

Lucille Harper dissatisfied with federal government

by Brendan Dunbar

The director of a local women's group had a chance to voice her displeasure about recent funding cuts to the people in charge.

Lucille Harper of the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre recently returned from a trip to Ottawa to discuss budget cuts made to the Status of Women office.

"It was an opportunity to speak to some of the Members of Parliament... who sit with the House of Commons standing committee on the status of women," Harper said.

Harper, along with 40 other women from across Canada, met with opposition MPs.

"They were extremely supportive," Harper said.

She noted that the meeting coincided with the 25th anniversary of a United Nations' resolution to eradicate prejudice against women. The resolution is reviewed every five years.

In the last review the UN had 23 motions for Canada, including pay equity, education and the eradication of poverty, "in particular looking at the poverty and inequality of First Nations women," Harper said.

"We have not adequately addressed women's inequality," she said, noting that poverty is worsening because of the cuts.

"Most profoundly, aboriginal women are living in a depth of poverty, facing family violence," she said.

On Nov. 30 Heritage Minister Beverley Oda announced that 12 of the 16 Status of Women offices across Canada would be closed down on Apr. 1, 2007, throwing 61 out of 113 employees out of work.

The SOWC's budget will also receive a 40 per cent cut.

Oda stated that the SOWC is no longer needed, since women have already achieved equality

in Canadian society.

Her assertion is contrary to the UN's findings. For example, women in the workforce only earn 71 cents on the male dollar, placing Canada 38th in the world's wage gap ratio.

Harper stated that the cutting of the Court Challenges program only reinforces poverty and inequality.

The Court Challenges Program of Canada was established in 1994 "to provide financial assistance for important court cases that advance language and equality rights guaranteed under Canada's Constitution," according to the program's Web site.

"Not only has the Court Challenges program not been strengthened, it's been eliminated," Harper said.

She and the other representatives from women's groups across Canada called on the prime minister to restore the Court Challenges program, increase funding for the Status of Women, restore funding to the CAP site program and women's education programs, and most of all, take the UN's resolutions seriously.

During his election campaign, Stephen Harper promised to honour the UN mandate.

Lucille Harper said the Conservative government has

done anything but that since forming the government in January.

"He (Stephen Harper) needs to be held accountable for it. Not only does he need to be held accountable, he needs to do something," she said.

By contrast, she said that members of the opposition have already taken action.

The Liberal female MPs put out a "pink book" recommending policy changes.

They will follow this with two more books, one dealing with rural women, which Harper says is "fantastic," and the second with First Nations women — "very, very important," she said.

The MPs she spoke to last week said the outcry against the reductions has been "huge."

Peter MacKay, Canada's Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Member of Parliament for Central Nova, said that the government is only taking steps to ensure more women benefit from programming aimed at them.

"The annual funding of women's programs has not been cut. They received \$10.8 million last year, they will receive \$10.8 million this year, and \$10.8 million next year," MacKay said from Ottawa during a phone

interview on Tuesday.

By closing some of the SOWC offices, the money that is currently used on administration fees can be put directly into programming.

"It takes 38 cents of administration costs to deliver one dollar of programming," MacKay said.

Women's groups like the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre will be able to apply for funding on-line, instead of sending their requests to Halifax.

MacKay also said that those people who have lost their jobs because of the cuts to SOWC can stay with the federal government in other positions.

The bottom line, he said, is accountability.

"We just want to make sure the government is accountable to people," MacKay said.

Cutting the Court Challenges Program is another example of the government's desire to be responsible.

"This program was set up to protect English and French in our society, and many other programs do the same thing," he said.

There is a certain irony in Harper's meeting with opposition MPs. "In the last two years of the former government, they cut funding to women's groups five times," MacKay said.

He also noted that Harper did not meet with him during her latest trip to Ottawa.

"I really wish she would have," he said.

For Harper, cuts to women's programs are unforgivable, given

Canada's economic situation.

"There's no excuse. There's no excuse, when we had a \$35 billion

surplus, for cutting programs. It's just not conscientious," Harper said.

From Casket Wednesday Dec 26, 2006