

A Message From:
MARIA MINNA

MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT
BEACHES - EAST YORK



Conservatives Play Politics with Women's Rights

Stephen Harper's Conservative government does not understand that women's equality is still an issue in this country. Women in Canada are strong-willed and determined but, without the necessary instruments in place, their rights will be denied, as Stephen Harper puts in more and more barricades to stop women from advocating for equality.

The \$5 million (40%) cuts to the operating budget of Status of Women Canada directly impact its research capabilities which many groups depend on to fight for equality, violence against women and sexual exploitation, etc. The Women's Program which has funded women's groups has been fundamentally changed to reflect the right-wing, survival of the fittest beliefs of the Conservatives.

The previous mandate of the program was to be the primary federal mechanism that promotes the *equality* of Women in Canada. Its mandate was to facilitate the full and active participation of women in the economic, social, *political* and *legal aspects* of society.

The Conservatives have shut down 12 of the 16 regional offices across the country and have also eliminated funding for groups working towards "*achieving social justice*." All organizations doing research and advocacy to advance women's equality will no longer be eligible for funding.

The Conservatives have abolished any mention of the word "equality" and have taken political and legal aspects out of the mandate. They do not want women participating in determining public policy. They have eliminated funding for groups which assist women in the legal aspects of society and cut all funding for the Court Challenges Program and the

Law Commission of Canada. These have been two fundamental organizations that have advanced the cause of equality seeking groups in the last 25 years.

Meanwhile the Harper government has allotted money for "for profit" organizations and "spiritual organizations".

Primary examples of how these organizations have helped our society are: 1) Protecting women under the law through the rape shield; 2) allowing funding for immigrant women to get English as a second language training, which was only provided for immigrant men; and 3) recognizing the work of aboriginal women on reserves so they qualify for the Canada Pension Plan.

These are rights that we now consider fundamental, but were only achieved through court challenges and funded through many equality-seeking groups. If the policies of this government were in place at the time of these cases, it would not have been possible for these breakthroughs to have been achieved.

Conservative MPs are politicizing the funding process. Many have been phoning women's shelters in their ridings asking them to make applications to Status of Women Canada. Their Minister has implied that it is easier to access funding for specific projects, but not for research or advancing equality. How many will be left out in the cold that do not live in Conservative ridings

The Conservative's regressive cuts and change in the Women's Program will shut out any efforts to work for women's equality. This government is not accessible, transparent or accountable. Women's groups have been

protesting the decisions of this government for several months now.

Eileen Morrow, Coordinator of the Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses (OAITH) which represents 75 members across Ontario primarily for first stage emergency shelters for abused women and their children, is deeply concerned by the actions of several Conservative MPs. In a press release on Dec. 14, 2006 she states:

"We are deeply troubled that the federal government is using violence against women and public support for women's shelters as a justification for cutting funds for equality and advocacy work... Advocacy and women's equality rights work is our only hope to finally stop violence against women. Women certainly need better funded shelters and women's services, but they also need a stronger advocacy voice in public policy."

"What women in Canada should know is that the time-limited project grants Status of Women provide will not give ongoing program funding to women's shelters to do direct frontline work."

"It is especially bizarre that MPs in Ontario are soliciting applications from shelters. When James Flaherty (federal Finance Minister) and John Baird (Chair of Treasury Board) were MPPs in the Ontario Government of Mike Harris they participated in cuts to the base budgets of these very same shelters and in the elimination of all program funding to abused women's second stage shelters."

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