EMPLOYMENT EQUITY IS NOT AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

Marjorie Cohen

Depuis la publication du rapport Abella, "L'égalité dans l'emploi", le terme 'équité dans l'emploi' a été adopté de préférence au terme 'action positive'. Marjorie Cohen affirme que ce changement dans la terminologie est plus qu'une question sémantique: il représente l'évasion des principes fondamentaux qu'impliquent l'action positive'. Son article examine cet important changement dans la signification de ces mots.

EMPLOYMENT EQUITY OR AFFIRMATIVE ACTION?

The idea of Affirmative Action should not be confused with the idea of Equity. The term employment equity has been adopted recently in preference to affirmative action because the latter is deemed too strong and politically too dangerous to use. The question now is whether or not the substitution of the term equity is a backing off from the basic principles which affirmative action implies. I maintain that it is.

Affirmative action means a lot more than simply giving people equal opportunity and equal pay. The principle of affirmative action recognizes that the market mechanisms which control the work people do and how they are paid will never, by themselves, bring about conditions of equality. Making specific acts of discrimination illegal is a necessary step, but not a sufficient one to change basic structures in the way the labour of certain groups is treated.

Equity implies impartiality and fairness - it is a good term, but it is limited. The MacDonald Commission, for example, is quite explicit in its understanding of this when it says "equity is not identical with equality." To people who believe that everything is truly fair when laws treat everyone equally, equity is a sufficient concept. Differences in the rewards and treatment of various groups, then, are viewed as arising from some kind of natural difference in ability or personal choice in a way of life. When things are fair, the individual is personally liable for the way things turn out. Equity does not require that people be equal - only that they are treated in the same fair way.

The concept of affirmative action views fairness in a much broader sense. The focus is not only on equality in treatment, but equality in results. It recognizes that treating a disadvantaged group the same as a privileged group is not equality: the disadvantages or privileges of the past will have a bearing on the present and will render the results unequal. Affirmative action calls for positive steps to rectify past discrimination and inequalities which have become a structured part of the system. Rather than relying on inefficient, cumbersome complaint mechanisms, as currently exist (mechanisms which place the onus for change on the victims of discrimination), affirmative action programs would require that employers actively reverse their discriminatory practices.

Affirmative Action has been a dirty word in Canada. Employers have hated it because it would cost them money. For a long time, even some feminist groups were afraid of the negative public reaction it would arouse. The particular stumbling block was the use of quotas to achieve the objectives of affirmative action programs. There was a fear of being unfair to white males - a fear that "reverse discrimination" would threaten the foundation of a just society. Governments would sometimes use the term, not in legislation of course, but in advocating "voluntary" programs in the public sector. In reality this was a brave term for meagre programs. Certainly there was no notion of quotas or compulsion in the government's use of the term.

The Abella Commission on Equality in Employment, which issued its report in October 1984, backed away from the use of the term affirmative action because of its association with the use of quotas, and used instead employment equity. The Commission advocated goals and targets, rather than quotas, but insisted that effective enforcement was essential for any improvement in the current situation. While many groups felt that the notion of goals and targets was rather weak and did not give sufficient guidance to employers about what to do, the call for mandatory rather than voluntary action was supported fully. Altogether the Abella Commission recommended 117 measures for change, including federal legislation which would require that employers implement employment equity, that the government provide a sufficient enforcement mechanism, and that employers report annually on their progress.

"EMPLOYMENT EQUITY" - BILL C-62

Last June the government issued its response to the Abella Commission in the form of a bill on employment equity, Bill C-62. It is a miserably inadequate bill and bears virtually no resemblance to the measures advocated in the Abella Report, yet it is termed "employment equity legislation."

In the press release which accompanied the introduction of the Conservative government's bill on employment equity, Flora MacDonald, the Minister of Employment and Immigration said: "The Employment Equity Bill is a landmark piece of legislation. Past governments have paid lip-service to the idea of equality in employment - this government has taken action within the first nine months of its mandate." Even allowing for the usual hyperbole ministers tend to use when describing the significance of their
own work, most groups who were wait­
ing for the Bill were not quite prepared for 
the extent to which it differed from the
minister's claim.

The Bill itself is a sham. It contains
dazzling rhetoric with regard to purpose:

The purpose of this Act is to achieve equality 
in the work place so that no person shall be
denied employment opportunities or 
benefits for reasons unrelated to ability, and 
in the fulfillment of that goal, to ameliorate 
the conditions of disadvantage in employ­
ment experienced by women, aboriginal 
peoples, persons with disabilities and 
persons who are, because of their race or 
colour, in a visible minority in Canada by 
giving effect to the principle that employ­
ment equity means more than treating 
persons in the same way but also requires 
special measures and the accommodation of 
differences.

But one does not have to read very far 
before realizing that the only special mea­
sure this Bill would require of employers 
in the federal sector is that some of them 
report annually to the government. The 
reporting for those who employ more 
than one hundred people would begin in 
1988 and would give information about 
the proportion of women and other 
minorities hired or fired in each firm, their 
representation in specific occupational 
categories, and their salary ranges. If 
employers fail to report they could be 
liable to a “fine not exceeding fifty 
thousand dollars.” But that's it. If the 
report shows that the designated groups 
are grossly discriminated against, nothing 
happens. If the employer shows no 
change in employment practices year after 
year, or if things actually get worse for the 
target groups, there will be no penalties.

There is simply no enforcement mechanism 
in the bill to require that the employer imple­
ment employment equity. Public humiliation 
and shame are considered by the Minister 
to be sufficient enforcement tools: “The 
employment practices and policies of 
federally regulated businesses will go on 
public record, and these companies will 
have to answer to the people of Canada 
if they fail to achieve equality in 
employment.”

As much as the notion of an enraged 
public beating down the doors of discrimi­
nating companies like CN Rail has a 
certain appeal, experience reminds us that 
public outrage tends to get diffused and 
ultimately cannot confront the extraordi­
narily widespread nature of systemic 
discrimination. Once again, the onus for 
any kind of enforcement would be placed 
on disadvantaged groups. Volumes of
data would need to be sifted through, analyzed, and argued about. Heroic efforts would be needed to draw the media’s attention to the issue, and years and years would be spent filing complaints with the Canadian Human Rights Commission.

But even assuming that public humiliation could be effective, it is not at all clear that the information the government receives will be at all useful or will be available to the public in any meaningful way. The Minister of Employment and Immigration has indicated that she will “consolidate the information submitted; analyze employment trends of the designated groups; and assess the overall achievement of Employment Equity on a national and sectoral basis.” The consolidation of information could effectively hide any real information about how individual firms perform. But also, as guidelines about reporting are being drawn up, employers are actively lobbying so that categories of salaries, for example, are very broad. Their reasoning is that narrow categories would make it too easy for the incomes of their chief executives to become public knowledge and this would constitute an invasion of privacy. We know that broad salary categories, not incidentally, would also conceal a great deal about how specific groups of workers are paid.

The government would now like the focus of discussion to be on the form reporting should take. Fortunately, there is a broad coalition of groups which is not letting the major issue of the gross inadequacy of this bill die. The coalition includes the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, the Coalition of Provincial Organizations of the Handicapped, the National Ethnocultural Council, the Canadian Association for Community Living (formerly the Canadian Association for the Mentally Retarded), the Canadian Labour Congress, the Urban Alliance on Race Relations, the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women, and the Coalition for Equity. These groups are demanding that the bill be substantially amended to require specific affirmative action goals, timeframes for results, and penalties for firms which fail to comply. They also insist that certain promises made during the election particularly those which would require that private companies doing business with the government adopt the principle of equal pay for work of equal value be included in any employment equity package. Brian Mulroney specifically assured the public that contract compliance would be a priority for his party: 

A Progressive Conservative Government will ensure that all companies seeking to provide services to the Government of Canada hire increasing numbers of women to perform those services as a condition of getting the job ... We will ask these firms to show us, as part of their tendering responsibilities, how many women will be hired to fulfill those contracts. There’s nothing alien about that. It’s just good old business sense.

Some groups, such as the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, are specifically calling for Bill C-62 to be defeated if it is not drastically altered. Their reasoning is that the bill is so ineffective and so far removed from the promises made by the Conservatives during the last election, that it cannot in any measure be called an employment equity bill. Passing it would simply let this government claim it has done something for disadvantaged workers when, in fact, nothing will change as a result of its passage.

Mandatory reporting is not mandatory affirmative action. Clearly the government could not call this bill an affirmative action bill, but they could call it “an act respecting employment equity.” The term employment equity is weak and can mean anything. If what we want is affirmative action we should not call it employment equity.

Marjorie Cohen teaches in the Department of Sociology, York University, and is a Vice-President of NAC.

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**DYKE DIARIES**

**A CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS**

Submissions of up to 5000 words are being requested for an anthology of lesbian personal writings – diaries, journals, letters, thoughts. Material on any facet of the writer’s life is welcome; pieces need to grow out of a lesbian life and may be as lesbian-specific (or not) in content as is appropriate to the thoughts/emotions/situations being discussed. Pieces used may be published anonymously if the writer wishes; confidentiality will be strictly observed. Please include the year of writing and the age of the writer at that time. Deadline for submissions is March 1 1986.

Please send material to:

Frances Rooney  
Post Office Box 868, Station P  
Toronto, Ontario  
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