

It's been a terrible decade under Stephen Harper: Porter ^[1]

Author: Porter, Catherine

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EXCERPTS

Canada has a feminist prime minister-designate.

I'm still in shock.

The first thing Justin Trudeau plans to do is name his cabinet — half of whom will be women.

Can you believe it? I can't either.

Trudeau has promised to draft the country's first national action plan on violence against women, call an inquiry into our missing and murdered aboriginal sisters and, within 100 days, get started on a national framework for child care.

Child care. Remember that? That was the first thing the Conservative government destroyed when they came to power nine long, cold years ago. It was Harper's first cluster bomb in the War on Women.

He not only ripped apart the country's fledgling national program — which feminists have been demanding for more than four decades — but his government stopped funding research into child care, presumably because it could be used to bolster another plan.

"The child-care movement became enemies of the state during the Harper era. Who would have ever imagined that?" said Martha Friendly, the country's leading expert on child-care policy. Her Childcare Research and Resource Unit, then hosted by the University of Toronto, lost its government funding. She put her library into boxes, moved into a basement, and crowdfunded her last major report.

"It was hell," she says.

Feminists across the country are emerging from their bomb shelters, and blinking in the stark light of day to assess the damage of the past decade.

It's bad.

The Harper government stopped funding research into women's equality. It shuttered up a dozen of its Status of Women offices, and stripped the word "equality" from its mandate. It cut off feminist groups who were lobbying for change.

"We've lost the voices of women working in communities, on the front lines," says Kate McInturff, a senior researcher at the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. She had been the executive director of the Feminist Alliance For International Action (FAFIA), tracking our government's progress on UN commitments to women's rights, before the Conservatives cut its funding. She fired her staff and fired herself.

"I just hope (Trudeau) restores Status of Women's mandate to fund research and advocacy," she says. "It's the best way to ensure programs are effective."

What about the Court Challenges Program? That helped poor women take on discriminatory laws and practices, by paying part of their legal costs. The Harper government cut that in 2006.

"We've had to scramble for pro bono assistance," says Amanda Dale, executive director of the Barbra Schlifer Clinic. "We stayed up and did it instead of showering and sleeping. It's just not feasible to raise money you need on a case-by-case basis."

She's called the last nine years "oxygenless."

More damage: In 2009, the government passed the Public Sector Equitable Compensation Act, which stripped from women in the public sector the right to appeal to the Canadian Human Rights Commission when they discovered they were being paid less than their male peers. They had to take it up with their union instead.

In 2012, the Harper regime dismantled the long gun registry, erected to protect women from being shot to death by enraged men like

Marc Lépine. (The registry saved the lives of 600 people every year, according to gun control advocate Wendy Cukier.)

Who knows what other damage will surface, once Trudeau begins to consult with feminists? Most have been shut out of Ottawa for a decade. The Harper government didn't care what they thought about anything. We, like scientists and environmentalists, were brushed off as freeloaders and whiners.

"We used to meet with cabinet ministers," says Doris Mae Oulton, president of the Canadian Federation of University Women. "We used to bring our issues forward . . ."

We all have high hopes for the Trudeau regime. We hope he works to make Canada safer for women, and more fair. We hope he pushes business to pay women as much as men with legislation (a recent internal presentation by the Status of Women Canada, acquired by CBC news, stated Canadian women aged 45 to 54 make \$23,600 less than their male counterparts, on average). We hope he brings more women into not just cabinet posts, but department leadership positions, and changes our electoral system to finally herald more women into parliament. (On Monday, women's representation in the House of Commons edged up one measly percentage point to 26.)

But, to start, we'll settle for an invitation to talk. "That alone, would be the biggest change," says Dale.

It's been a terrible decade. Thank God it's over.

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