

DATES & DATA

Ontario Council Newsletter
Vol. V, Issue 6 (Electronic)

March 2007
Standing Committee Reports

MARCH 3RD, 2007 CFUW ONTARIO COUNCIL STANDING COMMITTEES

Joint Morning Session

The morning speaker was Dr. Graham White, professor of political science at U of T, an expert on Canadian governments, speaking on *The Reform of Ontario's Electoral System: Saviour or Threat to Democracy?*

The Ontario Citizens Assembly, a group of randomly-selected volunteers chosen to reflect the Ontario demographic, is meeting to consider alternatives to the present Single Member Plurality (first-past-the-post) electoral system now in place. If it recommends changes, a referendum must be held at the October 10th election this year. If the referendum passes, the new system must be in place by the 2011 election.

Prof. White outlined the two basic systems, Single Member Plurality (SMP) and some form of Proportional Representation (PR), stressing that neither was right nor wrong, and that each had characteristics that could be either advantages or disadvantages.

SMP involves electing one member in each geographic district. **Characteristics of SMP:** it is simple; can provide stable majority government; can minimize significant parties; provides a direct link between member and district; distorts voter preference; over-rewards the most popular parties; penalizes small parties; winning party may not have a majority of votes, over-rewards regional parties (e.g. Bloc) over national parties (e.g. NDP, Green) exacerbating regional differences. It has been accused of discouraging turn-out and producing wasted votes (i.e. those cast for losing parties).

Proportional Representation has many variations, but all involve seats being allocated according to the proportion of votes cast for the parties. The system that many favour is Mixed Member Proportionality (MMP) where a voter casts two ballots, one for a riding member, and one from a party list.

Characteristics of MMP: it is complex and confusing; results in MPs elected from the list likely having no direct connection with the electoral district; could cause an increase in the number of parties; may result in few if any majority governments; reduces the concentration of power in one party; can produce government paralysis (Israel, Italy), or long-term stable governments (Sweden, Germany); could yield large, unwieldy ridings. Claims that these systems lead to increased voter turn-out and increased representation by under-represented groups (women, aboriginals, ethnic minorities) have not been proven.

Prof. White gave an overview of the Ontario Citizens Assembly, explaining its make-up and characteristics. It was inspired by and similar to a group which considered electoral reform in B.C. last year. Their report is expected the week following Ontario Council's AGM.

Doris Anderson (1921 - 2007)

The morning session began with a tribute by Margaret McGovern to Doris Anderson, who died on March 2, for her work on women's issues. It was her dramatic resignation as chair of the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women that led to the inclusion of Article 28 of the Canadian Charter in which rights and freedoms were "guaranteed equally to male and female persons." Margaret proposed a scholarship on women's issues to be offered in Ms. Anderson's memory by CFUW, either at the national or provincial level.

The Family Statute Law Amendment Act

Other announcements included a plea for Clubs to pressure MPP's to proclaim Sections 1, 4 and 5 of Bill 27 (The Family Law Statute Amendment Act, 2006) which are the only sections not yet in force. These are of particular importance to women who may be disadvantaged by religious arbitration of family disputes under the existing law.

STATUS OF WOMEN & HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE - Afternoon Session

Our speaker was Marilyn Oladimeji, who is President of the Ontario Coalition of Rape Crisis Centres and a teacher at George Brown College in the "Assaulted Women's and Children's Counsellor/Advocate" program. Marilyn described the work of the Toronto Rape Crisis Centre (TRCC), including not only work with rape victims but also with victims of other forms of abuse and women prisoners. Among other things, such women tend to be bereft of self-esteem and lack the tools to change their lives for the better.

One particularly exciting program speaks to both of these needs by training abused women for well-paying technical jobs. It is a special six month trial project at George Brown College to train participants as heating and air conditioning technicians which pays \$20-\$25 per hour. The project is supported by a \$400,000 grant from the Ontario Women's Directorate and other partner agencies including George Brown College, Direct Energy, Nelly's Shelter, TRCC and Project READ. Fees, books, transportation, and child care are paid for while the women retain their social assistance. After six months training, the women will work with Direct Energy for two months' practice. Each woman is supported by one agency e.g., Nelly's. The managers of the project hope for a long-term program. George Brown College may pick up the program and find subsidies from the Ministry of Education and student loans.

Marilyn spoke of other work being done by the TRCC and the Coalition for Ontario Rape Crisis Centres such as the "Make My Community Safe" program. The Coalition is pressing Premier Dalton McGuinty to carry out the campaign promises to curb violence against women and children through its "Step It Up Ontario" campaign. This campaign includes the demand for affordable housing.

LEAF: Margaret McGovern, Co-Chair of the UWC North York Issues Committee, described the work of the Women's Legal Education and Action Fund (LEAF). LEAF works in challenging court decisions and acting as intervenor in appealing cases under the Charter of Rights & Freedoms. She pointed out that LEAF will no longer receive money from the Court Challenges Program since it was eliminated. One recent victory, *Dickie vs Dickie* ruled that defaulters of family support were in contempt of court and could be arrested. In addition, the court can refuse to hear appeals where someone is in default. 97% of defaulters are men. LEAF will intervene soon in a case testing the constitutionality of the "safe third country" term for those requesting refugee status. The term is part of the international agreement regarding refugees.

Next, we discussed questions for candidates at the next provincial election. There were a series of questions relating to those on social assistance or the working poor. "How would you work to assist persons to leave social assistance to become employed?" (The cost of training is more difficult as they cannot accept student loans/gifts/scholarships and remain on social assistance.) "How will you work to end the clawback of the Child Tax Benefit Supplement from families on social assistance?" "Will you support an increase to \$10 of the minimum wage?" "What is the role of Food Banks in our society? Why are more people asking them for food? Why are many of the working poor clients of the food banks?"

In addition we wish to have questions about affordable child care, affordable housing similar to issues included in CFUW Ontario Council's brief on poverty. "Where is the \$300,000 for child care spaces promised by the current Liberal government?" Further possible questions were suggested on how parties encourage more women candidates and our food supply in Ontario. "How would your government protect farmland, keep food costs moderate and pay attention to pollution involved in imports?"

A series of questions and background will be issued by Ontario Council to the Clubs. Questions may be asked at candidates' meeting, by e-mail and of candidate's reps at the door.

Judie Arrowood, Chair
Status of Women & Human Rights Committee
Anne Smith, Secretary pro tem

EDUCATION COMMITTEE - Afternoon Session

Twenty-four members attended the afternoon session of the Education Standing Committee.

Our guest for the afternoon was Annie Kidder, Executive Director of *People for Education*. This organization is an independent parents' group working to support public education in Ontario. They have become a voice in public education. Our focus for the session was the education environment in Ontario as we lead up to a provincial election in early October.

Ms. Kidder began by outlining how *P4E* obtains their information through surveys and an annual report sent to each school in Ontario. They have tracked the amount of fundraising, state of school libraries, physical education and funding in Northern Ontario schools. Working with Queen's University they have recently put together a report on school libraries. The report states the strong relationship between a school with a school library and the literacy in the school. The struggle for school libraries goes on.

Having recently received a Trillium Grant *P4E* will be using this funding to provide education to parents on how they can be more involved in their children's education and feel more comfortable in the school. Many parents experience different barriers, such as class distinction and language. It is believed all parents should be engaged in education as studies have shown that there is a relationship between parental involvement and a child's success in school.

The present day finds Ontario at a crossroads in education. When the Liberal government first came into power, teachers and parents were still mad about the previous governments cuts to education. The Liberal government believes strongly in public education and is working well with teachers and making improvements in funding and programs.

The smaller classroom size in the lower elementary grades was discussed. It was interesting to note that a child in Grade 2 could be in a classroom of 22 children then move onto Grade 3 and be in a split grade with over 35 children. Children were not prepared to deal with the increase in size. Teachers were reluctant to teach at the higher-grade levels because of the increased workload for preparation, teaching and marking.

Parent's expectations of their children to be successful in school and go to either college or university were discussed. We traditionally do not accept our children choosing a trade such as a plumber, electrician or mechanic.

Education and the Election

Unfortunately education is not on the agenda for the Fall election. Other issues such as health care, poverty and the environment are more at the forefront. This was found to be very disappointing as the representative from the Orangeville Club pointed out that "*our schools are a reflection of our society*". We went on further to discuss: the issues of childhood obesity being blamed on lack of physical education; breakfast clubs having been formed to feed hungry children so they can learn; and parental involvement tending to be eroded by divorce.

It was agreed that if children received the quality of education they deserve, our health care and social systems would be much better off. Education should be the priority.

Wendy Taylor, Chair
Education Committee

LEGISLATION COMMITTEE - Afternoon Session

Elaine Harvey initiated discussion on Bill 67, the *Organ and Tissue Donation Mandatory Declaration Act*, which mandates that those renewing driver's licences or health cards must indicate either that they agree with donating their organs, or are undecided about donating.

This contravenes the human right to opt not to donate organs by those people who oppose organ donation on religious or other grounds. Linda MacGregor will be sending a letter indicating Ontario Council's concern about this infringement on human rights because an individual should have the right to refuse. The letter, however, emphasizes that CFUW has a resolution that favours organ donation. (One member suggested that anyone refusing to donate should not be eligible to receive a donated organ.) Clubs were urged to lobby their MPPs on this human rights issue.

Electoral Reform: members were urged to make their Clubs aware of Prof. White's message from the morning session through newsletter reports, reference to the CFUW website, speakers, public meetings, and questions to be raised at all-candidates meetings.

All-Candidates Meetings: Elaine and Darla Campbell described successful all-candidates meetings held by the Kingston Club (municipal) and the Oakville Club (federal) respectively. Oakville's was a breakfast meeting, to which tickets were sold: Darla described the organization, set-up, advertising, and methods used to prevent excessive partisanship. She stressed the importance of scrupulous fairness in the treatment of candidates (e.g. order of speakers chosen by lot), and the necessity of establishing and communicating clear limits on what candidates may do (e.g. number of signs, number of brochures).

Questions for Candidates: The meeting broke into small groups to brainstorm questions for candidates in the provincial election, reflecting CFUW concerns. These will be collated, edited and presented at the OC AGM, and sent to Clubs for use at all candidates meetings.

Elaine Harvey, Chair
Legislation Committee