

# A call to arms for women's rights lobby [CA-QC] <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

See text below.

## EXCERPTS

York University political scientist Barbara Cameron was sitting in her small home office in January immersed in sabbatical research when a newspaper story jolted her out of academic contemplation.

The Quebec Court of Appeal had ruled that Ottawa's use of Employment Insurance to pay for maternity and parental benefits was unconstitutional because it treads on the province's jurisdiction over social programs.

While the media didn't give the court ruling much attention, Cameron, an expert on federalism and social policy, knew the impact: This was a serious attack on one of the country's first national programs designed to help women gain social and economic equality in Canada. The decision could threaten Ottawa's ability to create new national social programs for child care and disability supports.

Cameron was incensed. But where could she turn?

Then came the news last week that the National Action Committee on the Status of Women owes Ottawa some \$30,000 in unpaid taxes and penalties, and is just too broke to answer its phone.

This was not a surprise: Its last president was forced to resign in the fall of 2001 because NAC had run out of money to pay her. NAC, the national voice for feminists in Canada since 1972, has been effectively defunct ever since.

The Quebec court ruling, which caught Cameron and other feminists in English Canada by surprise, threw it all into sharp relief.

Cameron, who has been active in the women's movement since the Royal Commission on the Status of Women released its landmark report in 1970, knew that the Quebec ruling, if not challenged by Ottawa, could pave the way for other provinces or even business groups to pull out of the program and weaken maternity and parental benefits across the country. It could also be used to justify federal inaction on other measures to advance women's equality.

With the support of a handful of feminists from across the country, Cameron created a Web site to alert others and urge them to petition Ottawa to appeal. (The petition also calls on Ottawa to negotiate a separate parental leave program for Quebec that doesn't weaken the federal government's ability to deal with women's equality in the rest of Canada.)

In addition, Cameron started a Web discussion about creating a new way for Canadian women to monitor and speak up on such national issues in the future.

"We see the Web site as a way to come in contact with other feminists who share our view that this is a crucial period in Canadian politics when strong voices for women's equality must be raised once again," Cameron wrote.

She was overwhelmed by the response.

Cameron doesn't know how many people lobbied Ottawa because of her call to action, but the federal government filed its appeal on Feb. 23. Meanwhile, more than 100 people have e-mailed their desire to help build a new national women's movement. And many of those who responded were members of provincial organizations and national women's professional groups, like Women in Science and Technology, suggesting an even broader interest.

Freelance editor Fina Rao was too busy juggling new motherhood and work to notice the Quebec court ruling in January. Because she is self-employed and didn't qualify for maternity benefits when her son Daniel was born 11 months ago, she took just four weeks off before returning to her home office in Maple, north of Toronto.

Rao, who paid into the federal EI program for 15 years before launching her own business two years ago, is among the 39 per cent of women who don't qualify for maternity benefits, according to a 2003 Statistics Canada study based on 2001 data.

Of those who received no financial support when their babies were born, 5 per cent were self-employed; 12 per cent hadn't worked the minimum 600 hours in the previous year to be eligible; and 23 per cent were not in the paid labour force.

Rao wishes self-employed people could opt to pay into EI.

Quebec's former Parti Quebecois government passed parental leave legislation in 2001 that would have increased benefits and expanded coverage to part-time and self-employed workers in that province. But the improvements were never implemented because Quebec was unable to convince Ottawa to free up EI premiums to pay for them. Frustrated by the lack of negotiations, Quebec finally took the federal government to court in 2002. And in January, the Quebec Court of Appeal made its unanimous ruling.

Rao, like most Canadians outside Quebec, was unaware of that province's struggles to enhance parental benefits. And she hadn't heard NAC was no longer active to fuel a national debate on the topic or to lobby for women's rights generally.

University of Toronto doctoral student Sandra Tam, who is writing her thesis on young women workers in global labour markets, says there is a false perception that women's battle for equality has been won.

"This is a very strange time for young women because they are being led to believe that they can be the CEO, but they're not told about the choices they will still be forced to make," she says.

"We are often mothers as well as workers, and young women aren't seeing how these two worlds overlap. Where's the child care, where are the maternity leave policies, and protection for part-time and self-employed workers?"

The need for an active national organization to lobby for women is as great as ever, says Tam, 32. Without it, Tam believes local groups &mdash; like Toronto's Status of Women Committee, which may be folded to make way for a broader equity roundtable in the city &mdash; become more vulnerable.

Tam, a member of the city's status of women committee for the past three years, agrees women need to connect with other equity-seeking groups. But she thinks women's voices still need to be heard separately and that with the Internet there is huge potential to organize differently and more broadly than ever before.

Former NAC president Judy Rebick, who has written a book on the history of the women's movement in Canada that's expected to hit stores next fall, believes a new wave of feminism is about to wash over the country.

"This situation &mdash; the Quebec Court of Appeal decision &mdash; has really brought the absence of a national women's voice in this country into sharp relief. Here we're having a discussion about maternity and parental leave and not a single women's group is quoted in the press," she notes.

But Rebick isn't sure reviving NAC is the right way to go.

"I think we need a new strategy for the women's movement. We have a whole new generation of feminists now and we have a very different environment."

Economist Marjorie Griffin Cohen says the Quebec court decision carries "enormous potential for disaster."

Cohen, who is chair of women's studies at Simon Fraser University, says that although Quebec has many progressive social policies, the court took a very male view of employment and what constitutes a legitimate absence from work.

If NAC had been active, it would have raised a national alarm over this dispute long before it ended up in court, Cohen speculates.

"NAC had built up enormous expertise on policy at the federal level and it had strong links to Quebec women," says Cohen, "A national feminist movement is crucial. Canada is suffering because we don't have one now."

NAC has been a powerful force for women nationally on many issues over the years, she notes.

It was responsible for ensuring that women's equality rights were included in the Constitution when it was repatriated in 1982. It highlighted the economic risks to service sector workers during the free trade debates of the late 1980s. And it was the first progressive group to oppose the Charlottetown Accord in the early 1990s because it felt the deal would be bad for aboriginals.

But NAC and many other social justice organizations were stung in 1998 by the federal government's decision to stop funding advocacy groups. As a result, NAC lost about \$250,000 in operating funds overnight, money it was never able to recoup through membership dues and fundraising.

Last month, members of the acting NAC executive submitted a proposal to Status of Women Canada for \$216,300 to hold a national meeting in Ottawa next fall or early in 2005. The purpose of the meeting would be to discuss the future of the organization, said NAC secretary Sunjee John.

NAC's last president Denise Campbell, who was just 26 when she was elected in 2001, says she had hoped to reach out to more women and rebuild for the challenges of the global age. But NAC's funding crisis and organizational inertia ultimately ended her presidency.

Campbell says she is excited that the Quebec court decision has awakened the slumbering women's movement.

The Women's Equality Web site set up by Barbara Cameron can be found at <http://www.atkinson.yorku.ca/~bcameron> [2].

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

**Region:** Canada [3]

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**Tags:** gender [5]

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