet those issues raised by the Royal Commission. The recommendation dealing with citizens' information centres is entirely compatible with a major recommendation of the Task Force on Government Information and some progress is already evident.

Programs to serve the needs of women of the Indian and Eskimo cultures are being developed and expanded, and language classes for immigrant women are being supported federally by nearly \$900,000.

In the matter of corrections, there are substantial areas of agreement in the treatment of women offenders between the Ouimet Report and the Bird Report. The Solicitor-General has indicated his interest in attracting to his department women prepared to work in the fields of prevention and rehabilitation.

The Department of National Health and Welfare is taking steps to support the development of family planning in Canada and is prepared to enter into discussion with the provinces on ways and means of establishing high-standard day care.

The problem and the challenge are of wider scope, however, than the acceptance or denial of some or all of these recommendations. They involve the desire of Canadians to employ to the fullest the talents of all Canadians; they involve a desire to excel.... We have attempted, through Order-in-Council appointments, to increase considerably the number of women filling important public offices. In proportion to the number of men occupying positions in this category, the total is still not impressive, but, in comparison with the number of appointments in previous years, the record is one of which I am proud. I propose to better it and invite all Canadians to exhibit impatience with our rate of progress in this respect.

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Until Canada is given the opportunity of utilizing to the full the offerings of all Canadians, this country and the people who live in it will not gain fulfilment. We cannot assume that the contribution of women will be a mere extension of or even support for the contribution of men. Their performance will not only be original, it will be sometimes competitive and

sometimes complementary. We have no means of perceiving the dimensions of their offering; we know only that it will be rich, that it will be persuasive, and that it will enhance our society and all who live in it. It is an exciting prospect.

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