

HARPER PLANS TO WIN MAJORITY USING WOMEN VOTERS

A Brief Chronological Account of the Erosion of Women's Rights Under the Tories

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In March 2009, representatives of Canadian women protested in front of the United Nations about the federal Tories' regressive revisions to pay equity laws.

Representatives of women's groups and labour unions gathered at the United Nations yesterday, to announce that they will be filing a complaint against the Harper government with the UN Commission on the Status of Women. The complaint condemns the Canadian government for rushing controversial pay equity legislation through Parliament, which will make it extremely difficult for women in the federal public sector to demand equal pay for work of equal value.

—*Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC)*, "Women launch complaint against Harper government for destroying the right to pay equity," news release, March 6, 2009

About a month later, Prime Minister Stephen Harper made some ironic, sanctimonious statements about women's rights in another country.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper said [April 1, 2009] that Canada remains committed to its mission in Afghanistan, but he voice strong concerns about new Afghan legislation that would limit women's rights in that country.... "We're deeply troubled by it. And I don't think we're by any means alone," the prime minister said during an interview in London ahead of the G20 talks that begin [the next day].... Harper noted that Canada was reluctant to get drawn into any Afghan electoral politics, but said: "The concept that women are full human beings with human rights is very, very central to the reason the international community is engaged in this country."

—*CBC News*, "Harper 'deeply troubled' by Afghan move to limit women's rights," April 1, 2009

The Harper government has a horrendous record regarding women's rights in Canada. Harper's disdain for women's equality is well known, and his government has cut funding for numerous women's programs.

After three decades of (admittedly uneven) progress towards full human rights, women must now contend with the agenda of Stephen Harper. The Prime Minister's disdain for women's equality is one of the most dramatic examples of his wider assault on democracy.... In the very first year that Stephen Harper was prime minister he moved in many ways to halt the course of progress for women. His government summarily cancelled the multi-billion national child care program that the previous Liberal government had spent years negotiating with the provinces (and women's groups had fought for, for decades). It also had the support of the vast majority of Canadians.... According to Sharon Gregson of the Coalition of Childcare Advocates of B.C.: "Other countries are able to provide child care for up to 100 per cent of children between the age of three and six. Other countries, like Belgium, Denmark, Italy, Sweden, even England and the United States, invest more per capita in early childhood development services than Canada does.".... Other cuts were part of a one billion dollar assault on things that the Harper government didn't like, and were implemented in spite of the fact that his government had inherited a \$13 billion surplus. Amongst the programs eliminated was the Court Challenges Program (CCP), one of the most effective and innovative programs in the world promoting and facilitating human rights. The CCP had, since 1978, provided funding for individuals challenging government legislation that was discriminatory. In short, it made constitutional rights, and rights under the Charter, accessible to ordinary people. *Amongst its major beneficiaries were women.* (my italics) To ensure that it would not have to accept any outside, citizens-based advice on changing the law, Harper also eliminated the \$4 million in funding for the Law Commission of Canada, formerly the Law Reform Commission. The government also closed 12 out of 16 regional offices of the Status of Women Canada across the country as well as eliminating the \$1 million Status of Women Independent Research Fund. Changes were imposed to the criteria for funding the Status of Women Canada's Women's program which precluded support for advocacy or lobbying for law reform. That meant that dozens of women-run NGOs would no longer receive funding because virtually all of them combined advocacy with the provision of services -- such as women's shelters advocating for an end to violence against women. One of the most cynical efforts by the Harper government to turn back the clock was its decision -- again, with no reference to Parliament and no consultation with women or women's organizations -- to simply refuse to take the issue of pay equity any further than the law already allowed. *Harper, breaking a promise made in the 2006 election,* (my italics) simply rejected recommendations from a federal task force to move toward a "proactive pay-equity system." Shelagh Day, one of Canada's foremost feminists and a human rights scholar, told a Vancouver forum in December 2006: "The Harper government has come forward a few months ago and simply said they're not going to do anything on pay equity. The law will stay the way it is." In 2009 the Harper government took pay equity backwards when it introduced the Public Sector Equitable Compensation Act. According to human rights advocates the bill

emptied “the right to pay equity of its meaning. The new legislated criteria for evaluating ‘equitable compensation’ will reintroduce sex discrimination into pay practices, rather than eliminate it.” *The law (passed by stealth by placing it in the 2009 budget where it could not be voted down) introduced additional criteria that would allow public sector employers to consider “market demand” in determining compensation -- in effect ensuring higher pay for men even if work was of equal value.* (italics mine)
—*rabble.ca*, “Harper runs roughshod over women’s rights,” Murray Dobbin, February 8, 2010

Also in February 2010, Harper was caught making bogus, ironic policies towards women overseas.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s initiative to “mobilize” the Group of Eight wealthiest nations to improve the health of women and children in the Third World has neither details nor money and is so narrowly focused it lacks credibility. Stephen Lewis, Canada’s former ambassador to the UN, calls Harper’s plan “a piece of crass political opportunism” that sees women as mothers and little else....”None of the spectrum of human rights and issues is encompassed in (Harper’s) announcement,” the former UN special envoy for HIV/AIDS [Lewis] says. “It includes none of the panoply of women’s issues which consign women to subordinate positions around the world.”
—*Winnipeg Free Press*, “Harper’s defence of women rings hollow,” Frances Russell, February 10, 2010

Of course, with the Harper government, there is a price to pay for speaking out; that is, voicing dissent. Many people and organizations have found this out the hard way.

Are you old-fashioned? Do you still believe in gender equality? Do you intend to promote gender equality? Do you believe a woman should be able to have an abortion if she chooses to? Or are you just an old-fashioned progressive? Do you sympathize with Palestinians who are treated like dirt by the government of Israel? Do you oppose the pursuit of free trade with a government like Columbia’s that has a deplorable human-rights record? Have you been critical of our government for freezing foreign aid spending? For arbitrarily cutting off aid to eight very poor African countries? Above all, would you care to be vocal about these views: If so, be very afraid. The Harper government is going to get you.... As Amnesty’s Alex Neve puts it: “We are not a nation founded or built on some sense of orthodoxy, ideology and conformity. We are a nation of diversity and debate.” Alas, we need to change that tense. We *were* that kind of nation, a liberal or tolerant nation. Which is reason enough for the Harper government to go to war against this democratic principle and to introduce a new kind of punishment politics for those who fail to toe the government line. Dissent from that line is being

squashed, or at least dissenters are being intimidated by fear of losing their funding. You can disagree, but you pay the price....Over the years, at its best, Canadian development assistance has been largely non-partisan (even if Canada has blindly promoted discredited neoliberal prescriptions for growth and development). *Today, however, without any public discussion or accountability, a destructive social-conservative agenda is being imposed on development priorities. That's what Harper's controversial mother-and-child initiative really reflects, and that's what accounts for the reversal of Canada's support for women's rights internationally.* (my italics) Civil-society activists from across the country are fighting back. They've united under the telling name "Voices" to keep track of Harper's latest victims and to plan a fight-back campaign. (Its website will be up and running soon, probably next week.).... But getting Stephen Harper to come to his senses won't be easy. This is a government that rarely cares about anyone beyond its minority conservative "base." It is unprecedentedly indifferent to the voices of other Canadians. But maybe enough angry Voices can shake it out of its dogmatism and folly.

—*The Globe and Mail*, "The Harper government, women's rights and the cost of speaking out," Gerald Caplan, June 4, 2010

Once again, PSAC representatives demonstrated near the UN against Harper's regressive policies for women. This time, they had broadened the scope of their protest.

PSAC representatives have been sent to New York for the last two weeks at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women. (<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/>). Working with trade union activists from around the world, they are confronting the Harper government's anti-women policies.... Access to education is a particularly important issue for Aboriginal children.... The UNCSW theme also recognizes that education is not in itself sufficient to ensure women's equality in the labour market. In Canada, 60 per cent of minimum wage workers are women, and women constitute a majority of part-time, temporary and precarious workers. In fact, 38 per cent of women in Canada have incomes that are so low, that they do not have to pay any income tax. As a consequence, they do not benefit from tax cuts.... [T]o address the issue of missing and murdered Aboriginal women...the money is going to fund RCMP and Department of Justice general initiatives rather than any Aboriginal initiatives.

—*PSAC*, "PSAC women confront Harper government at the United Nations," March 3, 2011

Due to these and other regressive policies, how long could the Harper government last? It was brought down by a non-confidence motion based on its contempt for

Parliament, but if the motion hadn't been made there, it would have been made for non-confidence in the Tories' 2011 budget.

MPs voted 156-145 in favour of a Liberal motion [March 25, 2011] citing Stephen Harper's minority Tories for contempt of Parliament and expressing non-confidence in the government.... The contempt charge marks a first for a national government anywhere in the Commonwealth.... The opposition parties wasted no time pounding home their campaign message, slamming the prime minister as a secretive leader who abuses power and leads a government plagued by scandal.... [Liberal Opposition Leader Michael] Ignatieff kicked off debate on the confidence motion this morning, accusing Harper of subverting democracy. "You have spoken, Mr. Speaker. The committee has spoken, and now the House must speak with a clear voice," Ignatieff told the Commons. "And it must say that a government that breaks the rules and conceals facts from the Canadian people does not deserve to remain in office."

—*The Tyee*, "Harper government topples on contempt motion, triggering May election," Canadian Press, March 25, 2011

So, after reading about how women's rights have gone backwards under the Harper regime, could it be trusted with another government? (Not a minority, and certainly not a majority.) Here's what Murray Dobbin wrote in another article about the mistreatment of women under Harper: "No other part of society has suffered from Harper's contempt for democracy and his determination to turn back the clock as have women." ("The Tories' War on Canada's Poor," Rolf Auer) Well, Harper is seeking a majority government, and he wants to achieve it on the very backs of the women he has repressed.

Stephen Harper embarks on his fourth national election campaign in seven years with a mission to finally secure a majority government. And he plans to achieve that majority by convincing more women to vote Conservative.... But the Conservative Leader hasn't won women over yet. That same Nanos poll shows 27 per cent of them are undecided, as opposed to 17 per cent of men. Undecided women are "the one group of voters who are up for grabs," pollster Nik Nanos said. "This is the group of voters who are likely to move around during the election and who, for all intents and purposes, will decide who wins and by what margin.... All four parties will spend the next five weeks driving home their core messages to voters. The part of the Tory

message that emphasizes money for the military and for new prisons doesn't really resonate with most women, whose focus is on providing for their families.

—*The Globe and Mail*, “Tories see majority in gaining women’s vote,” John Ibbitson and Joe Friesen, March 26, 2011

So what’s it going to be? Billions and billions of dollars on fighter jets and prisons? Or perhaps instead a national child care program?