

# Status of Women Canada Cuts a Loss for Healthy Democracy

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*Cet article nous donne les grandes lignes des récentes coupures du budget conservateur qui ont causé des changements perturbateurs à Condition féminine Canada en dépit du mandat initié par la ministre Bev Oda. Les mots "égalité" et "accès à la justice" furent rayés du document CFC dans le but de baillonner les critiques provenant des groupes de la base vis-à-vis du gouvernement. Seront perdues, l'expérience de première ligne des groupes de la base et leurs recherches sur les problèmes des femmes et de leurs familles, qui pourtant influençaient de manière constructive les politiques gouvernementales. La perte d'un dialogue informatif entre les groupes de la base et les concepteurs des politiques gouvernementales affaiblit le processus démocratique.*

December 2006 bore witness to two important moments in the history of women's rights in Canada that are clearly at odds. December 10th was the twenty-fifth anniversary of Canada's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women—something to celebrate. But the same week also marked a series of hearings on the Hill conducted by the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women tasked with assessing the response to recent budget cuts and reforms by the ruling Conservative government to Status of

Women Canada (SWC). And what was the response? Well, let's just say that women's groups across the country are not ready to make nice.

In November 2006, Status of Women Minister Bev Oda announced sweeping reforms to SWC in the name of "streamlining" and "efficiency." The changes include substantial cuts to the SWC operating budget (a loss of 40 per cent) and the subsequent closure of regional SWC offices (from 16 down to 4).

These significant economic reductions to an already miniscule SWC budget, during a booming time in the Canadian economy, and while the government is reporting a (continued) budget surplus, have summoned up appropriate "boos" and cries of shame by opposition parties hurled at the ruling Conservative party. Media pundits also rightly question why the Conservative government would seek shallow savings from organizations—grass-roots women's groups across the country—that can afford it the least, literally ripping the shirts off their backs.

But what was often hidden in the general outcry and coverage of the SWC cuts was a fundamental change to the SWC mandate that was about a lot more than just money, and which should make all those interested in a healthy democracy sit up and take notice.

While most coverage and concern was focused on the SWC regional office closures, the words "equality," "advocacy," and "action" were quietly removed from the Terms and Conditions of the SWC mandate, and from various SWC documents, such as their website (a chilling process of erasure that attempts to change history—borrowed directly from the Bush administration's "handling" of women's organizations in the U.S.).

Oda also eliminated virtually all funding for research on women and women's issues and made it impossible for women's organizations involved in advocating or lobbying governments to be eligible for SWC money. At the same time, Oda made for-profit organizations eligible for SWC funding.

What does this mean? It means that if Shell or Microsoft or Bell want to start a trainee program for women, they may get taxpayer money to do so, but your regional, provincial/territorial or national women's organization that deals daily with Canadian women and families on issues of violence, health, or poverty can no longer get government funding from SWC to undertake research, nor can they educate government officials or government policy makers on their knowledge and experience.

Some critics have declared the

SWC cuts ideological and, thus, from a right-wing government, not too surprising. With these new strictures for SWC firmly in place, the Conservative government has attempted to muzzle women's voices across the country.

But this is ironic given that this government was voted in on—and continues to preach—a platform of accountability, democracy, and evi-

nizations that meet the direct needs of individual Canadians is one that is flexible and resilient enough to govern for all Canadians.

The Harper government has made a serious miscalculation if it believes that Canadians consider equality—women's or anyone's—and advocating for equality issues, a partisan or an ideological issue. Grassroots women's organizations in our coun-

Of course there are many different ways to tackle the problems of inequity in our country—and the means and methods can become a partisan or ideological discussion. But to silence the voices of those who work directly with the communities that most need our attention is helpful to no one. And it certainly does not make the needs of these communities go away.

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dence-based policy making. Grassroots women's organizations across the country, many of which received their funding from Status of Women Canada, fulfill an essential democratic process and function as an accountability mechanism to government, to make sure that policy is based first in evidence (research) and experience (on the frontlines), and on the actual needs of Canadian women and their families.

Important advocacy work undertaken by women's organizations, far from partisan, is an instrumental means to continue to educate and engage our elected officials on what is going on regionally in this vast country. It is a critical avenue of public discourse that only makes government policies stronger, more informed, and more complete.

Disagreement and debate from women's organizations with government officials or departments is not something that should be feared and quashed by the Conservative government, or by any government, but the sign of a healthy and vigorous democracy.

A government that can listen to the voices of those who work on the frontlines and make a difference is an accountable government. A government that engages with the orga-

try employ a host of women and men with various political leanings, and work on behalf of communities that vote for all political parties.

Equality is a Canadian value, not an ideological option. Advocating for equality in order to improve public programs and policy is also not partisan, but simply good public policy. And funding organizations (a pittance) to educate our elected officials on what they know—through both research and experience—can only benefit all Canadians, and ensure the most efficient delivery of services to all regions.

The Harper government has also seriously miscalculated if it believes that women's equality has been fully achieved or has somehow been (effortlessly) won and is now over. Sadly, this is not the case. One in nine Canadian women live in poverty, according to Statistic Canada (143); women still earn only 70.5 per cent of what men earn for full-time work (Statistics Canada 152); and the bulk of unpaid caregiving—for children, seniors and the disabled—continues to be done by women (NCGHRW). Too many women also continue to be on the receiving end of violence in the home (Statistics Canada 164-65). The list could go on; there is clearly much work that needs to be done.

Grassroots organizations have valuable knowledge and experience that should be an essential part of the discourse that informs decision-making. Sustaining organizations that carry out the equality-seeking work embedded in our Charter, and which work toward the equality values that all Canadians can be proud of, can only make Canada a better place.

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## References

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