The following article has to some extent been overtaken by events. In August, the federal government established the Canadian Panel on Violence Against Women, with a mandate similar to the one proposed in this article. No one working in the women's movement is naïve enough to believe that solutions to huge social problems come fast or easily, but many of us are optimistic about the work of this Panel because of the people appointed to it: activists, experts, front-line workers. Their work alone will not — could not — end violence against women, but it may move our country along the way to becoming a safer place.

The nature and extent of violence against women (and children) in Canada have been documented in study after study in recent years. In 1990, women — and men — all over Canada were still trying to find understanding: what causes such violence, where does it begin, why is there so much of it in so many forms, how can it be stopped?

In relation to the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, cynical women in 1990, weary of the unending struggle for equality, asked themselves how much the Commission had accomplished and whether it had been worth, not just the millions of dollars a Royal Commission costs, but the thousands of person hours preparing briefs, responding to the recommendations, and lobbying forever for implementation.

Many of us remembered the establishment of the Royal Commission in 1967, and recalled very clearly, not just the cynicism that greeted its establishment, but the amusement on the part of many, in particular the media. What could possibly be wrong with the status of women? Why don't women stop whining and get on with it? But as the Commission began its public hearings in the late sixties, women came forward who did not belong to the large and sophisticated women's organizations (who also, of course, presented very important briefs). These women spoke, often for the first time in public, and what they said changed the attitude to the Royal Commission and eventually changed the country. They told of poverty, especially in old age, of lack of training and lack of opportunity, of low pay and low esteem, of fear for their future. The Royal Commission and its indefatigable chair, Florence Bird, responded with a thoroughly researched and powerfully persuasive report, and 167 recommendations on almost every aspect of women's lives.

Looking at the Report in 1990, it is easy to see what has not been achieved: we still have no national child care plan, no pensions for homemakers, no equality of pay or opportunity. But what has been accomplished is formidable. In the late sixties, women could not borrow money, open a bank account, or get a mortgage without a husband's signature. Not only was birth control illegal, disseminating information about it was illegal until 1969. Almost no churches ordained women. Divorce was a long, messy and embarrassing matter, dependent in most provinces, until 1968, on proof of adultery. The great majority of people believed that women's place was...
in the home, that she might have a "little job" but she would certainly stop working when she got married or at the very least when she became pregnant. If she did not think of doing so herself, it was perfectly legal for her employer to fire her for either of the sins of marriage or pregnancy.

It is almost impossible for young women to believe, or for older women to remember, what a "Father Knows Best" world it was. The Royal Commission was not the only instrument of transformation of that done on so many other subjects two decades ago?

The Pros and Cons of a Royal Commission

The small group of women (who had by now met several times in the spring of 1990 to talk about solutions to the problem of violence) had, of course, repeatedly reminded themselves of the disadvantages and potential dangers of a Royal Commission. The dialogue went like this:

Statement: A Royal Commission will cost millions of dollars which should be spent on front line service.
Response: Governments are increasingly reluctant to fund services properly now. Maybe a Royal Commission would build so much public support that funding would become easier to achieve.

Statement: A Royal Commission would take a long time and might get in the way of actions to prevent violence or to aid victims. It would be an excuse for government inaction.
Response: There is no reason that action should stop while a Commission goes on. Both can happen simultaneously. Anyway, what action?

Statement: Royal Commission recommendations are just shelved anyway.
Response: The recommendations of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women were not shelved. Women would have to act for implementation, as we did after the previous Royal Commission, but perhaps it would be worth it.

Statement: There are innumerable studies now of the problem of violence. Why do we need another one?
Response: What may be needed is a comprehensive look at all the studies, bringing together all the disparate elements these studies represent: the role of education in preventing violence, media and violence, the churches and violence, and so on. And perhaps the other element a Royal Commission could provide is a much higher level of publicity than these individual studies attained.

The ad hoc committee finally agreed
The effects of violence against women should be explored, women's experience of violence, including, among other things, the influence of home, school, media, institutions, quasi-judicial bodies and media. Supported by strong research, the Commission's report should include specific recommendations, timelines for achievement of change, and a process for implementation and review.

**Process**

The Royal Commission should be as accessible and unintimidating as possible, and should:
- accept both written and oral submissions;
- travel to all regions of Canada;
- have adequate staff and resources;
- provide translation, signing and transcribing for those with special needs;
- make hearings accessible, in terms of physical locale, times, child care;
- make hearings wheelchair accessible;
- have hearings which are sensitive and informal;
- make provisions for in-camera sessions;
- conduct extensive outreach to all possible participants to include victims of violence, frontline workers, other community members, professionals and agents in the field. The outreach should be active and adequately financed;
- provide funding for the collection of testimony, by audio and videotape if desirable;
- provide adequate funding for extensive research, both as backup to the Commission process and on an ongoing basis;
- allow adequate time between the notice and the date of hearings, as well as for the hearings to occur;
- hold hearings over a two year period, and report within a year after that, for a total of three years from the naming of the Commission;
- hold hearings with a friendly and humane approach, "goal-driven" rather than "Commissioner-driven";
- make the final report to Parliament and provide it to the public.

**Terms for a Royal Commission**

The committee was painfully aware that the wrong Commission could be worse than none at all. We also wanted a Commission with the broad mandate, financial support and research capacity of other major Commissions, without the alienating pomp and formality of some. We therefore developed a fairly detailed proposal for the mandate, process and composition that we believe would produce a useful, effective Royal Commission.

**Mandate**

A Royal Commission on violence against women should examine and document women's experience of violence, including physical assault, sexual assault and sexual harassment. The causes of violence against women should be explored, including, among other things, the influence of home, school, media, pornography. The effects of violence against women should be examined, including the effects on children who are victims or witnesses.

The response of the community should be studied, including the criminal justice system, education system, health care system, organized religion, government agencies, quasi-judicial bodies and media. Supported by strong research, the Commission's report should include specific recommendations, timelines for achievement of change, and a process for implementation and review.

**Composition**

We recommend approximately seven people rather than a single Commissioner. The Commission should be either entirely or predominantly female.

The members of the Commission should have a demonstrated understanding of and sensitivity to the issues of violence against women and children. They should have a demonstrated commitment to social reform aimed at achieving equality for women. Candidates must be able to commit both the time and high level of energy required for their tenure on the Commission.

The following constituencies should be considered: French and English language communities; Native community; lesbians; rural and urban communities; regions; disabled women; immigrant women; visible minority women; women of various ages. Hearings could take place with panels of three or four Commissioners, to increase accessibility.

With the support of over twenty organizations, we wrote to the Prime Minister and the Minister Responsible for the Status of Women. Among other things, we said:

As you know, this year is the 20th anniversary of "The Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women"...which helped to raise the consciousness of Canadians about previously unacknowledged discrimination against women, and led to some significant legislative change. It did not, however, deal with the subject of violence. We are now proposing a "Royal Commission, Part II."

The Montreal massacre was followed by increased public attention to violence against women; evidence of an appalling degree of such violence continues to mount. We have concluded that the situation is so desperate that it warrants a Royal Commission. Every social institution from the schools to the criminal justice system has been identified both as problem and solution. We think a high-profile, public investigation with strong recommendations might have an impact similar to that of the original Report.

Other support emerged. The mayor of Toronto wrote to the mayors of all Canadian cities for endorsement of the idea and to date 41 cities have agreed. At Queen's Park on December 6, the Ontario Minister responsible for Women's Issues spoke in the legislature in favour of a Royal Commission and the premiers of Ontario and Newfoundland have written to add their support. Representatives of both federal opposition parties spoke on December 6 in the House of Commons calling for a Royal Commission.

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