'Simple justice': 50 years later, Monique Bégin reflects on the Royal Commission on the Status of Women [1]

Released in 1970, the report included 167 recommendations for reducing gender inequality

Author: Gutnick, David

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EXCERPTS

In the spring of 1966, the formidable Laura Sabia, then president of the Canadian Federation of University Women, gave Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson a warning: "If you don't do something about discrimination against women in Canada, two million of us will hit the streets."

That was the last thing Pearson needed.

Bombs were already going off in Quebec; rising nationalism there was putting the future of the country at risk. That had already prompted the establishment of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism.

And now — here were the women.

In 1967, they got their royal commission.

The commissioners — five women and two men, headed by Ottawa journalist Florence Bird — criss-crossed the country for six months, hearing from women about the problems they faced in Canadian society.

They sifted through hundreds of briefs and more than 1,000 letters, before tabling their report 50 years ago this December.

Monique Bégin, a 31-year old-sociologist from Montreal, was hired as the commission's executive secretary. She pretty much ran the show.

Bégin, now 84, a retired university professor and former Liberal cabinet minister who, as health minister, brought us the Canada Health Act, says her experience on the commission was one of the highlights of her life.

David Gutnick's documentary, "More Explosive Than Any Terrorist's Time Bomb," airs on The Sunday Edition on March 8, International Women's Day.

Here are some excerpts from Gutnick's interview with Bégin, condensed and edited for clarity.

Gender roles

In the early '60s in Canada, women, whatever their training and their abilities, were confined to basically four or five typical women's occupations: saleswoman in a store, teacher, nurse, secretary and factory worker. So I became a teacher. I remember learning that when I marry, I would lose my job immediately. It was just very wrong. And such were the times.

Commission impetus

It was the great successful times of the '60s that brought together the impetus to push for a Royal Commission on the Status of Women. Of course, Prime Minister Pearson's cabinet had only one woman, Judi LaMarsh. LaMarsh, who was secretary of state, was absolutely in favour of a commission. But the name of her memoir, The Bird in the Gilded Cage, says it all. Cabinet was dead set against a [royal commission]. So it's really women who kept pushing and finally obtained it on Feb. 3, 1967. Cabinet appointed seven commissioners: Florence Bayard Bird, chairperson; Lola M. Lange, Jeanne Lapointe, Elsie Gregory MacGill, Doris Ogilvie, Jacques Henripin and Donald Gordon, Jr.

Hearing from women

We had to reach out to Canadian women who have never been in a royal commission and don't even know what it means because fundamentally that's masculine. It's never for women.

Our philosophy was participatory democracy. It was crystal clear for us that we wanted ordinary women, that it was their royal

commission, and we needed to hear them. That spirit nurtured everything.

The meetings across Canada were organized to be the simplest, friendliest type of gatherings. If you want me to tell you that we had cookies and coffee, the answer is no. We received at least 468 briefs from individuals and groups.

We made sure that in the West, we had Aboriginal women come. That was brand new. I did not know that in Halifax, N.S., there was a black community called Africville until representatives came and presented briefs. We were discovering Canada through these women, it was quite extraordinary. We learned of all the legal injustices to women farmers who cannot benefit in the income tax of what their husband receives. It was a great education: they, women, were just speaking of daily life, the problems of injustices at work and in their pay.

'Equality was the key word'

One very, very important topic and a major topic in feminism today is all forms of violence to women. It was never mentioned in our public hearings. We didn't even have a chapter on that in the report because then it was considered part of private life. That is the biggest change in feminism of today compared to the time of the royal commission.

We adopted a kind of very down-to-earth, practical approach. Equality was the key word. Simple justice. When the report came out we presented it to Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau. He had passed a law on abortion, which was a big, big improvement on the previous condition — when there was nothing — but it was less than what we were recommending. He told us that he would not touch abortion for the rest of the time in government because it was the most divisive topic he had ever dealt with.

Commission reaction

[On Dec. 7, 1970] there was an extraordinary text by Anthony Westell in the Toronto Star:

At 2:11 p.m. in the House of Commons Monday, the Prime Minister rose, bowed politely to the Speaker, and tabled a bomb, already primed and ticking.

The bomb is called the Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada, and it is packed with more explosive potential than any device manufactured by terrorists.

… As a political blockbuster, it is more powerful than the famous report of the controversial commission on bilingualism and biculturalism.

But controversial as some of these proposals may seem now, they will quickly be accepted in substance, if not in every detail. They are reasonable answers to real problems, which can no longer be ignored.

The immediate aftermath of the commission was as exciting for me to live as the commission itself because, for example, Grace Hartman, who was the vice-president of the biggest public union of Canada, CUPE, immediately adopted the report, officially adopted it at the union's annual meeting. She wrote a document [on] how to implement the recommendations that was distributed all across the unions in Canada.

Years after, in the '90s, I was in India at a conference, and some of the women had copies of our report. How did it get there? Something special happened with the report of that commission. It was a ticking bomb.

For me, it was just common sense ... Women still have a long way to go. Men must change: that's a culture of transformation. I'm sorry, but that's what I think.

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