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The Royal Commission on the Status of Women: Looking Back, Looking Forward

Unlike many royal commissions, the Status of Women Commission has not been lost to the dustbin of history—as a public record of women's position in society in the late 1960s and as an impetus for reform of public institutions, processes and policies, it has proven itself to be remarkably informative, instructive and enduring. My desire to speak about the commission stems from a recommendation made a few months ago by women's advisory councils across the country for the establishment of a new royal commission on the status of women. This is interesting in part because it speaks to the importance placed in the results achieved as a result of the first commission. It was not merely a symbolic government action designed to appease women and for which there was little follow up. Instead the commission made clear in the disturbing evidence that it collected the discrimination against women and women's poverty. The call for a new commission is also interesting for it suggests that there is much left to do.

My hope is to focus on three aspects of the Commission. First, the context within it was established—that is, to outline the circumstances that led to the call for a commission. Second, I'd like to outline some of the realities in women's lives in the late 1960s that were crystallized in the collection of women's stories and the research that was undertaken for the commission's report. Obviously I can only skim the surface. Third, I'd like to address some of the key recommendations that were made in the

commission's report but that have yet to be adopted. And finally, I'd like to close my talk by addressing the desirability of holding a second commission on the status of women.

### Context

PM Lester Pearson established the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in 1967 and the commission's report was tabled in the House of Commons in 1970. It was a seven-member commission – five women and two men. Florence Bird was appointed the Chair of the Commission, who was a CBC journalist among other things.

The Commission's mandate was to “inquire into and report upon the status of women in Canada, and to recommend what steps might be taken by the Federal Government to ensure for women equal opportunities with men in all aspects of Canadian society.”

The establishment of the commission was not a proactive decision by government to address with women's issues—instead it came in response to repeated demands by a committee representing 33 organizations with a membership totalling two million women. This committee included the Committee for the Equality of Women (CEW) led by Laura Sabia and the Federation des femmes de Quebec (FFQ) inspired by Therese Casgrain. Pressure was also mounted by women journalists (women's pages in newspapers), in women's periodicals (French and English versions of *Chatelaine*) and on women's radio and television programs where the idea was promoted to audiences and support built for it. The pressure tactics were particularly impressive since women as a group were not a political constituency of any force prior to this. Two events in particular are often cited for having pushed Pearson to agree to establish the commission. One was Laura Sabia's threat to Pearson that 1,000,000 women would march on Parliament Hill if

the commission was not established (although she later admitted that this would have been very difficult to carry out) and the second was pressure from Judy LaMarch, a federal Liberal cabinet minister at the time.

One consequence of the calling of the commission was that it legitimized the concerns of women regarding their status. The commission and its report moved beyond symbolic politics by providing a conceptual framework for future research and advocacy, and second, by establishing a vocabulary for the development and articulation of feminist analysis and ideology to come. According to Heather MacIvor, it was a “national consciousness raising exercise.”

The commission was unique from previous commissions for attempting to generate information from the grassroots. Leaflets were printed and distributed in grocery stores and church basements, since that is necessarily where women would find them. And the response was overwhelming: 468 briefs, 1000 letters of opinion, public hearings in 14 cities in 10 provinces; overall, a total of 890 witnesses. In addition to this testimony, forty special studies were commissioned, eleven of which were eventually published. The commission also established a small staff and organization that conducted data collecting exercises and administered the data collection itself. The commission undertook three and one half years of work at a cost of just under \$2 million dollars (roughly the equivalent of \$10 million today).

One of the key consequences of the exercise was that it served to privilege women’s voices—ordinary women spoke in their own voices rather than the institutional and formalistic process that often renders Royal Commission foreign to the very people that are the focus of the exercise. The media coverage of the commission also provided

women with a mechanism for understanding that other women felt exactly as they did. As the expression suggests, there is strength in numbers. Another is that it helped to forge a link between an older more traditional generation of feminists (associated with such groups as the YWCA and the Voice of Women) and a younger more radical generation of feminists largely emerging on university campuses, by providing a common cause in seeing to it that the recommendations of the commission were eventually put into action. It was a catalyst for change that led to the formation of an Ad Hoc Committee of Women whose purpose was to review the government's actions in addressing the recommendations. This then led to the creation of National Action Committee on the Status of Women in 1973. Finally it legitimized women's demands—not among women—but among those in positions of political power by grounding them in “hard facts and statistics.” Numbers are simply more difficult to ignore than women.

What exactly did the commissioners have in mind as they were undertaking this? Several criteria and principles guided the commissioners in undertaking their responsibility:

- “Equality in practice as well as in principle” – it is not only what should happen that matters but what actually does;
- “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights” – it is unacceptable to have classes of citizens;
- “Equality of opportunity for all” – emphasizing the removal barriers; and
- “Equality to share responsibilities as well as privileges and prerogatives” – that women's desires stem not only from self-interest, but also from a need for self-

fulfilment, a desire met by sharing in the responsibility for determining and shaping societal goals, and bringing them about.

In addition to these criteria were four more specific principles. These are extremely progressive principles considering that second wave feminism was in its infancy in the late 1960s, with the only available modern feminist texts consisting of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. The first principle was that women should be free to choose whether or not to take employment outside their homes—while this may appear straightforward, providing this choice in practice rather than in principle remains an elusive goal. The second was that the care of children is a responsibility to be shared by the mother, the father and society. The third, that society has to assume a responsibility for women because of pregnancy and child-birth, and that special treatment related to maternity will always be necessary. And finally, in certain areas women will for an interim period require special treatment to overcome the adverse effects of discriminatory practices – in essence employment equity, a policy formalized in section 15 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, 12 years later.

If the principles guiding the commissioners were progressive, the scope of their mandate was extremely wide. The Commission was asked to address issues of women in the economy, education, their place in the family and their participation in public life. Some of the topics they evaluated were poverty, citizenship, taxation, and the Criminal Code. The wide scope is indicative of the limited information available at the time on women in Canada. The commissioners began their work with very little background on which to rely.

The Commission made over 160 recommendations to the federal government and many of these have subsequently been adopted, although the vast majority required policy changes only and very little cash outlay. Nevertheless, one has to conclude that the RCSW was not merely a political exercise designed to diffuse pressure for change but rather a catalyst for change. According to Monique Begin, executive secretary of RCSW, the success was due to the reformist, yet moderate approach adopted by the commission because it “gave credibility to the cause and appealed to a broad base of individual women and women’s associations.”

### The Realities of Women’s Lives

Before reviewing some of these changes, it is important to highlight some of the realities of women’s lives in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and in some instances to compare them to today’s realities, if nothing else to remind us about the conditions revealed by the commission:

First, I found it tremendous unusual to see that the married women on the Commission were referred to by their husband’s names in the order-in-council that established it: Mrs John Bird, Mrs Ottomar Lange, Mrs Robert Ogilvie. There is a certain irony in coming face to face with the very invisibility of the married women who were sitting on the commission in order to bring women out from the shadows.

A key issue for the commission was women’s involvement in the labour force and in employment. What they found was that 34% of the labour force was made up of women -- equivalent today is 46%. The figure has gone from 1/3 of the workforce to roughly ½. What often happened is that women would work, get married, quit work when first child was born, and then return to work after the last child had begun school. Some women

would find that pregnancy meant that they no longer held a job, or that they had lost their job while on maternity leave. In today's world many more women continue to work even with children who have yet to begin their schooling. The commission also found in that some provinces, there existed different minimum wage rates for women and men – a policy stemming from the assumption that there exist two separate wages: a male wage (breadwinner) and a female wage (supplementary income). The female wage is simply a secondary wage, not as important to the family income. This belief still exists in part, in that public opinion surveys reveal that some Canadians believe that in the event of layoffs, women should be laid off first. And if there were sex segregated wages, there was also sex segregation in employment advertising. Many newspapers ran sex segregated want ads: male help wanted columns and female help wanted columns. There were men's jobs and women's jobs.

Upon marriage, women would also find that they could not earn credit as easily as men could (loans, mortgages). There was, in essence, the loss of the availability of earning credit in the women's name upon marriage. And it might often be the case that a husband's signature would be required for a women to earn credit at independent retailers.

In nine of ten provinces at the time of the commission's report, a husband's earnings and savings were his exclusive property and in the event of divorce, homemakers were not entitled to an equal split of assets for they had not 'contributed' to the collection of assets.

In the workplace, women made up 70% of all clerical workers but only 11% of all managerial positions in the late 1960s; a woman was very likely to be working as a

secretary, stenographer, typist, telephone operator, waitress, hairdresser, school teacher, nurse, or home economist. In 1999, while women share of managerial positions had risen to 35%, and yet they continue to make up 75% of all clerical positions. This translated and translates into a wage gap. In 1967, a woman who worked full time, full year earned on average 58 cents for every dollar earned by a man. In 1997, by comparison, that figure is 73 cents for every male dollar earned. Things have improved but they remain unequal.

Related to women's occupational relegation to "pink collar" ghettos is the issue of women's poverty (sometimes referred to as the feminization of poverty). In 1969 almost 52% of families with children headed by sole-support mothers were poor. In 1997 this figure has risen to 56%. And age may bring wisdom, but it certainly doesn't bring financial security for most women: about half of all women aged 65 or older who were living on their own could be found in the low-income group. The percentage for that group today remains at 49%.

Women's economic security is also certainly related to their educational attainment. In the late 1960s, women earned 34% of undergraduate degrees, 20% of masters degrees and 8% of doctorate degrees. Today women earn half of all undergraduate degrees, 42% of masters degrees, and 23% of all doctorates. Evidence collected at the time of the commission suggested that some programmes imposed quotas on the number of women that would be allowed to register or required a higher academic standing for entry from women than men. And women were simply not allowed to attend military colleges.

Part of the reason for the limited knowledge that existed when the commission was established was that very few university courses were available that dealt specifically

with women; they only really began to appear in the early 1970s. And there certainly were no women's studies programs in existence at Universities.

Outside of universities, The Indian Act was such that a woman was made to give up her status if she married a non-status man. The same, however, was not true for status men marrying non-status women. And also bear in mind that the dissemination of birth control information and contraceptives in Canada became legal two years after the commission was established in 1969. Finally, women's political representation can also be examined. In the early 1970s the share of women elected to the House of Commons was less than 5%; today's the figure stands at roughly 20%. At the time of the commission, only 5 women could be found in the 102 seat Senate (roughly 5% of all seats). Today that figure stands at 33%.

In many respects, then, women's equality was limited in the late 1960s by the existence of clear barriers to entry, by assumptions regarding proper gender roles in the family, at work and in the wider society, and by policy based on these gendered assumptions.

### Policy Recommendations and Implementations

A number of the recommendations that were adopted subsequent to the commission's report dealt specifically with removing the barriers that restricted women's entry to various occupations and institutions, and to removing policies that treated women in an unequal manner in the workplace. Examples include equalizing minimum wage rates between women and men; amending the unemployment insurance act to allow for maternity leave; amending the Canadian Labour Code to prohibit dismissal or layoff due to pregnancy. Additional changes have included modifying the Indian act so as to

restore status and right to band membership to native women who had lost their status through marriage to a non-native. Policies and laws in the area of divorce were also modified to simplify the lengthy legal requirements accepted as grounds for divorce and to providing for more equitable distribution of assets upon divorce.

Some changes brought about by the decisions of the Supreme Court (for example those making unlawful any distinctions based on sex, pregnancy and childbirth, family or marital status, and those prohibiting sexual harassment in the workplace) but the legislation that allowed the Court to do so had to be in place for the decisions to be rendered. This legislation includes the Canadian Human Rights Act (1985) and its provincial equivalents, and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982).

A key recommendation was to place within governments the organizational capacity to address women's issues in the future. In response to this, the Advisory Council on the Status of Women, an independent body that advises government and educates the public on issues of concern to women, was established in 1973 and several provinces have later followed this precedent. Similarly, the first Minister Responsible for the Status of Women was appointed in 1971, although it wasn't until Monique Begin was offered this position five years later that a women cabinet minister took on this role.

Unfortunately, several of the more assumption-challenging recommendations have never been put into action. According to Monique Begin, what the state failed to do in response to the commission was put in place radical changes that would lead to a transformation of culture and society.

The first of these was the call for National Day Care Program that is both accessible and affordable. This recommendation stems from the recognition that in order for women

to be free to choose whether to work outside of the home they must have access to affordable and accessible daycare. This recommendation is still a long way from reality, as the work of Susan Prentice, of the Department of Sociology at the University of Manitoba, among others, makes clear. Although a National Child Tax Benefit is in place, this does little to address the needs of those at the lowest income levels and the shortage of spaces across the country.

A second recommendation that has not been addressed was the call for a Guaranteed Annual Income for the heads of all one-parent families with dependent children in an effort to combat poverty across such families. This concern remains today as attested to by the figures on poverty that I mentioned earlier.

A third recommendation was to make abortion available to all women before 12 weeks upon demand. Although the Supreme Court struck down the abortion law in 1988, it remains the case that many women in Canada do not have access to abortion services because of prohibitive costs or because of limited access to services (for instance, women in PEI do not have access to a hospital or clinic on the island that provides abortion services).

### An Idea Whose Time Has Come Again?

And so we come to a renewed call for a royal commission on the status of women 30 years after the first. Why might such a commission be necessary? One could say that women's lives have changed and that as a result their needs and concerns have as well; for instance, we are faced with different concerns such as the small share of Canada Research Chairs going to women in Universities across the country (roughly 18% despite the fact that women constitute 26% of the Canadian full-time professorate). Violence

against women is another; especially wife abuse and rape, both of which received little attention in the original report. The multiplicity of barriers also deserves to be addressed, that is, how disability, visible minority status, Aboriginal status, and sexual orientation can combine to create additional barriers for women in Canadian society.

Consistent cutbacks have been particularly hard on women: continued poverty, reliance on social welfare programs, increased use of food banks, difficult to find adequate housing; safety concerns—reduction in social assistance funding requires women remain in abusive relationships--important to evaluate status in light of the changed economic climate.

Some issues, on the other hand, remain the same. Women remain predominantly in pink-collar ghettos – their employment patterns haven't changed all that much. Women remain concentrated in a narrow range of occupations – clerical, sales, teaching, health and caring profession. And women still earn on average 73 cents of every dollar earned by a man.

But where the first commission spoke of seeking to break down barriers, the second should concentrate on equity versus equality – being treated in a fair and just manner rather than simply in a manner that allows us to be like men for it is clear that unique or different circumstances call for unique and different treatment. Adrienne Clarkson, just recently in a speech to the York University Law School, decried the systemic discrimination within the legal profession that results in much lower pay and fewer opportunities for partnerships for women. As she noted, this was not the result of a male conspiracy against women. It results simply from the expectation that as a lawyer you will log an incredible number of billable hours. But women hold off on having children

to get through law school, their articling year and then through the first few years of practice as they get settled in and hope to prove themselves. At that moment, right when the company expects the strongest “commitment of time,” most women are ready to have children. For many, however, this decision limits their ability to acquire a partnership in the firm. As a result, many move over to the private sector where maternity benefits are better and expectations for after hours and weekends engagements are fewer. These concerns are starting to hurt men as well, since many more men are sharing in childcare, but the responsibility remains predominantly women’s. Rather than visible barriers, we speak today of invisible barriers to equality and glass ceilings.

What is needed is equality in practice as well as in principle. For instance, the Chrétien government adopted a policy in 1995 ensuring that before adoption all policy decisions should undergo gender-based analysis. By all accounts this isn’t happening.

The Inter-Parliamentary Union just released a new study that reveals that women have a better chance of getting into public office in Sweden, South Africa, Pakistan and 32 other countries than they have in Canada. The removal of barriers is not necessarily enough.

Each of these appears to provide sufficient justification for voicing a demand for a renewed commission to inquire into the status of women in Canada. A Commission could renew and reinvigorate the women’s movement. And, women’s concerns and inequalities might be granted the same level of legitimacy that followed to some extent after the tabling of the first Royal Commission thirty years ago.