

KEY ELECTION ISSUES FOR ISLAND WOMEN: LOCAL CANDIDATES RESPOND

Follow-up to the PEI Advisory Council on the Status of Women's
"Federal Election 2004: Guide to the Issues"
Compiled June 23, 2004



LEGAL AID: *Will your party implement a national legal aid program that includes funding for family legal aid?*

Conservatives	Greens	Liberals	NDP
<p>Over the last decade, provinces have been faced with shrinking transfers from the federal government which [have] made it increasingly difficult for them to meet all of their spending commitments. A Conservative government would respect provincial jurisdiction over legal aid but would also work to rectify the fiscal imbalance which exists between the federal and provincial governments, thus giving provincial governments greater flexibility in delivering much needed programs, including legal aid.</p>	<p>Yes. This is consistent with our party's position on ensuring funding is made available to enable all people equal participation/representation in the justice system.</p>	<p><i>From Shawn Murphy and Joe McGuire:</i> It is the provinces and territories that oversee the delivery of civil legal aid services. Major service delivery areas that make up civil legal aid include: family law, poverty or social benefits law, and refugee legal aid. Up until 1994-95, the delivery of civil legal aid services was supported by the federal government through the Canada Assistance Plan (CAP), administered by the then Department of Health and Welfare, as an item of special need. Eligibility was determined by the financial circumstance of the individual, while cost-shared matters were determined by each province's legal aid agency. In 1995-96, however, the CAP was absorbed into the Canadian Health and Social Transfer (CHST). This is a federal transfer provided to each province to support provincial health care, post-secondary education, social assistance, and social services. Therefore, funding for civil legal aid is now provided to the provinces through the CHST. The 2003 budget increased this assistance by committing \$53 million over two years to improve the family justice system, and \$89 million over two years for legal aid. But, the Island candidates would always be supportive of any initiative which would result in additional resources to legal aid where it is most needed.</p>	<p>Legal aid in the country primarily benefits men. There is legal aid assistance for those facing criminal charges but very little assistance for those, majority of whom are women, who are facing family related legal issues. As family legal aid programs are provincially funded, there is a disparity in access to these resources across the country. Presently, PEI is the least funded per capita of all the provinces and territories. Family legal aid programs need to be a priority so that Island women and all women across the country have equal and [accessible] assistance in exercising their property and custody rights as well as their right to [an] equitable settlement in family matters.</p>

THE ADVISORY COUNCIL'S ANALYSIS OF THE RESPONSES ON LEGAL AID:

- We are heartened that the **NDP's** response offers a sympathetic assessment of the legal aid problem from an equality perspective. However, their response here makes no concrete promises to Island women.
- The **Green Party's** response to the legal aid question is not yet fully developed.
- The local **Liberal Party** candidates do well to promise to support "additional resources" where they are "needed most." Where they are needed most, for women, is in family legal aid. The Liberals are also right to point to the loss of CAP and its replacement with the CHST as a turning point in federal-provincial negotiations over social transfers. Social transfers are important in that they provide core funding for provincially regulated programs such as family legal aid. With the creation of the CHST by then-Finance Minister Paul Martin came a loss of opportunity. The federal government used to put **conditions** on social transfers and could use cost-sharing under CAP to create **incentives** for provinces to establish equitable, accessible programs. The federal government could use its spending and regulatory power to help ensure that all provinces provided equitable access to legal aid. The Liberals' abandonment of CAP has had regrettable effects for women. It is also worth noting that the \$89 million dedicated to legal aid in the 2003 budget applied to criminal legal aid, which is mostly used by men. Funding for family legal aid, which is mostly used by women, is still lumped in with the CHST, without any conditions placed on provinces' use of the money.
- The **Conservative** position on our legal aid question raises concerns. Their focus on giving decision-making power to provinces would entrench the kind of thinking that saw the Liberals give up their responsibility to use social transfers to spur provinces to establish good, equitable programs. More decision-making power for provinces should raise some concern in provinces with fewer resources. "Respecting provincial jurisdiction" and giving provinces "greater flexibility" could mean that inequalities across the country are also entrenched, and that "have-not" provinces such as Prince Edward Island continue to be unable to provide services at the same level as other provinces with larger budgets.

Both the Liberals' and the Conservatives' plans would allow the PEI provincial government to continue to fall back on the perennial excuse of "insufficient federal funding." We believe the federal government has a role in providing funding, incentives, and leadership on social transfers, including those that affect family justice and legal aid. How the federal government doles out its social spending has real effects on women's equality.

DIVORCE REFORM: Will your party reform divorce law to ensure that the rights of all family members - fathers, mothers, and children - are protected?

Conservatives	Greens	Liberals	NDP
<p>It would be a priority for a Conservative government that all citizens receive fair treatment from our legal system. Divorce and family breakdown take their toll on fathers, mothers, and especially children, and we would be committed to ensuring that our legal system properly balances and protects the interests of all involved. At present, however, there are [no] plans to change the current divorce laws.</p>	<p>This is an issue that would require stakeholder involvement. The Green Party of Canada supports the concept of involving advocacy groups and local organizations to help ensure their concerns are taken into account during the legislative process. A fair and equitable judicial process is essential for resolving issues that surround family law.</p>	<p><i>From Shawn Murphy and Joe McGuire:</i> While the Government of Canada does not provide services to Canadians directly because this is a provincial/territorial responsibility, it is committed to promoting the development and maintenance of family justice services. In regards to interests, the “best interests of the child” has been the core principle of family law in Canada for some time.</p>	<p>The failure of Bill C-22, an act to amend the divorce act, to get passed on second reading of parliament is just another example of women and women issues being poorly served in parliament. Although Bill C-22 did have some problems, for the most part, it was a positive improvement for women over the present divorce legislation. Further work in the area of divorce and related issues for women needs to take place. The NDP would be supportive in assessing these changes.</p>

THE ADVISORY COUNCIL’S ANALYSIS OF THE RESPONSES ON DIVORCE REFORM:

None of the parties acknowledge that women are most often the primary caregivers of Canadian children, or that women and children leaving abusive relationships require special recognition under divorce laws in Canada.

- The **Liberals’** focus on the “best interests of the child” is admirable, but it may not go far enough to assist and protect children’s mothers.
- The **Conservatives**, with their emphasis on the “fair treatment” of “all citizens” appear to presume that the interests of everyone in a family — mothers, fathers, and children — should be considered equally. But we know that men, women, and children rarely enter into divorce proceedings as “equals,” and this needs to be recognized.
- The **Green Party** offers a promise that Canadian women would be consulted and included in any process to consider divorce reform.
- The **NDP** offers the most concrete plan for how to proceed with divorce reform after the failure of Bill C-22.

ABORTION RIGHTS: *Will your party ensure access to abortion in all Canadian jurisdictions, including PEI?*

Conservatives	Greens	Liberals	NDP
<p>A Conservative government will not introduce legislation to restrict a woman's ability to access abortion.</p>	<p>Yes.</p>	<p><i>From Shawn Murphy and Joe McGuire:</i> I do not believe that there is currently any consensus for a change in the current laws governing abortion. I would not support the use of the Notwithstanding Clause in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms to block the implementation of decisions of the Supreme Court of Canada on this topic.</p>	<p>Therapeutic abortion services are not presently available except in extreme cases and approved by a panel of doctors. Island women have to travel, at their own expense, to a private clinic in Halifax or [Fredericton], despite the Canada Health Act stating that all Canadians are entitled to equal access to medical care. In reality this is not the case for Island women. The NDP are committed to ensuring [that] Island women and all women across the country have access to safe, therapeutic abortion services.</p>

THE ADVISORY COUNCIL'S ANALYSIS OF THE RESPONSES ON ABORTION RIGHTS:

Neither the **Conservative** nor the **Liberal** candidates can be said to **support** women's rights to make their own reproductive choices. The best they promise is not to take those choices away! Only the **Greens** and the **NDP** address the question of **local access to abortion on PEI**, and both support better access to abortion for Island women.

UNPAID WORK: *How will your party recognize and value the unpaid work of women?*

Conservatives	Greens	Liberals	NDP
<p>A Conservative government will value the unpaid work of women and will restore fairness to our tax system, which presently penalizes families who decide to care for their children at home. A Conservative government will introduce a \$2000 per child tax deduction, phased in over four years. A Conservative government will also increase the size of the GST credit by 25 percent.</p> <p>More and more Canadians are taking care of elderly parents in their own homes. Often, the responsibility of caring for loved ones in the home falls to women. The Conservative Party of Canada wants to provide help and encouragement for families that make the decision to take care of loved ones at home, often at great financial sacrifice. A Conservative government will double the size of the caregivers' tax credit to cover \$7000 in allowable expenses.</p>	<p>The way that we value economic growth in our society needs to take into account the social and cultural contributions made by women who are not paid for their work. The genuine progress indicator (GPI) is one metric that could be used to help determine the true value and raise awareness of the value of this work and how it helps contribute to the betterment of our society.</p>	<p><i>From Shawn Murphy and Joe McGuire:</i> I recognize that it is women who do the vast majority of unpaid work and that this situation puts women at a disadvantage in terms of institutional finance systems, such as tax benefits and pension contributions. To work towards closing the gap between the amount of unpaid work done by women and the amount of unpaid work done by men, the Government has, over the last ten years, instituted a number of initiatives. In 1995, the Employment Equity Act was passed, endeavouring to destroy barriers to women's employment. For women who are engaged in unpaid work caring for sick family members, a tax credit of \$5,000 was established in 1998. The Liberal government has now committed to doubling that amount to \$10,000.</p>	<p>There are a number of ways to alleviate the unfairness to women caused by their countless hours spent doing unpaid work such as care giving, household and community work. The NDP party has proposed ideas such as increasing the child tax benefit and permitting those who don't pay tax to qualify, easing EI eligibility requirements to factor in a worker's year in the work force plus benefiting women who have worked in the past but may have stopped working to take on caregiver responsibilities. As well, improving access to CPP/QPP benefits by expanding the current drop-out provisions for child care to include other unpaid care. There are a number of options to explore, within our tax system being just one example, where changes can be made to recognize the value of the unpaid work of women.</p>

THE ADVISORY COUNCIL'S ANALYSIS OF THE RESPONSES ON UNPAID WORK:

Recognizing unpaid work requires innovative thinking. Both the **Conservatives** and the **Liberals** have at least begun to recognize the economic, social, and cultural importance of unpaid work in their platforms; both offer tax credits for caregivers. This is commendable. The **Conservatives** make admirable provisions for all children and for women who care for their own children, though because the benefits are distributed through the tax system, their proposal would have little benefit for a lone parent struggling to care for a child without paid employment. The **Liberals** approach the problem of unpaid work with a greater diversity of benefits, to meet the needs of a wider group of women. Both the **Liberals** and **Conservatives** acknowledge the growing importance of assistance for those who care for family members. The **Greens** offer an innovative way of valuing unpaid work in fundamental, non-monetary ways. The **NDP** offers the most comprehensive and inclusive strategy, incorporating solutions into the tax system, the EI system, and the CPP system to benefit the largest cross-section of women and to allow them options.

EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION: Will your party develop a national, universal, and quality child care program?

Conservatives	Greens	Liberals	NDP
<p>A Conservative government will be committed to assisting Canadians and Islanders, with the financial challenges of raising a family. Previous federal governments have made commitments to help families in this area, and have failed to deliver. [We] will deliver on its promises and will assist Canadian families by introducing a \$2000 per child tax deduction, phased in over four years; will increase the size of the GST Tax Credit by 25 percent; and will raise thresholds for all tax brackets and will phase out the 22 percent tax bracket on taxable income between \$35,000 and \$70,000. The Conservative Party . . . believes in offering choices to Canadian families, including those who wish to have one parent remain in the home as a child care and early learning option. [We] will recognize and respect provincial jurisdiction over such issues as child care, but is committed to building a new relationship with the provinces which includes supporting the new Council of the Federation established by the provinces. A Conservative government will encourage the Council to share information and best practices in areas such as health care, education, and other social programs. Our commitments to restoring predictability and fairness to the Equalization formula and to implement the First Ministers' Accord on Health Care Renewal will better enable the provinces to meet their social spending commitments.</p>	<p>Yes. Adopting the model that the province of Quebec uses would be a good place to start.</p>	<p><i>From Shawn Murphy and Joe McGuire:</i> Accessible and affordable child care and early learning is proven to be a valuable investment in the futures of our children, as well as in our society. A Liberal government will create "Foundations" national early learning and child care program. I believe that this program has been a long time in coming, and I am very pleased that it makes up part of our platform.</p> <p>We will phase in a contribution of \$5 billion over the next five years, beyond funds already committed, to accelerate the construction of this national system. The Foundations program will ensure that children have access to high-quality, government-regulated spaces at affordable cost to parents.</p>	<p>Women make up 45% of the work force in Canada. Whether they are heading single-parent families or make up one half of two income families, Canadian women play a very important part in the work force. It is clear that we need to assist these women who choose to participate in the work force. One of the best ways to assist is to invest in a national child care program. The NDP proposes to work with the provinces and territories to provide stable, long-term federal funds to create an additional 200,000 high quality, affordable, publicly funded child care spaces within four years. Child care professionals recognize the value of the early years. Island children are entitled to quality early child care and educational services. The NDP's proposal for building affordable housing and rent supplements to low income Canadians will also assist single mothers in getting their children off to a good start in life.</p>

THE ADVISORY COUNCIL'S ANALYSIS OF THE RESPONSES ON CHILD CARE:

All the parties offer ideas that would improve access to early childhood care and education for Canadian women. The **Liberals**, the **Greens**, and the **NDP** all propose increased access to child care and early learning opportunities.

- The **Liberal** plan is most comprehensive and might best match the “national, universal, and quality child care” program called for in our question. But, unfortunately, the Liberals have promised accessible child care in previous elections.
- The **NDP** helpfully integrates its strategy into a broader social context.
- The **Green Party's** national platform suggests student loan forgiveness for working graduates of childhood education programs, a nice nod to our educators.
- Only the **Conservatives** make no promises about increased access to universal child care. The Conservatives propose to give parents options through tax credits and through better, more consistent support for the provinces. Tax credits don't always help the most vulnerable mothers in Canada, and more autonomy for the provinces is not necessarily a good thing when it comes to providing access to social programs in small provinces such as PEI. The Conservatives are the only party that makes any promises that would benefit parents caring for their children themselves, at home.

PARENTAL BENEFITS: *What will your party do to make parental benefits accessible to women?*

Conservatives	Greens	Liberals	NDP
<p>Currently, a Conservative government would have no plans to change the formula for accessing parental benefits under the Employment Insurance program.</p>	<p>The justice system needs to take a more active role in ensuring parental benefits are paid to women in a timely and efficient manner.</p> <p>The Green Party also wants to raise parental benefits under the EI act and to reorganise, streamline and integrate all income support programs, so that you get the support needed whether or not you are eligible for EI. Income supports are an investment in our people and in the future. The stigma and persecution and unnecessary layers of bureaucracy often apparent in the current system must be done away with.</p>	<p><i>From Shawn Murphy and Joe McGuire:</i></p> <p>The Liberal Government has greatly increased the length of parental leave, and has changed the Employment Insurance Act so that fathers may also benefit from Parental Leave. That said, a great deal of work remains to be done, and I am committed to improving benefits for mothers who do not necessarily qualify for parental benefits, such as the unemployed and students. The Liberal commitment to establish a national child care program becomes an extremely important step toward achieving this goal.</p>	<p>Parental benefits for women need to accurately reflect changes in the work place and include part-time, self-employed, and seasonal workers. Employment insurance coverage needs to broaden eligibility requirements as well as increase the benefit amount of maternity benefits so as to make it easier for women to qualify and to put less financial strain on them and their families while off on maternity leave.</p>

THE ADVISORY COUNCIL'S ANALYSIS OF RESPONSES ON PARENTAL BENEFITS:

The **Liberals**, the **Greens**, and the **NDP** all promise to improve access to benefits and to work towards broadening the eligibility to include parents who would not be eligible under the EI system. The **NDP** further promises to increase the amount of money women receive while on maternity leave (to make it higher than the current level, which is 55% of her salary). The **Conservatives** would leave the system as is, which means leaving it inaccessible to vulnerable women — students and unemployed women, for instance, but also women in non-standard employment (working part-time, seasonally employed, or self-employed).

WOMEN'S VOICES: *How will your party ensure that women's voices are returned to national debates?*

Conservatives	Greens	Liberals	NDP
<p>A belief in the equality of all Canadians is a founding principle of the Conservative Party of Canada. All Canadians must be vigilant in ensuring that our national debates reflect that principle. Women have made significant contributions and great gains in all areas of Canadian society including politics, the arts, the academic community, and the professions, all the while – if they so choose – raising families. Canadian women have a lot to be proud of, but they also need to be vigilant in ensuring women continue to have a strong voice in national debates.</p> <p>The Conservative Party of Canada, nationally, and right here in Prince Edward Island, counts as members, women who are passionate about our country and are committed to returning ethics and accountability to politics, and to government. Canadian women work very hard and it is unacceptable that any government would spend their money recklessly and irresponsibly.</p> <p>A Conservative government will work hard to restore faith in our government institutions and will create a climate which will encourage all Canadian women to engage in the political process, and to fully participate in building a better Canada.</p>	<p>We would encourage the involvement of women in the democratic process. One way to do this is to work with local community groups that are promoting women's issues and ensure that they have access to adequate resources to enable them to get their issues put on the agenda.</p> <p><i>From Irene Novaczek on the 10 core Green values:</i> These values are derived from the global green movement and help to define us as new and separate from other parties....</p> <p>Equity, and in particular gender equity as well as more generally social justice, as two of the ten core green values. Grassroots democracy is another. As a young party that has never enjoyed funding that would allow us to hire researchers, we recognise that some of our policies lack detail. However, the party is not one where only the leader calls the shots and makes the decisions. We develop policy through collaborative efforts based on transparent core values. . . .</p> <p><i>[See also the Greens' response on "Electoral Reform," below.]</i></p>	<p><i>From Shawn Murphy and Joe McGuire:</i> The Liberal Party of Canada is proud of the 76 female candidates running in this election. They represent women from all walks of Canadian life and will bring a wealth of experience and fresh ideas to the new Parliament.</p> <p>At the time of the election call there were forty Liberal women in Parliament - far more than any other party. These women meet weekly when the House of Commons is sitting to discuss emerging issues, key pieces of legislation and topics that concern Canadian women. The National Liberal Women's Caucus works within government to enhance women's equality. They have provided input on several pieces of important legislation such as pay equity, the Youth Criminal Justice Act and the Canada Child Tax Benefit.</p> <p>As part of its electoral financing legislation, the Liberal Government also included new spending limits for candidates seeking party nominations in an effort to eliminate a potential barrier for women entering politics. The National Liberal Women's Commission continues to identify barriers and to work within the Liberal Party to eliminate them. We are particularly proud of our Judy LaMarsh fund which provides substantial financial assistance to women Liberal candidates.</p>	<p>The NDP have implemented changes to the party structure to try to [ensure] that 50% of the candidates are women. In this election, 30% of the candidates are women. The NDP is consistently working towards this 50% goal. These structural changes implemented are unique to the NDP. There is no similar changes in either of the other two party structures.</p>

THE ADVISORY COUNCIL'S ANALYSIS OF THE RESPONSES ON WOMEN'S VOICES:

We need to hear women's voices in the political arena, but not just those of women politicians. Women's advocacy groups require funding and support to continue their equality-seeking work. None of the parties offer plans to ensure that advocates for women, inside or outside government, will be supported.

- The **Greens'** process for setting policy would include women's groups in a concrete and important way, including voices from the grassroots and all walks of life. Their plans offer the best chance for women's voices to be heard. They have the advantage of gender equity underpinning their processes and policies.
- The **Liberals** and the **NDP** both point to their parties' efforts to encourage women to enter politics at the federal level, and both parties are taking important strides.
- The **Conservative** position, that women themselves "need to be vigilant in ensuring women continue to have a strong voice in national debates" is disappointing. Of course, women have a responsibility to ensure their voices are heard. But we believe that governments also have a role as a partner and supporter of women and women's groups as they seek to be heard at the grassroots and governmental levels. After all, women's strong voices have led to the greatest social developments in recent Canadian history, creating a society that is recognized around the world for its advances towards equality.

ELECTORAL REFORM: *How will your party work towards electoral reform?*

Conservatives	Greens	Liberals	NDP
<p>The Conservative Party of Canada is committed to implementing meaningful democratic reforms to address this country's democratic deficit.</p> <p>In an effort to improve democracy in Canada, a Conservative government will appoint non-partisan independent commissions to examine and report on best practices from other jurisdictions on methods of direct democracy and alternatives to the voting system, which includes how we elect Members of Parliament, which could include exploring various forms of proportional representation, as mentioned in the recent leaders debate.</p> <p>A Conservative government will also introduce other democratic reforms including fixed election dates for every four years; ensuring fairness and transparency in party nomination and leadership races; only appointing elected Senators to the Senate; making all votes, except for the budget and main estimates, "free votes" for ordinary Members for Parliament; allowing Parliament to review and ratify appointments, such as Officers of Parliament, Supreme Court Justices, and heads of major Crown corporations and agencies.</p>	<p>We would reform the system to one that would be based [on] proportional representation, probably similar to that found in New Zealand or Tasmania. Fixed election dates would also be established.</p> <p><i>Comments on the Greens' process, continued from "Women's Voices":</i> As Greens, we are committed to respectful consultation with concerned citizens so that the programs we develop will have flexibility to suit local needs as well as provide minimum national standards. To assist with decision-making we would use systems of full cost accounting so that social, spiritual, environmental and cultural values are recognized as well as financial costs. Many of us in the Green Party come out of community based social and environmental organizations and municipal governments so we know how difficult community consultation can be, but we believe it is essential to provide people with balanced information and to restore faith and hope and a sense of common purpose in the nation, for the sake of ourselves and future generations.</p>	<p><i>From Shawn Murphy and Joe McGuire:</i> I am very much in favour of exploring ways in which we can reform our democratic system to more accurately reflect the public will. Systems of proportional representation, for example, consistently elect more women. In considering changes to our electoral system, however, it is of the utmost importance to me that Prince Edward Island does not experience a decrease in its level of representation. In the short term, I believe that a move toward preferential balloting – even within the first-past-the-post system – should be explored.</p>	<p>The NDP proposes holding a referendum on whether to change the voting system to one based on proportional representation, similar to systems in Germany and New Zealand that respect voters' choices, protect local representation and require broad levels of support for a party to qualify for seats in Parliament.</p>

THE ADVISORY COUNCIL'S ANALYSIS OF THE RESPONSES ON ELECTORAL REFORM:

- The **Conservative** commitment to examining alternative voting systems is good. It will be well worth examining and assessing the potential benefits to women of many of their ideas. Taken as a whole, their package of proposals for addressing the "democratic deficit" is overbalanced in favour of majorities and endangers minorities and other vulnerable groups, including women. The Conservatives must ensure their democratic reforms guard against a tyranny of the majority and uphold the Charter of Rights and Freedoms as the most important protection of minority rights.
- The local **Liberal** position is refreshingly supportive of exploring electoral reform and reminds us of the fundamental importance of PEI's special constitutional promise that our federal representation will not decrease. This is an important point, since our federal representation is a vital tool for Island women.
- Both the **NDP** and the **Greens** support proportional representation, which has been shown again and again in jurisdictions around the world to help increase women's presence in electoral politics.