

## **Federal Program Cuts Jeopardize Democracy**

VANCOUVER – West Coast LEAF is outraged by the government's decision to eliminate the Court Challenges Program and drastically reduce \$5-million in funding for Status of Women Canada.

"We are saddened by how short-sighted these cuts are, given that these programs, now deemed 'bad ideas' have in fact provided Canadians with some of our most important gains in equality and access to justice - achievements for which Canada has been recognized internationally," says West Coast LEAF volunteer vice-president Nitya Iyer. "Taking away economic support for these programs erodes the rights themselves."

Treasury Board President John Baird's comments that it doesn't make "sense for the government to subsidize lawyers to challenge the government's own law in court," represent a superficial understanding of the importance of constitutional rights. If the people whose rights are compromised cannot challenge the laws that affect them, they have no rights.

Minority and marginalized groups must have effective access to the courts and governments. This is a fundamental aspect of democratic governance and is a key aspect of Canada's internationally admired Constitution. The Court Challenges Program and the Status of Women Canada have played a vital role in ensuring that vulnerable members of our society have a meaningful opportunity to be heard by courts and government agencies. Cutting these two programs will compromise the ability of women to challenge legislation and to participate fully in the legislative process. This erodes women's democratic rights and poses a serious threat to women's equality.

The promise of the Charter was to entrench "*values and principles essential to a free and democratic society which I believe embody, to name but a few, respect for the inherent dignity of the human person, commitment to social justice and equality, accommodation of a wide variety of beliefs, respect for cultural and group identity, and faith in social and political institutions which enhance the participation of individuals and groups in society.*" (Chief Justice Dickson in *R. v Oakes*).

These values can only be realized if violations of them can be enforced through the courts. In cutting the means by which groups with little or no economic power gain access to the courts, the government's commitment to those values is called into question.

Founded in 1985, West Coast LEAF works in partnership with LEAF national to advance the equality of women and other marginalized groups. We do this by carrying out public legal education, conducting equality rights litigation primarily using the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and by advocating for law reform to ensure that government policies and legislation enable women to participate fully in the social, economic and political life of their communities.

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