

That was then...this is now [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

If they weren't fuelled by such anger and dismay, the protests might almost resemble a warm walk down nostalgia lane, scenes from the '60s and '70s when uppity women were called "libbers" for their subversive belief in equality with men.

There they were by the thousands throughout the fall and into December, signs in hand, protesting in cities across the country.

"Are we equal? NO," read one of the placards at an Ottawa demonstration held Dec. 10 (International Human Rights Day), a rally with the slogan "Women will not go quietly back to the kitchen." The rallying cry, heard on the 25th anniversary of Canada's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, echoed those heady days 40 years ago when the granddaughters of suffragettes were starting to rediscover women's uppitness.

Except that the protesters were marching in 2006. And the Ottawa march was just one event in an accumulating mass of outrage across the country that has greeted the Conservative government's decision to effectively disenfranchise Status of Women Canada.

In recent months, the 36-year-old federal agency has had its operating budget cut by \$5 million, or 40 per cent, in what the government called "administrative efficiencies." These efficiencies include a reduction of staff, cuts in the production of information and promotional material and a reduction of public consultation. In addition, its Policy Research Fund will be discontinued, terminating all SWC-funded independent research on gender policy.

Beyond these changes, SWC's very *raison d'être* -- the promotion of "gender equality," its official aim since the day it was created -- has been demolished. Although the agency website has yet to be updated to reflect the exclusion, "equality" has been removed from the wording of the SWC mandate, said Status of Women Minister Bev Oda in December. The Conservative government, she explained, believes all government departments and agencies should promote equality, not just SWC.

But the greatest blow to SWC has been in the impact it has had on Canadian women through its Women's Program Fund, its backbone as a funding agency. While the money in the fund remains untouched, it will no longer assist any groups engaged in advocacy or lobbying -- that is, most of the organizations who have to date benefited from the fund. For the first time, though, SWC's Program Fund will be able to give grants to for-profit organizations -- business start-ups, for example, though not job training programs offered by co-ops.

To reflect the agency's reduced status, the Conservative government is also closing 12 of SWC's 16 offices across Canada. The remaining four (in Moncton, Montreal, Ottawa and Edmonton) will function as regional offices.

In the House of Commons, Stéphane Dion devoted his first question as Leader of the Opposition to the issue of women's rights and the closing of SWC offices. And women, along with sympathetic men, have been turning out in numbers across the country to protest.

They rallied in Saskatoon outside the office of Conservative MP Carol Skelton. Members of the Canadian Federation of University Women demonstrated in Hamilton. In Winnipeg, they held a funeral for SWC.

Just more than a month ago, a Halifax woman launched a website, *thewomenareangry.org*, that has received well over 20,000 hits. Another website called *statusreport.ca*, started up by Audra Williams of Halifax and Pam Kapoor of Ottawa to act as a kind of protest clearinghouse, attracted more than 42,000 hits in less than three months.

In October, the executive director of Oxfam-Canada wrote to Oda about the decision to no longer fund advocacy and lobby groups. "All voices, including those marginalized because of race, economic standing and gender inequality, must be heard and valued," wrote Robert Fox. "I would urge you to return to Cabinet and to caucus and make the case that public funding for advocacy has contributed significantly to the just, open and tolerant society of which we are so proud ... and that women's groups in Canada should continue to receive public support for their vital public policy, advocacy and lobby work in defence of women's rights and women's equality."

And in St. John's, where a newspaper report quoted one woman who said she was so angry steam was coming out of her ears, the director of a women's centre said the needs for women -- which SWC has addressed -- were still enormous. Overflowing shelters and the continuing salary gap attest to them.

"We can go on and list ad infinitum what makes us unequal," Lorraine Sheehan told the St. John's Telegram. "To say we have written in the constitution an equality clause doesn't make us equal any more than having a peace bond protects us from being harmed or murdered -- they're words."

The reaction has not been confined to Canadian borders, either. Says Kapoor, "I think it's important to point out that the whole world is watching." Available on the website she co-founded is a letter written on Dec. 6 to Prime Minister Stephen Harper by an extraordinary group of six women, all of them Nobel Peace Prize winners during the past 30 years.

"We women Peace Laureates of the Nobel Women's Initiative," they say, "are writing to express our concerns about recent decisions which may jeopardize the historic efforts by Canada to achieve women's full equality, at home and abroad."

The six -- Betty Williams and Mairead Corrigan Maguire (Ireland), Rigoberta Menchu Tum (Guatemala), Jody Williams (United States), Shirin Ebadi (Iran) and Wangari Maathai (Kenya) -- continue: "As international advocates for peace and women's rights, for many years we have relied on the Canadian government's leadership on these issues in the international arena. Canada has put in place a number of key domestic safeguards, and has an internationally acclaimed human rights legacy to its name. It is the apparent rollback of this leadership through recent decisions by your government that we find very disturbing and why we feel it is important to share our preoccupations directly with you."

In short, there has been a groundswell.

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- reprinted from the Ottawa Citizen

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