

COMMUNITY VOICES

Canada's New \$50 Bill Highlights Women's Equality

But how many Canadian women will see the new \$50 note?

Lorraine Neal is a freelance writer living in British Columbia. She can be reached at lorrainejneal@yahoo.com and on the web at www.writesideup.ca.



Figure 19. Image courtesy of Bank of Canada, Bank Note Communication and Compliance Team.



Figure 20. Image courtesy of Bank of Canada, Bank Note Communication and Compliance Team.

When the Bank of Canada, our country's note-issuing authority, unveiled the new \$50 bill on November 17, 2004, discordant thoughts dodged about in my head. I had recently read a damning report by the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women that Canada is not doing enough to ensure women's economic equality. I was baffled and dismayed that the popular media gave the report limited attention. Then, the new \$50 note was launched to some fanfare for its celebration of human rights, particularly women's equality in Canada.

The bill, in case you have not seen it (and I believe too many Canadians have not), extols the rights and freedoms of Canadians as embodied in historical figures, primarily Canada's longest-serving prime minister and human rights supporter, William Lyon Mackenzie King. King was a proponent of the Famous Five, those unshakable Canadian women who forced the British Privy Council to finally declare that women are indeed persons in 1929 (see sidebar on The Famous Five: A Brief History). The women are represented on the note in the form of Canada's statue located both on Parliament Hill in Ottawa and Olympic Plaza in Calgary, Alberta. To his credit, King appointed the first woman, Cairine Wilson, to the Senate in 1930 and under his administration the Government of Canada introduced unemployment insurance in 1940 and the family allowance in 1944. The \$50 note also inscribes the

Thérèse Casgrain Volunteer Award, named for Thérèse Casgrain who campaigned throughout her life for

women's rights, world peace, and social justice and became the first woman to head a political party in Quebec in 1951.

The Famous Five: A Brief History

The Canadian political landscape was forever transformed on October 18, 1929. Women were finally declared "persons" under the law and granted the right to be appointed to the Senate thanks to the formidable spirit of five Alberta women, known as the "Famous Five."

An 1876 British Common Law ruling was the clog that prevented Canadian women from taking active part in public office (Alberta Women's Secretariat, 1992). In 1916 this impediment became a problem for Judge Emily Murphy, the first woman magistrate in the British Empire, for Women's Court in Edmonton. Murphy had sentenced a bootlegger but his attorney challenged her ruling on the grounds that she was not a "person" and occupied her office illegally. A year later Magistrate Alice Jamieson of Calgary was also challenged. Although the Alberta Supreme Court declared in 1917 that there was no legal disqualification for holding office in Canadian government on the basis of gender, the situation was inconclusive at the federal level. When Emily Murphy learned that the federal government would not appoint a woman to the Canadian Senate because, according to The British North America Act, women were not "persons," she consulted with lawyers and learned that any five persons could initiate an appeal to the Supreme Court of Canada. Murphy assembled four like-minded Alberta women: Henrietta Edwards, Nellie McClung, Louise McKinney, and Irene Parlby. On April 24, 1928 the women faced the Supreme Court of Canada and asked: "Does the word 'person' in Section 24 of The British North America Act include female persons?" (Status of Women Canada, The Famous Five and the Persons Case, 2005).

Their appeal was denied with the explanation that persons in public office must be "fit and qualified," so only men were eligible. Nellie McClung said in a press release at that time, "This ruling leaves us abashed, but not despairing: humbled but not hopeless. Acts can be amended and we believe they will." The Famous Five did not relent. With Prime Minister King's support, they petitioned Canada's highest court of appeal, the Privy Council of England. On October 18 1929, Lord Sankey, Lord Chancellor of the Privy Council, announced that "women are eligible to be summoned and may become Members of the Senate of Canada." Their battle was finally won (Status of Women Canada, The Famous Five and the Persons Case, 2005).

So why the conflict roiling in my head? The Bank of Canada appears to have demonstrated some reverence for women's equality. But this is a \$50 note, a slip of paper that can be exchanged for an armload of grocery bags brimming with wholesome food, a legal tender many women in Canada - the very citizens the bill acknowledges - may never see in their wallets.

I'm not certain what King and those five tenacious women would say and do today. In January 2003 the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, which monitors countries around the world regarding their obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), conducted a review of Canada's compliance with its recommendations. In response to this review, the Canadian Feminist Alliance for International Action (FAFIA), a coalition of over 60 Canadian women's equality-seeking non-governmental organizations, produced the CEDAW Toolkit, which reported that, among other dire statistics, 19% of adult Canadian women are poor (Canadian Feminist Alliance for International Action, CEDAW Toolkit p.21; see also sidebar on CEDAW). That's 2.2 million women. Additionally, the National Anti-Poverty Organization of Canada (NAPO) reports that 70% of working Canadians earning minimum wage are women. Despite

strong economic growth and super-size corporate profits over the last decade the proportion of jobs paying less than \$10 an hour has not decreased since 1986. Anyone making this wage is either living in poverty or is at high risk of entering poverty. Among industrialized countries Canada's incidence of low pay is second only to the United States (National Anti-Poverty Organization, Workers and Poverty).

These numbers are truly staggering. Factor in the affected children (one Canadian child in six is poor, largely attributed to the fact that a vast proportion of poor Canadian women are mothers), and we have a picture nothing better than bleak (Campaign 2000, One Million Too Many).

A September 2005 study by Statistics Canada found that although women comprised less than half of the labour force (49%), they made up 55% of the chronically unemployed and nearly two-thirds of Canadians who never found a job. Overall, women accounted for 53% of the 10 million individuals who had been unemployed at some time in the study period (1993-2001). The problem is especially acute for single mothers since they were especially over-represented among those lone parents who never found a job (Statistics Canada 2005).

According to NAPO, even employed female Canadians are at poverty risk. This, they say, is caused by several factors including minimum wages that have been frozen for years, an increase in the number of low-paying jobs, wage gaps between men and women and the lack of a national employment strategy that should include Aboriginals, youth, people with disabilities, new immigrants and women. Workers who earn minimum wage or below \$10 an hour often must work two or more jobs plus extra hours just to make ends meet (National Anti-Poverty Organization (NAPO) 2004).

None of this is news to Canada's policy-makers. At the 1995 "United Nations' Fourth World Conference on Women," Canada, along with over 180 countries, agreed to an international platform of commitments, known as the Beijing Platform for Action, which focused on women's inequality in twelve critical areas, such as the economy, poverty and health (UN 1995). At that time, Canada pledged to undertake a gender analysis of all its macro-economic policies and budgets (Finestone 1995). Since then however, no federal Minister of Finance has delivered on Canada's promise.

It was the February 2003 report from United Nations Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women that jolted me into a disturbing awareness of our country's ignominious problem. The report says that Canada is not doing enough to guarantee women's economic equality, highlighting the alarming percentage of Canadian women living in poverty, mostly elderly women living alone, female lone parents, Aboriginal women, women of colour, immigrant women and women with disabilities. The report blames budget cuts to social programs and services as responsible for our women's poverty (UN 2003).

The 2003 UN Committee report called on Canada to take action on pay equity for women, as well as to eliminate discrimination faced by Aboriginal women, boost funding for shelters for battered women, increase the number of women in politics, expand affordable childcare, and revise employment insurance rules to address the fact that fewer women than men can access benefits, but even two years after its publication, Shelagh Day, Chair of the Human Rights Committee at FAFIA, said, "We think that the situation of women in Canada is getting worse and it's very hard to get the government's attention" (personal communication, September 7, 2005). Day's observations

stand in pointed contrast to Senator Joyce Fairbairn's confident assertion in the Bank of Canada press release that "The new \$50 note celebrates citizens who have throughout our history helped to make Canada one of the world's most democratic countries a place where the rights and freedoms of individual Canadians are secure."

That incongruity whispers of the political aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, when government officials confidently assured Americans that relief efforts were being dispatched in a timely manner, against a contradictory backdrop of thirsty, hungry, desperate and dying refugees, the overwhelming majority of whom were poor, elderly, ill, and/or black families. Their images saturated televisions around the world and their stories headlined every major print and online media, the result being collective shock and severe criticism of the Bush administration, inciting public demand for action. (Not to mention a global outpouring of offers for support.) Politicians were forced to answer the question on everyone's mind: why is help taking so long to arrive? Obviously there are many differences between that disaster and women's poverty in Canada; I am only comparing the media and political response here. What is relevant, I believe, is our national media's lack of sustained attention to the harsh realities faced by far too many Canadian women and children. If these numbers were given a face, if compelling stories of the real women living in poverty became part of our collective consciousness I suspect our politicians would be called to task immediately. The rights and freedoms of individual Canadians must be secured, including disadvantaged women.

Helping policy-makers and the public better understand the all-but-buried problem of women's poverty in Canada, FAFIA published a lodestar report in February 2005 tracking a decade of federal budgets. Written by award-winning economist Armine Yalnizyan, this must-read for all concerned Canadians measures the

federal government's performance against the commitments it made to gender equality in Beijing in 1995. Massive spending cuts in the deficit era that hurt women are clearly documented, alongside facts demonstrating how women's interests have been largely ignored since Ottawa began posting surpluses. "On the 10th anniversary of the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action, we found that the promises didn't match up with the federal government's fiscal choices," Yalnizyan said in a FAFIA press release following the report's publication. "Since 1998 Canada has posted annual surpluses, but the federal government has been more interested in tax cuts and debt reduction than in reinvesting in social supports that help women."

Yalnizyan traced where money was cut during our deficit era, and where it was spent during times of surplus:

- ▶ Cuts and changes made to core programs such as Employment Insurance, the Child Tax Benefit, housing, and the Canada Health and Social Transfer during the deficit era were never fully reversed during surplus years;
- ▶ Almost \$12 billion per year was cut from these social supports between 1994 and 1997;
- ▶ Once the federal government began registering surpluses in 1998, it allocated \$152 billion to tax cuts, and
- ▶ \$42 billion to new spending on programs such as defence and innovation, while programs that benefit women were ignored; and
- ▶ Only a fraction of new spending went to affordable housing and quality child care - programs that make a central difference in women's lives.

"Even now, social programs that directly benefit women remain low on the government's list of fiscal priorities," FAFIA spokesperson Lise Martin said in the press release. "A commitment to equality means a commitment to allocating resources to the programs that make a difference," added Shelagh Day of FAFIA. "After 10 years of waiting for progress, it's time for the Government of Canada to stop ignoring women. Women have a claim to make on this surplus."

Is the Canadian government really responsible for the economic realities faced by our poor female population? I believe the answer is yes. According to UNICEF's Innocenti Research Centre's Report Card No. 6, higher government spending on family and social benefits is clearly associated with lower child poverty rates. And, I propose, women's poverty as well, an assumption shared by FAFIA's Shelagh Day (personal communication, September 7, 2005). The UNICEF researchers found that government policies account for most of the variation in child poverty levels among OECD countries (member nations of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development). Nearly 15% of Canadian children live in poverty, defined as household incomes below 50% of the national median income. Of all OECD countries, Denmark tops the list with 2.4% of children living in poverty, followed by Finland with 2.8% and Norway with 3.4%. Those countries report higher government spending on family and social benefits (UNICEF 2005).

When I interviewed Shelagh Day she was adamant that reduced government spending coupled with federal transfer payments to the provinces that bear little or no allocation guidelines directly impacts the economic conditions of Canadian women. FAFIA is working diligently to persuade government officials to act on this growing disaster. And some headway may be coming. According to Day, the communications lines may be slowly opening; her goal is to see the issue of

women's poverty in Canada discussed and debated in an open forum, rather than behind closed doors.

Which brings me to this: Why is the issue of women's poverty in Canada largely ignored by the media and the government? Shelagh Day offered an explanation. "There is a prevailing myth that equality between the sexes is solved," she said. "And government would like nothing more than to tweak this issue off their agenda. However, the problem is not solved. In fact, it is persistent." Yet, with more people now discussing the issue of poverty on a global scale, there may be hope yet. As Day said, "People are now talking about women's poverty as a human rights issue and a serious problem."

Back to the new \$50 bill. A quotation printed on the reverse side grabs my attention: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights," an excerpt from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The dignity of women living in poverty in one the richest nations in the world seems not to have been considered. Unless of course the Bank of Canada plans to send every impoverished woman in our country a heaping bagful of crisp new \$50s.

CEDAW

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), adopted in 1979 by the U.N. General Assembly, is much like an international bill of rights for women (see United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, CEDAW Convention text).

The document defines discrimination against women and prescribes national action to end discrimination. Nations (called "States") that accept the Convention must end discrimination against women in all forms, including:

- ▶ incorporate the principle of equality of men and women in their legal systems and abolish discriminatory laws;
- ▶ establish tribunals and other public institutions to ensure the protection of women against discrimination;
- ▶ and eliminate acts of discrimination against women by persons, organizations or enterprises.

The Convention provides a framework for nations committed to achieving gender equality by ensuring women's access to opportunities in political and public life - including the right to vote and stand for election as well as education, health and employment. Countries that have ratified the Convention are legally bound to its provisions and must submit progress reports every four years.

References

Alberta Women's Secretariat (now part of Alberta Community Development). Persons Case (1992). Online at http://www.cd.gov.ab.ca/helping_albertans/human_rights/womens_issues/persons_case/index.asp

Bank of Canada. Bank of Canada Issues New \$50 Bank Note (2004, November 17) [Press release]. Online at <http://www.bankofcanada.ca/en/press/2004/pr04-26.html>

Campaign 2000. One Million Too Many: 2004 Report Card on Child Poverty in Canada (2000). Online at <http://www.campaign2000.ca/rc/rc04/04NationalReportCard.pdf>

Canadian Feminist Alliance for International Action (FAFIA). (2004). CEDAW Toolkit: Commitments Abroad, Inequalities at Home. Online at http://www.fafia-afai.org/proj/ce/cedaw_toolkit.php

_____. Ten Years of Federal Budgets: Double Whammy for Women (2005, February 3). [Press Release]. Online at <http://www.fafia-afai.org/gvt/PressRelease030205.htm>

Finestone, Shelia.. Statement by The Secretary of State (Status Of Women And Multiculturalism) of Canada, at The Fourth United Nations World Conference On Women, Beijing (1995, September 6) . Online at <http://www.un.org/esa/gopher-data/conf/fwcw/conf/gov/950906204201.txt>

National Anti-Poverty Organization (NAPO). Workers and Poverty (2004). [Fact Sheet]. Online at <http://www.napo-onap.ca/en/issues/workers.htm>

Status of Women Canada. The Famous Five and the Persons Case (2005). Online at http://www.swc-cfc.gc.ca/dates/persons/case_e.html

Statistics Canada. "Study: Chronic Unemployment 1993 to 2001," The Daily (2005, September 6). Online at

<http://www.statscan.ca/Daily/English/050906/d050906a.htm>

United Nations (UN). Report of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (2003).
O n l i n e a t
<http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N02/364/78/IMG/N0236478.pdf?OpenElement>

_____ Division for the Advancement of Women.
Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995).
O n l i n e a t
<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/index.html>

United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women.
Department of Economic and Social Affairs. CEDAW
C o n v e n t i o n t e x t . O n l i n e a t
<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/cedaw.htm>.

UNICEF. "Child Poverty in Rich Countries, 2005."
Innocenti Report CardNo.6 (2005). Florence: UNICEF
Innocenti Research Centre. Online at
<http://www.unicef.org/brazil/repcard6e.pdf>

Yalnizyan, A. Canada's Commitment to Equality: A
Gender Analysis of the Last Ten Federal Budgets -
1995-2004 (2005). Ottawa: Canadian Feminist Alliance
for International Action. Online at
http://www.fafia-afai.org/images/pdf/budget_2005_analysis_fafia.pdf