

Federal Election 2004



PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND
Advisory Council on the Status of
WOMEN

Legal Aid

Divorce Reform

Abortion Rights

Unpaid Work

Early Childhood
Care &
Education

Parental Benefits

Women's Voices

Electoral Reform

A Guide to the Issues

Chairperson's Message

It is election time again. Time for women to make their issues heard and their votes count.

The PEI Advisory Council on the Status of Women has a mandate to help Island women move towards equality. That goal requires change at the federal level.

Our members are in contact with women throughout Island communities and all across Canada. As a result of our work, we have named eight key election issues: These are: 1) Legal Aid, 2) Divorce Reform, 3) Abortion Rights, 4) Unpaid Work, 5) Early Childhood Care and Education, 6) Parental Benefits, 7) Women's Voices, and 8) Electoral Reform.

Right now, Canadian women do not have a national voice. Therefore, it is up to each of us to make sure that every candidate hears about our concerns and that their parties become accountable for addressing those concerns.

I hope that you will use this guide to challenge candidates on the issues that matter to you. Please share the information and ask questions. Be sure to check in for answers.

Remember to vote in the 2004 Election!

Kirstin Lund, Chairperson



Legal Aid *"When my ex-partner committed a crime, he automatically got legal aid. But, when I wanted to do a separation agreement and settle things for my children and me, I couldn't get legal aid."*

The provinces and federal government share costs for criminal legal aid. Any income-eligible person charged with a crime is entitled to legal aid and the majority of those clients are men. Things are different for family legal aid programs. The majority of clients are women and each province must fund its own program. PEI spends the lowest amount per capita in the country. The result is that only women with low incomes who are in very violent situations can get help to settle property and custody matters. While those who are accused of a crime are able to exercise their right to legal representation, women are not able to exercise their right to a fair settlement.

Ask your candidate:

Will your party implement a national legal aid program that includes funding for family legal aid?

Divorce Reform *"I left my partner because he abused me. Now, I need clear guidelines about the care of our children so that I can stay safe."*

The federal government introduced *Bill C-22, An Act to Amend the Divorce Act* last year but Parliament perogued after its second reading. The changes proposed in this bill would have had a significant impact on Canadian women and children, particularly those leaving abusive or violent situations.

The *Divorce Act* does require changes and *Bill C-22* took some important steps. For example, it introduced criteria for applying the best interests of the child. However, there were problems with the bill. It did not recognize the reality that, before and after separation, mothers are most often the primary caregivers and that many families live with abuse and violence. It eliminated the legally recognized terms "custody" and "access." Women were worried what that could mean for them and their children.

Ask your candidate:

Will your party reform divorce law to ensure that the rights of all family members - fathers, mothers, and children - are protected?

Abortion Rights *"When I needed an abortion, I had to go to New Brunswick and I had to pay for the travel and medical costs."*

According to the *Canada Health Act*, all Canadians are entitled to equal access to medical care. In 1988, the Supreme Court struck down Canada's *Abortion Act*. Despite these realities, no Island hospital will provide abortions. Costs for out-of-province abortions are only covered after the consent of two physicians. And, the Island has no information source to help women make decisions about their reproductive health.

Those women who can afford it receive abortions off-Island. Many others, though, cannot afford that option and find it difficult to obtain the "consent" required for health coverage. When women cannot gain access to abortion in a timely and cooperative manner, their health is put at risk and their rights are denied.

Ask your candidate:

Will your party ensure access to abortion in all Canadian jurisdictions, including PEI?

Unpaid Work *"My government actually penalizes me for taking on necessary work."*

Women do about 2/3 of the unpaid work in Canada. And, they suffer consequences for that work.

Of course, when women take time to do unpaid caregiving work, household work, and community service, they give up earning opportunities. But, they also face economic penalties built into our nation's institutions.

Our tax system is discriminatory. For example, if a woman cares for her own children, she is not eligible for a child care expense tax credit and a spousal deduction does not have the same value as a personal deduction.

Unpaid workers cannot contribute to their own registered retirement savings or pensions under the *Canada Pension Act*.

Even our *Census* is biased towards paid workers. It does ask three questions about time spent on unpaid work but those questions are narrow in scope and do not carry the same weight as questions about paid work.

Ask your candidate:

How will your party recognize and value the unpaid work of women?

Early Childhood *"I don't know why Canada doesn't take better care of its children."*

Canada is one of the only industrialized countries without a national child care program. This lack of commitment forces women into being the consumers and providers of market-driven services. That means high fees for parents and low wages and poor working conditions for workers.

Recently, Canada and the provinces developed a new initiative to fund early childhood care and education services. At its current funding levels, though, it does not even come close to the amount required to offer the quality, universal service recommended by child care professionals who understand the value of the early years.

Experts estimate that such a service would cost about \$5 billion/year - about 1% of Canada gross domestic product. That is what other countries typically spend on similar services. So far, Canada seems unwilling to make that investment even though it regularly invests similar amounts in other programs and services.

Ask your candidate:

What will your party do to make parental benefits accessible to women?

Parental Benefits *"I want to start a family but I am not eligible for the benefits I would need."*

Maternity and parental benefits are tied into a woman's history with the *Employment Insurance Fund*. That policy discriminates against two key groups of women:

- 1) Those who have non-standard work arrangements like part-time, self-employed, and seasonal workers.
- 2) The most vulnerable and marginalized women like teenaged mothers, women with little education, and single mothers.

This method of calculating eligibility means that women who are past their child bearing years and men of any age are actually more likely to be eligible for benefits!

Between lack of eligibility and the low wage replacement (55% of the recipient's insurable income), women are finding it difficult to have children and maintain their family's financial security.

This is of great concern for women in Atlantic Canada.

Ask your candidate:

Will your party develop a national, universal, and quality child care program?

Women's Voices *"When was the last time you heard a woman speaking on a national issue from an equality perspective?"*

Women's voices used to be a big part of national debates. That is no longer true. The federal government's gender policies and funding approaches have meant that national groups like the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women (CACSW), which no longer exists, and the National Action Committee (NAC) no longer research, analyze, and communicate on equality issues relevant to Canadian women.

That work has been channeled into a federal government department called Status of Women Canada that does not have the relationship with the community and the freedom of expression that arms-lengths groups once enjoyed. All federal government departments are supposed to use gender analysis in their policy development processes but where is the accountability?

At the community level, grassroots groups rely on project funding that may limit their responsiveness and flexibility. All these changes from the past decade have silenced women's voices. Some groups have even called for a new Royal Commission on the Status of Women to re-examine the state of equality in Canada.

Ask your candidate:

How will your party ensure that women's voices are returned to national debates?

The PEI Advisory Council on the Status of Women is an arms-length provincial government agency that works for equality and supports women's full and active participation in social, legal, cultural, economic, and political spheres of life.

Electoral Reform *"Women make up over 50% of the population. Why do they make up less than 25% of the House of Commons?"*

Canada's electoral system needs an overhaul. Despite women's individual efforts and achievements, they have not achieved fair representation as a group and, thus, they are denied real political power.

Canada's political institutions and processes were established at a time when women were not even considered persons. Now, in the traditional "winner take all" voting system, women are still being excluded. That's a problem for everyone.

Women's experiences and priorities are different but their perspectives are not being represented and their votes are not being counted. That is undemocratic and brings the legitimacy of all our decisions into question.

Across the country, there are calls to reform the system itself in order to provide real representation. Evidence shows that systems designed to provide proportional representation can increase fairness and accountability for many groups, including women. Women can win elections and do the work - given the opportunity.

Ask your candidate:

How will your party work towards electoral reform?

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