

# **International Women's Day Breakfast**

## **B.C. Federation of Labour**

**March 8, 2011**

### **Remarks by Shelagh Day**

I have been working on women's human rights since the early seventies, in this province, and with many national organizations. I have seen advances, and, like the previous speakers – Dawn Black and Judy Darcy - I have been fortunate enough to have played some part in making some of those advances happen.

But I have hard things to say this morning. While International Women's Day is a day for celebrating women and our accomplishments, it is also an important day for reflection, and for reckoning. Where are we now in the struggle for equality? What fights are before us? What do we need to do now?

I confess that I have been surprised in recent years, because I did not think that we could move so far backwards so fast. The neo-liberal restructuring of the last fifteen years has affected women in so many profoundly negative ways. I believe it has taken some time for us just to absorb how the current neo-liberal thinking - which seeks to reduce the role of government, push aside the collective values of sharing and caring, and make the market supreme – profoundly contradicts the value of egalitarianism, and the rights to equality, security of the person and an adequate standard of living for

everyone that Canada has embraced by ratifying international human rights instruments.

The general erosion of social programs and social protections has negatively affected both men and women. But it has particularly harsh impacts for women because social programs give tangible reality to the right to equality. They level the playing field by turning illness, unemployment, childbirth, single status, old age into affordable – or at least not catastrophic – incidents of being human, or female. For women in particular, social programs have been fundamental creators of equality. Income security programs soften our economic dependence on men, and health care, home care, child care, have shifted some of the burden of care-giving from individual women's shoulders to the state, permitting us to move in greater numbers into paid employment and higher education.

In 2011, the neo-liberal erosion of the foundations of women's equality – strong social programs and investment in the “care economy” – is paired with the overt hostility to women's human rights of the Harper administration.

When I read my morning paper, I find that some time soon we might be faced with a federal election, in which, the pollsters tell us, Stephen Harper has a good chance of winning a majority government. I will be blunt with you. Women cannot afford to let that happen.

Let me just review a few of the things that Stephen Harper has done to set women back in the four years that he has run the government.

First of all he has both cut programs and spent money in ways that do not take women's lives and needs into account.

- He cancelled the national child care agreements with the provinces that had taken years to negotiate and that women have fought for forty years. Instead of publicly regulated child care spaces, women got a taxable \$100 a month payment to parents of kids under 6. For women who know the real cost of childcare, this amount is laughable.
- He spent money in a stimulus budget - which the International Monetary Fund said fell far short of the 2% of GDP that governments were encouraged to spend post-recession – that offered nothing to women, since it was focussed on supporting jobs in construction and other male-dominated industries, jobs which are still not held by women. As many women pointed out, investments in social infrastructure – child care, home care, and other social programs, would also have stimulated the economy.

Instead of spending on child care, and other social programs, Harper wants to spend 1.3 billion for security for the G8/G20 summits (this is the security which caused one of the worst violations of the civil rights of peaceful protesters in Canadian history), 16 billion for 65 new F-35 fighter jets, and 1 billion dollars a year for the next five years for an estimated 4,189 new federal prison cells that will be required because, as a part of their law and order agenda, the Harper government has taken away the discretion of judges to allow credit for time served prior to sentencing.<sup>1</sup> These are not women's priorities.

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin Page, Parliamentary Budget Officer, *The Funding Requirement and Impact of the "Truth in Sentencing Act" on the Correctional System in Canada*, June 22, 2010, online at: [http://www2.parl.gc.ca/sites/pbo-dpb/documents/TISA\\_C-25.pdf](http://www2.parl.gc.ca/sites/pbo-dpb/documents/TISA_C-25.pdf).

Secondly, Harper has attacked women's rights, our ability to use our rights, and our ability to speak out and participate in political life and in policy development. He has done this in vengeful and bullying ways.

- Harper eliminated the Court Challenges Program – one of the most admired programs in the world because it actually made constitutional equality rights usable by women and other equality-seekers. Now we have constitutional equality rights that are praised internationally, rights that we fought for, but now cannot afford to use.
- Harper cut the budget of Status of Women Canada, eliminated its research policy branch entirely, closed 12 of 16 offices across the country and changed the criteria for funding for women's NGOs. Women's NGOs now cannot receive any money for advocacy, lobbying, or research. There is now a long list of women's organizations that have closed their doors or are struggling to stay alive.
- For example, despite the ground-breaking work that the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) has done through the Sisters in Spirit project to collect information and create a database on missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls in Canada, Status of Women Canada cut the funding for this project. There are now 582 missing and murdered Aboriginal women in the database and both NWAC and Walk4Justice estimate that the actual number is much higher. This is a catastrophic and continuing violation of women's human rights in Canada. But now NWAC is being punished by Harper for bringing to light the massive and systemic pattern of racism and sexualized violence against Aboriginal women and girls.

- The government has also gutted the right of women federal public servants to pay equity, by introducing the “Public Sector Equitable Compensation Act” which was deeply buried in the 2009 budget. This so-called “equitable act” is scheduled to come into force in the fall of 2011.

This is a very shortened list, but there is a common pattern in Harper’s actions: silence critical voices, suppress information, block avenues for asserting rights, push women back.

What will precipitate us into an election is the upcoming budget. Any nation’s economic model, any nation’s budget is a statement of values. Canada is redistributing wealth upwards and income inequality and poverty rates have increased rapidly over the last decade according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.<sup>2</sup> Today only 45% of men and 39% of women can expect to receive unemployment insurance benefits if they lose their jobs. The last time unemployed women and men were this exposed to economic risk was in the 1940s. Across the country we are seeing dramatic increases in food bank and meal program use. Welfare benefit levels are at a historic low, and in this province, with the highest poverty rates in the country, we know well that women receiving social assistance cannot feed and house themselves and their kids adequately.

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<sup>2</sup> OECD, “Country Note: Canada”, *Growing Unequal: Income Distribution and Poverty in OECD Countries*, Geneva: OECD, 2008, online at: [www.oecd.org/els/social/inequality](http://www.oecd.org/els/social/inequality). The OECD said: “After 20 years of continuous decline, both inequality and poverty rates have increased rapidly in the past 10 years, now reaching levels above the OECD average”. Inequality in household income increased significantly and poverty increased for all age groups. The OECD further noted that taxes and transfers do not reduce inequality in Canada as much as in other OECD countries or as much as they previously did in this country.

Spending money on corporate tax cuts, fighter jets and jail cells, while ignoring the real inequality in our country is not what women need. A commitment to women's human rights and women's security provide an entirely different vision. Starting from the reality of women's conditions, many different women's conditions, permits us to imagine a state and a world that is more egalitarian and more secure, not just for women, but for everyone. It is time to shift the paradigm, to allocate our resources to fulfill the basic human rights of Canada's people, to make a woman-centered budget, which values adequate food, clothing and shelter for everyone, adequate incomes, child care, access to rights, and the safety that comes with equality and collective responsibility for everyone's well-being. And it is surely time to elect a woman-supporting, woman-respecting government, that is committed to women's human rights.

Women and women's organizations have become too siloed, too separated from each other. It is time for us to pull ourselves together, to take the risk of solidarity. I am very angry this morning. It is time to fight.