

WHY WE HOPE YOU WILL GET INVOLVED



We want to hear from as many different women and girls as possible. We want to know:

- Has your life and the lives of those you love improved in the past ten years? If so, in what ways?
- How do you think your life, and the lives of those you love, could be made happier, safer, freer, more secure?

Today Canada is going through difficult and divisive times. In the next few years we will face more changes than we have had to deal with since Confederation. And it's essential—just as it was ten years ago—that women's voices be heard in the coming discussions. There's a lot at stake for us.

Tonight there are no wrong answers, no red lights, no responses that are too ridiculous, too "far out". We won't all agree on the solutions. (Perhaps you won't even agree on the questions—which is why we've offered a choice for you.)

THE APERITIF

Every group will choose the most comfortable way to begin discussing these issues. You may want to start out with the two questions above—and then move on to the following more general questions as well.

THE FIRST COURSE: Make your own institutions

If there were no _____ would you re-invent it (them)?

If yes, how would you change it?

If no, how would you replace it?

Fill in the blank with one or more of the following:

- nations • provinces • justice system
- Senate • House of Commons • constitution
- municipal governments • marriage laws
- provincial governments • property ownership
- churches • gender roles • hospitals • taxes

SECOND COURSE: Your Choice of Entrees

If you were inventing a place called Canada, what would you say were the three, five, seven, ten—things you feel are most important to make it a good, fair and safe place to live? List them in order of importance.

For example one of your priorities might be looking after the environment, or that all children start out with an equal chance for an education, or that all people get adequate medical care, or that women have access to good child care, or that people are not discriminated against—native people, the disabled, ethnic groups, homosexuals.

Whatever your list, consider how best you think these ends could be achieved—by what arrangements between people? what rules? how do you

Equality Eve

WHY WE ARE CELEBRATING FEBRUARY 14TH, 1981

In 1980 and 1981 Canadian women played a central part in ensuring that strong equality guarantees were enshrined in the Canadian Charter of Rights—rights that will benefit women for generations to come.

In the spring of 1980, the government announced that it was bringing back Canada's constitution, the B.N.A. Act from Westminster in London with a new Charter of Rights to be entrenched in it. The Canadian Advisory Council decided to hold a conference on what a charter would mean for women. It commissioned eleven research papers. Later these were to become an invaluable reference for women.

But when the government announced the wording in the Charter, women realized to their horror that it would be useless. Clause 15, the clause covering discrimination, was identical to Canada's Bill of Rights—a document that had proved totally powerless to helping women. The council and other women's groups put on a blitz all during the fall of 1980 to make sure women knew how important it was to get the wording in the Charter changed.

Under pressure the government held hearings before a joint committee of the House of Commons and the Senate. Some of the finest, most compelling briefs were prepared by

women. In turn the government responded by making substantial changes to the charter, particularly to Clause 15.

The government then wanted to shut off all further discussion. It pressured the Advisory Council to postpone its conference. In protest at such unprecedented interference in a supposedly independent council, the president, Doris Anderson, resigned.

Canadian women all across the country who had high expectations of the conference and further changes, were infuriated. They decided to hold their own conference. Hundreds of women swung into action. Meeting rooms had to be booked, billets found, food arranged. It was the biggest mass movement of its kind by women in Canadian history. With almost no money, with word of mouth methods, 1400 women descended on Ottawa.

Over two days that began on February 14th, they decided what further changes they wanted in the Charter, and followed it up with a great lobbying job. Clause 28—which states the equality of men and women—was added to the charter. This clause is the same guarantee U.S. women have been trying to get in their constitution since 1923, and they have always failed.

The results of all that effort will

have a profound impact on Canadian women's lives. No other country gives women stronger protection in law.

1981-1991

Once the charter was in place, women needed to make sure this powerful tool worked for them. The Women's Legal Education and Action Fund (LEAF) was founded in April 1985 to carry equality cases through the courts. Some of the cases that have been won, have established the principle that:

- sexual harassment is discrimination on the basis of sex and is illegal
- the names of sexual assault victims need not be released to the media
- either parent is entitled to ten weeks parental leave on UIC benefits in addition to the mother's fifteen weeks maternity leave
- pregnancy discrimination is sex discrimination

But remember! Rights can always be eroded by decisions taken by a more conservative Supreme Court. And the Supreme Court has just lost two of its strongest advocates for the Charter equality rights—Bertha Wilson and Brian Dixon—and is likely to be much more conservative in the future. We must remain watchful.

make sure it happens? how do you make sure everyone is fairly treated? (Forget about our present set-up.)

YOUR CHOICE OF DESSERTS

Today in Canada some things like medicare, unemployment insurance and maternity leave are regulated by the federal government, and provinces may improve on them if they choose. Other things such as child care and homes for the aged are provided by taxes levied by the federal government, but the provinces are responsible for setting the programs up.

In the past the federal government has been responsible for setting up pensions, medicare, maternity leave, unemployment insurance, health standards, etc., and then enforcing uniform conditions all across the country. If every province sets its own standards, will people be better off? Is it important that everyone is treated the same—or would a poor province like New Brunswick end up with worse care than a rich province like Ontario? What would that do for the feeling of unity among Canadians? Would it be a good or bad thing?

AFTER DINNER CONVERSATION

How do you feel about Canada?

Do you consider yourself a Canadian first or a British Columbian, or Quebecker, or Newfoundlander? Does it matter?

Do you feel strongly Canadian, or would you care if Canada gradually became part of the U.S.?

How do you see Canada in the future?

Canada prides itself on being a multicultural, bilingual country. Unlike the U.S. which is a "melting pot" which absorbs newcomers and everyone becomes an "American", in Canada we take pride in our differences.

Today, all over the world ethnic minorities are agitating for independence—the Croats and Slovaks in Yugoslavia, the Basques in Spain, the many different republics in the U.S.S.R.

How far can Canada go in dispersing power to some of its constituent parts such as provinces, regions, aboriginal peoples, religious and ethnic groups, and still be a nation? Is it important?

Is there anything else you want to add?

Are there any other questions you think women should be discussing at this time? Anything we've left out? Feel free to add whatever you want to your answers and mail them to us.

And carry on the discussion. Its important. This decade is stacking up to be the turning point for Canada: globally and internally. What women citizens of Canada do individually and together will be crucial to our future—and our children's! Let's get started in our own communities now.

And don't forget to mail in your results!

Send to: Equality Eve, O.I.S.E., 252 Bloor Street West, Toronto, Ontario, M5S 1V6, or fax to (416) 961-7104.