

Oral Questions

Immigration. Last year the minister, who was then responsible for the status of women in Canada, indicated publicly that voluntary affirmative action did not work and that mandatory action would be required. Privately, however, we learned that the minister and the cabinet continued to pursue a very ineffective go-slow approach. Now we hear from both the minister who is responsible for the status of women this year, and also from the Minister of Labour, that the same thing applies—that voluntary affirmative action does not work.

Will the Minister of Employment and Immigration explain what evidence he had that led to this statement? Will he also tell the House what action he feels is needed to replace a voluntary affirmative action policy?

Hon. Lloyd Axworthy (Minister of Employment and Immigration): Madam Speaker, I am very pleased that the hon. member asked that question because it gives us the opportunity to explain that over the past several months we have been engaged in a very active discussion about affirmative action programs with the business community.

As the hon. member knows, two parliamentary committees, one on the handicapped and one on the labour market, recommended that we attempt to develop affirmative action programs in co-operation with the major participants, the labour unions and the business community. That is exactly what I have been doing for the past several months, meeting with these organizations to discuss with them what the most effective means would be of assuring equality of access in the workplace. We are continuing those discussions because we happen to believe that the most effective way of introducing such plans is not through confrontation with these groups, as the hon. member's party advocates, but through co-operation with those groups. That is what we intend to do.

REQUEST FOR COMPULSORY ACTION PROGRAM

Mrs. Margaret Mitchell (Vancouver East): Madam Speaker, my supplementary question is directed to the Prime Minister, and it concerns the constitutional rights of women. The Minister of Labour, the Minister of State for Mines, and the Minister of Employment and Immigration have now publicly stated that the government's voluntary program on affirmative action for women in the workplace has failed, yet the cabinet has refused to implement a policy of compulsory compliance even for the civil service and companies that have contracts with the federal government.

Since the new Constitution endorses affirmative action as a means for women achieving equal rights, will the Prime Minister, as the leader of this country, stop being such a bloody hypocrite—

Some hon. Members: Oh, oh!

Mrs. Mitchell:—and will he tell the women of Canada that he now will require—

Some hon. Members: Oh, oh!

Mrs. Mitchell:—will he tell the women of Canada that he now will require a policy—

An hon. Member: Withdraw!

Madam Speaker: Order, please. I cannot quite recall if that expression is parliamentary or not. I do not have the list before me.

An hon. Member: It is not.

Madam Speaker: Since it is creating such a ruckus, perhaps the hon. member would like to rephrase her sentence.

Mrs. Mitchell: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Would the Prime Minister stop being such a hypocrite, and will he now require a policy of mandatory affirmative action in the public service, and for all companies that do business—

Madam Speaker: Order, please. I am told that that expression really cannot be used, and I would ask the hon. member to withdraw it or rephrase the sentence.

An hon. Member: Withdraw!

Mrs. Mitchell: Madam Speaker, I would be very pleased—

Some hon. Members: Oh, oh!

Madam Speaker: Order, please. Would the House allow the hon. member to respond.

Mrs. Mitchell: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I would be pleased to withdraw. I know the sensitivities of the Prime Minister. On behalf of Canadian women would he please introduce compulsory compliance affirmative action programs in the federal jurisdiction?

Right Hon. P. E. Trudeau (Prime Minister): Madam Speaker, I am in no way as sensitive about this matter as the NDP apparently is. The hon. member should remember that she is a member of a party which has elected a government in Saskatchewan which opposed the insertion of women's rights in the charter.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

An hon. Member: That is not true.

Mr. Trudeau: Surely the hon. lady—if I can call her that—

Some hon. Members: Oh, oh!

An hon. Member: Withdraw!

Mr. Trudeau:—should not forget that when members on all sides of this House were trying to insert a guarantee into the Charter of Rights that women would be treated equally, the last holdout when the Minister of Justice was trying to get the province to come aboard was Premier Blakeney of Saskatchewan.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!