

The demise of the Advisory Council: one year later

By Jody Dallaire

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Last year at this time, the provincial government was officially marking International Women's Day with sponsored events and media releases reminding us that "there is still a great deal to be achieved" towards the equality of the sexes. It said it hoped that women's day would "motivate to continue to strive for equality."

Unofficially it had likely already decided to abolish its independent body that worked for gender equality. Later that month, David Alward would announce he was reneging on a promise in his platform, and instead of "actively engaging" with the Advisory Council on the Status of Women as the platform said, he would abolish it. The Advisory Council, which had been created by another Progressive Conservative government, was the only independent voice for women's concerns in the government and was doing valued work as the reaction to his decision would soon attest. Among the many manifestations of that shock that were seen in the days and months following the council's abolition, many remember the photos of large numbers of mostly young women with tape over their mouths on which "Alward" was written.

The government has since at times seemed to regret the day it made that decision, but it also has had it easier because the council is not around. That was why the council was abolished, not to save the couple of hundred thousand dollars, as was suggested. The Advisory Council researched and raised issues that were not on the government's agenda, it commented publicly when no one in the government would — and still won't — on how issues affect women.

It informed women and groups, and anyone else listening, on the status of equality in the province.

What might the council have done in the past year if they had been in place? In other words, what have we missed?

What did the government dodge?

Had the council been around in the last year, we likely would have in hand better information with which to receive and analyze the upcoming provincial budget. The council had made substantial contributions to understanding budgets from an equality point of view. The council promoted critical thinking among feminists and community groups. Follow the money, so that

governments cannot say one thing and spend on another. In other words, tell me what you spend on and I'll tell you what your priorities are. Nobody has stepped up to the plate to play that role since the abolishment of the council.

The council compiled a status report of statistics on women and men in the province which showed, among other things, where inequalities still existed or were still being tolerated. It had commissioned or supported studies on what a tax reform would mean for equality, for women, female headed families and ordinary citizens. It broadcast and supported groups and individuals who were researching or asking questions about the budget.

Were the council still around, we would have had in the last year dozens of public sessions in every region of New Brunswick on subjects of interest to women, such as fairness and equality. The council reached thousands of New Brunswickers every year with their very popular and unusual series of 'Lunch and Learn' sessions.

In the years before the council was abolished I attended many or listened to recordings of them available on the council's web site. 'How is the child care system working for you?', 'Running for City Hall 101,' 'Sex Matters!: Why Analysis Must Include Gender,' 'Sex and Taxes in New Brunswick,' 'Women, Poverty and the Recession. Are We There Yet?,' 'Child Care Spending as Economic Stimulus' and 'Promoting Social Justice for Rural New Brunswick' are some of the titles.

At one of its last public sessions on the impact of the government's tax-cutting agenda, with economists Jean-Philippe Bourgeois and Joe Ruggeri, it distributed, as was its habit, a 'suggested action' sheet if citizens were interested in following up on the issue discussed, complete with email addresses, media contacts and lists for further readings. You can bet this was not welcome everywhere.

Were the Advisory Council still around, it would likely have spoken about the number of domestic violence related murder suicides and femicide in this province lately. Without them around, we hear about the services available for surviving victims of wife abuse — but no one is saying, like the council would have said on this topic — 'we're wiping the floor but we're not shutting the tap.'

Were the council still around, it would likely have told us about the impact on women of successive governments' irresponsible management of the minimum wage levels. It would have estimated the thousands of dollars that some of New Brunswick's hardest working and lowest paid workers — those in child care centres, community homes, battered women's shelters and home support services — have lost and will never get back because of successive governments'

'slow motion' attitude on pay equity.

Some may think that the government has weathered citizens' wrath about the abolition of the Advisory Council on the Status of Women. The government has since taken little action to reduce gender inequalities, to work with the equality-seeking community or allow for gender issues to be taken into account in public business.

However, the government knows, from its own surveys and from the continued reaction of the citizens it meets, that it did a mean and unnecessary thing when it abolished the council and has lost some credibility as a result.

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