



Excerpts of Debates of the Senate

March 30, 2004

Historical Role of Women in the Senate and Challenges Facing Women Legislators to Advance Peace and Human Security

Inquiry—Debate Adjourned

Hon. Douglas Roche rose pursuant to notice of March 24, 2004:

That he will call the attention of the Senate to the historical role of women in the Canadian Senate and the challenges faced by modern women legislators to advance peace and human security.

He said: Honourable senators, I am calling the attention of the Senate to the historical role of women in the Canadian Senate and the challenges faced by modern women legislators to advance peace and human security.

As the time nears for my departure from the Senate, I have been reflecting on the most important political developments during the 33 years I have been in public life and what it is that gives me the most hope for the future. The increasingly important role of women in the great issues of our time — peace, security, sustainable development — stands out.

Women who are in the Parliament of Canada today are the direct beneficiaries of the pioneering work of Agnes MacPhail, the first female federal parliamentarian in Canada who was elected in a rural Ontario riding in 1921. Blazing a trail for women into the House of Commons was not easy. When she first tried to enter Parliament and take up her duties, she was stopped by a guard who declared, "You can't go in there, miss." Aside from defending the interests of her constituents, Ms. MacPhail made peace a priority during the turbulent inter-war years. She called for Prime Minister King to create a department of peace and for the Canadian government to spend \$1 on peace education for every \$100 spent on war. It is a pity her suggestions were not accepted.

More doors were opened by the Famous Five women of Alberta: Emily Murphy, the first woman magistrate in the Commonwealth; Louise McKinney, the first woman to serve as a member of a legislative assembly in the Commonwealth when she was elected in 1917; Nellie

McClung, who led the fight to enfranchise North American women; Henrietta Edwards, who published Canada's first women's magazine; and Irene Parlby, the first female cabinet minister in Alberta and a delegate to the League of Nations in Geneva. It was these Famous Five who successfully petitioned the Government of Canada to have women declared "persons" under section 24 of the British North America Act so that they could serve in the Senate of Canada. The statue of the Famous Five now graces Parliament Hill.

Four months after the Persons Case of 1929, Cairine Wilson was appointed Canada's first female senator and took an ardent interest in human security. Senator Wilson was a defender of the interests of refugees and was honoured for her work with refugee children. She chaired the Standing Senate Committee on Immigration and Labour and was Canada's delegate to the United Nations General Assembly in 1949, the first woman to hold either position.

Muriel Fergusson, the first woman Speaker of the Senate, used her position of influence to advance the rights of women and to ameliorate conditions for Canada's poor. She was instrumental in securing the right of women to sit on juries, which had the effect of increasing the reporting of sexual assaults, as women no longer had to confront an all-male jury when bringing their case to court. She summed up her outlook well when she stated: "People are my work, in fact my life. Doing things for people, even thinking about what can be done for them, has been what has kept me going." What a refreshing attitude towards public service.

Erminie Cohen, known to many of us in this room, is a more recent example of a female senator who values human security. Her position as honorary chair of the first Atlantic Poor People's Conference in 1996 "shocked and inspired" her, as she described it, to publish a book the next year, *Sounding the Alarm: Poverty in Canada*, calling attention to the plight of the poor.

The Very Reverend Lois Wilson was active in defending human rights in Canada long before her appointment to the Senate in 1998, active as a board member of both Amnesty International and the Canadian International Institute for Peace and Security. As a senator, she represented Canada in efforts to resolve conflicts around the world. Senator Wilson was Canada's special envoy to the Sudanese peace process. She also led the Canadian delegation to North Korea in 2000, which laid the groundwork for the establishment of Canadian diplomatic relations with that country.

Senator Mobina Jaffer succeeded Senator Wilson as envoy to the Sudan and co-chairs, with Lois Wilson, the Canadian Committee on Women, Peace and Security. This committee is responsible for overseeing the implementation in Canada of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, which calls for the full and equal participation of women in conflict prevention, peace processes and peace-building.

Senator Jaffer attended the forty-eighth session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women held earlier this month in New York, which repeated calls for greater involvement of women in peace and security and noted the need for men to be full participants in the process of overcoming obstacles to gender equity.

Senator Sharon Carstairs has long championed the interests of the terminally ill and their families. Her efforts to strengthen palliative care resulted in the recent announcement of a new compassionate care leave program to make it possible for family members to take time off work to care for their terminally ill relatives.

Senator Landon Pearson made a commitment following her appointment to the Senate in 1994 to be the senator for children. She co-chaired a Special Joint House Committee on Child Custody and Access to protect the interests of children. She has spoken out against child labour and the gross abuses of the rights of children that occur during war.

Senator Joyce Fairbairn has focused her efforts on fighting illiteracy in Canada, which she has called "our country's hidden shame."

Senator Thelma Chalifoux has stood up for social justice for Aboriginal peoples.

Senator Raynell Andreychuk has used her judicial and diplomatic experience to advance human rights through the promotion of the International Criminal Court and the work of Parliamentarians for Global Action.

Senator Lucie Pépin has worked to improve the health and status of women both in Canada and internationally.

Senators Ione Christensen and Elizabeth Hubley have deepened our understanding of the plight of the victims of land mines.

Senator Marjory LeBreton has raised public support for tougher laws against drunk driving.

Honourable senators, I could go on naming the contributions of other women senators, past and present, to human security issues. I see a pattern of concern for the most vulnerable people in our society. Perhaps this concern is rooted in the fact that women themselves have had to struggle to claim equal rights in our society — a struggle that continues to this day.

We have only to look around this chamber to see that women are not equally represented in the halls of power in Canada. Women occupy 35 per cent of Senate seats, which is good enough to make us sixth in the world in female representation in an upper house, but still falls far short of giving women their rightful share of seats.

Unfortunately, women do not fair as well in the House of Commons, where they make up less than 21 per cent of the members of Parliament, putting Canada in thirty-sixth place internationally. By comparison, Rwanda has the greatest percentage of women in the lower house, at almost 49 per cent, followed by Sweden, at 45 per cent.

Perhaps a second reason women are involved in advancing human security is that they experience insecurity differently from their male counterparts. It is those with less money and power who are most directly affected by government cuts in health and education spending, and by reduced income support programs. They also benefit the most from strengthened human rights protections.

Internationally, women suffer disproportionately the effects of conflict, which today kill more civilians than military personnel. War brings with it an increase in violence against women, both by armed factions and within the home. The evidence of sexual violence in recent conflicts in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, among other places, is truly sickening.

Women in Canada and around the world are recognizing that peace is in their direct interest and are taking a leading role in resolving conflict. The Canadian Voice of Women for Peace, formed in 1960, played a leading role in promoting disarmament and reconciliation during the Cold War. In 1962, this group endured public ridicule from the media, which called them pathetically foolish for their courageous stand in petitioning the government not to accept America nuclear weapons on Canadian soil. How right the Voice of Women was then and now in the opposition they and like-minded groups displayed toward the recent Iraq war. In the western world, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom brought together 1,200 women from a wide variety of states to protest the First World War. Since then, this organization has continued to advance the cause of human rights and disarmament with chapters in 37 countries around the world.

The United Nations has strongly promoted women's involvement in peace and security issues. The Fourth World Conference on Women, which took place in Beijing in 1995, concluded by issuing the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. The declaration, which aimed to empower women, recognized that "the full realization of all human rights and fundamental freedoms of all women is essential to the empowerment of women." This declaration was followed up by Security Council Resolution 1325, which I mentioned a moment ago, adopted in 2000. It expressed concern about the impact of conflict on women and stressed "the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security."

Honourable senators, my observation of the world scene over these past three decades has convinced me that women stand at the centre of change. When the representatives of the women of the world gathered in Beijing in 1995, it was affirmed that the leadership of the half of humanity that is female is essential to the search for peace and security. This leadership begins with ensuring that the doors of education are open to all the girls and young women in developing countries. Where this has happened, and I have seen it with my own eyes, startling results in development and population control have been achieved. The full development of women within all societies is, of course, paramount along with the guarantees of their full human rights. The movement forward of the status of women in society is clearly occurring, despite lamentable acts of discrimination that still scar humanity.

However, I go further in my assessment of the role of women today in the need to build true human security. Here is the world that we face: 2.7 billion people live on less than \$2 per day; 1.1 billion lack safe drinking water; 800 million are hungry; 40 million are infected with HIV/AIDS; 16 million are either refugees or internally displaced persons.

On top of this scandalous social deficit, there still exist today 34,145 nuclear weapons with the capacity of destroying the world many times over. Nuclear weapons account for only a

fraction of the \$850 billion that the governments of the world spend on their militaries every year.

The UN's Millennium Development Goals, avowed by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, require a minimum of \$50 billion to halve extreme poverty by 2015, reduce child mortality, combat HIV/AIDS, and develop a global partnership for development. However, so distorted are the priorities of governments that only about \$16 billion has been pledged to date. These human security issues are by no means just women's issues; they are the business of men and women alike to repair.

The Hon. the Speaker: Senator Roche, your time has expired.

Senator Roche: I would ask honourable senators for leave to continue.

The Hon. the Speaker: Honourable senators, is leave granted?

Hon. Senators: Agreed.

Senator Roche: I thank honourable senators.

I sense that the time has come for the growing and hardy band of women legislators to demand that governments everywhere get their priorities right and recognize that if we want peace and human security in the world, we must replace the culture of war with the culture of peace.

I am not saying that a world run by women would necessarily be a completely peaceful world, but my political and diplomatic experience indicates to me that the prospects of achieving a more humane world would improve with more women in the decision-making processes of governments. It may be true that not all women politicians are dedicated to a social justice agenda, but I think many of them are. When the number of women in public life is strengthened to achieve a critical mass, I think women legislators will be emboldened to push for better policies.

This idea was eloquently expressed by a woman named Jamila, Director of the Afghan Women's Welfare Department and founding member of the Afghan Women's Network, in her testimony before the UN Security Council in 2001. She said:

I have often heard that Afghan women are not political; that peace and security is man's work. I am here to challenge that illusion. For the last 20 years of my life, the leadership of men has only brought war and suffering... Anyone searching for Afghan women to engage in peace does not have to look far... When the UN is looking for leaders, look to us.

Men have had their way long enough in world history and they have given us a chain of war and poverty. It is time for change.

Honourable senators all, but especially honourable women senators, as I leave this great institution, I appeal to you to raise your voices against hunger and AIDS, against weapons and

against the great injustices that drag down so many people around the world. Raise your voices for an end to poverty, abuse and discrimination. Raise your voices for a nuclear-weapons-free world. Raise your voices for the full application of human rights for all women and for children and men too. Take the high moral ground in the struggles ahead to obtain true peace. You stand on the foundation of what the women who have come before you have built. You hold up half the sky. The future is yours.

Hon. Senators: Hear, hear!