



My Fight for Social Justice Continues

- By Maria Minna

Activism has always been the foundation of my career. Whether it was at the local level lobbying for funding for better services for immigrants in the '70s, or now, at the federal level, fighting for social justice for all Canadians, I am proud to be a voice for those who are, all too often, never heard.

I have been called a “fighter”, a “bulldozer”, and sometimes worse, by opponents and colleagues over the years. As an activist, I am a strong believer in the squeaky wheel getting the grease.

When I was first elected as a Member of Parliament, I, along with several Liberal Caucus Members, formed what was dubbed the “Child Poverty Caucus”. We felt that Canadian families deserved more from their government.

This small group of Liberal MPs was the catalyst for the Child Tax Benefit, a non-taxable allowance for low- to middle-income families with children 18 years of age or younger. The Child Tax Benefit currently stands at a maximum of \$3,200 a year per child.

When Stephen Harper’s Conservatives took power in January 2006, they cancelled the \$5 billion Early Learning and Childcare agreements that the former Liberal government, prodded by myself and other progressive Liberals, had been negotiating with the provinces since 2000. Instead of providing a truly universal, accessible, well-regulated program, the Conservatives offered families a paltry

\$100 a month taxable allowance. Canadian families still need more – much more. That’s why I continue to lobby this government to honour the childcare agreements with the provinces and add the \$100 a month allowance to the Child Tax Benefit, where it would go, un-taxed, to those families who need it most.

We must do more to fight poverty in this country. I would like to see the Child Tax Benefit increased to at least \$5,000 a year. The cost of living does not remain constant, nor should the Child Tax Benefit. We need to do more to help families get out of the poverty trap.

As well, I continue to fight for more affordable housing. Shelter is a basic human need and it should be available to all Canadians. The former Liberal government committed \$2 billion a year and appointed the first minister responsible for housing. This was a step in the right direction with sustainable investments in emergency, supportive, transitional and permanent housing units.

The current Conservative government, on the other hand, cancelled the funding for the Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative (SCPI), a program allowing community groups on the front line, to provide affordable housing. The Conservatives then re-announced a watered-down program with less funding -- after a six-month funding gap! As my colleagues and I continue to lobby for more investment in affordable housing, we are always reminded that Finance Minister Jim Flaherty, the man who controls Canada’s purse strings, is the same man who, under Mike Harris, once pledged to declare homeless people illegal. We need Employment Insurance (EI) reforms that better suit Canadians. Under the current system, 60% of Canada’s unemployed do not qualify for EI. Parental leave should be extended, and parents should not be penalized for stepping out of the workforce to raise their children. Benefits should be increased to better meet the needs of families.

The former Liberal government had committed \$1 billion for a National Caregivers Agenda. As our population ages, more and more Canadians are dropping out of the workforce to care for loved ones, thus creating a gap in their payments to EI and Canada Pension Plan (CPP). Their benefits should be protected to prevent today’s caregivers from becoming tomorrow’s poor seniors.

We need a government that is going to take real action to protect our environment. I am pleased that my Private Member’s Bill to eliminate perfluorooctane sulfonate (PFOS), a toxin commonly used in stain-guard products, fast food wrap, clothing, carpets, furniture upholstery, microwave popcorn bags, and nail polish among other things, is proceeding. My colleagues and I continue to demand that this government meet Canada’s commitments under the Kyoto Protocol. Locally, I have organized meetings between city officials and the provincial government on the Portlands Energy issue and have voiced my support for the local community’s position.

As your voice in Ottawa, I will continue to fight for social justice, more support for families, more affordable housing and a clean environment. My colleagues and I

will continue our efforts to prevent the current Conservative government from destroying the social fabric of Canada.