



Tories spend more, but women worse off: Grits

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OTTAWA - Women in Canada are worse off now than they were five years ago, Liberal MPs charge.

MPs Anita Neville, Lise Zarac and Ken Dryden acknowledged Thursday the Conservative government is spending more money on women's programs than Liberal governments of the past, but still claimed Prime Minister Stephen Harper has turned back the clock for women.

"He has systematically and deliberately made choices that have actually reversed at least a decade of progress with regard to women's equality," said Neville, the Liberal status of women critic.

The Liberals complain the government replaced their national government-run daycare program plan with direct payments to parents, passed legislation stopping human rights commissions from ruling on pay equity decisions for federal employees, and cut funding for advocacy and research groups.

"One of the real values of advocacy is to be able to present to a public and a media, the state of what things are as a way of generating pressure to do more," Dryden said.

Andrea Mrozek, manager of research and communications for the Institute of Marriage and Family, questioned why the government should fund advocacy groups who then use their government grants to lobby for money for pet projects.

"Our group is fully funded with the charitable dollars of hard-working Canadians," Mrozek said. "Government funding doesn't equate to independent research."

While the Harper government cut off lobby groups, the actual budget for the Status of Women has risen by nearly 40% since the Conservatives took power, from \$23.4 million in the last year of the Liberal government to \$32.3 million this year.

Grants and contributions to women's groups have risen from \$10.9 million to 19.9 million.

Rona Ambrose, the minister responsible for the Status of Women, told QMI Agency that the government now funds more services for women rather than lobby groups with 60% of the money going to programs aimed at violence against women.

"We're funding organizations that are doing project work. A lot of them are working with low-income and immigrant women," Ambrose said.

Dryden argued the lack of a national daycare program was forcing women into work they otherwise wouldn't do or leaving them stuck in part-time jobs. He was the cabinet minister responsible for negotiating the five-year, \$5 billion Liberal childcare plan.

The current government plan, sending cheques to families, costs \$2.6 billion per year -- more than double what the Liberals proposed to spend -- but Dryden claimed Thursday it was not enough.

"It is approaching the problem in a completely different way. What you are doing is putting money into the provision of services and better services.

Also higher wages," Dryden said.

He said the Liberal plan was about building a system while the Conservatives send parents money that has no impact and "can be spent on anything."

Ambrose said that far from neglecting women on this issue, the Harper government is supporting the differing needs of today's families.

"I listen to women and what women tell me across the country is that they want choice," Ambrose told QMI Agency. "Women want a government that supports the flexibility that they need in their lives."

Mrozek said her research and that of others shows government-run daycare centres are not the first choice of parents, most of whom would prefer to have a parent stay home with their children.

"It is not something that is family friendly, it is not something that parents want," said Mrozek. "That is the Liberal approach but they shouldn't claim that it represents all women across the country."

Dryden said the Liberals remain committed to putting forward a national daycare plan if they form government, but added it may be altered from what was originally proposed given the state of the economy and the government deficit.