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will
MICHAEL
IGNATIEFF

STAND
UP

for

WOMEN?

BY SHELAGH DAY

Michael Ignatieff's commitment to acting on women's equality issues remains an unknown. Shelagh Day provides some free advice in her open letter to the federal Liberal party leader on how to win the support of women.

Dear Mr. Ignatieff,
I just finished reading your book *True Patriot Love*. I was touched by your description of what it means to love one's country. True patriot love, you say, is not necessarily a love of what one's country is, but of what it might become. You write: "the real country, the object of love and longing, is an imagined place on the horizon that we hope to reach one day, if we can marshal sufficient courage, faith and determination." And you say that the purpose of political life is to narrow the gap between the land we live in and the land we can imagine. That has been the goal of my life—to narrow the gap between the Canada we live in and the Canada that I and many other women can imagine.

It is striking to me then that this book, which is mainly about your Grant forefathers' ideas of Canada and their involvement in the development of the country, has no foremothers in it. There are women that your forefathers loved, but you seem to have no female intellectual ancestors.

Of course, a book called *True Patriot Love* is about loving the *patris*, or fatherland. But when that book is written in 2008, it is notable that there is still no sense of the mothers or of a coexisting motherland. You do not remark on the important absence of the women in anyone's history-telling, including your forefathers', nor do you embed women, with our centuries of experience of caring and community-building, in your vision of the future of Canada. Quebec, Aboriginal communities and Canada's racially and culturally diverse people figure in your vision, yet women do not. This invisibility of women is shocking in a book written by a leader of a Canadian political party in the 21st century.

The absence of women matters deeply because I am looking for a political party and a prime minister for women, since there will be another federal election soon. I agree with you that Canada can do better. Right now, we have the worst government I have seen in my lifetime. We could be doing so much better for ourselves and for the rest of the world. I agree with you that Mr. Harper's time is up. His administration has been nasty and brutish; it should be short.

One good reason it should be short is because his is an overtly anti-woman regime. Mr. Harper's administration has made cruel assaults on programs that are important to women, eliminated women's access to the use of our Charter rights, abandoned our first real chance in years at a national child-care program, gutted equal pay protections for women who are federal civil servants and attacked the puny Status of Women Canada program that once supported some participation of women's non-governmental organizations in policy-making. More covertly, and with even broader effect, Harper's government is shrinking the positive, redistributive role of the government, pulling government back from playing any active role in creating equality for women.

That is why I support your effort to defeat Mr. Harper. But that still leaves the question for me and for millions of

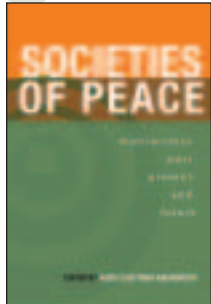
FALL 2009

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other women: Are you capable of being a leader for women? So far, I distrust your political judgment because of your support for the war in Iraq and your rationalization about the use of torture. The *post facto* explanations and apologies you have offered leave shadows. To defeat Mr. Harper, you will need to get us past these doubts, and show us that you are a stronger, more progressive political figure. One way to do this is to take women seriously. That is why I am writing this open letter: to urge you to become what women need.

Women have a vision of Canada, too. Too often feminism is perceived to be about micropolitics—that is, about the relationships of individual women to individual men—and the core issue is thought to be who wipes up the vomit. But women have visions of nation, too, and have always had them. And a cornerstone of those visions is an equality that lessens the divisions that sex, race, disability and class create. We know from experience that some fundamental material equality is needed to make intimate relationships ones of choice and political power more equally shared.

I know that liberty is a primary value for you, but liberty, if it is simply defined as freedom from state interference, is not liberty for women. Women need governments to intervene in the family and the market to correct for long-standing discrimination, and to redistribute power and wealth so that women and men share more equally.

Fundamentally, women need social programs. The advances that women have made in Canada over the last 50 years are principally due to the creation of a fabric of social programs that shifted some of the burden of caregiving, which women have always performed (and still do), from the shoulders of individual women to the shoulders of the state. A solid public health care system, good public education, long-term care, child care, social assistance, unemployment insurance, paid maternity leave and public pensions all have given concrete reality to the right to equality for women, and for everyone. They level the playing field by turning illness, unemployment, childbirth, relationship breakdown, single motherhood and old age into affordable—or at least not catastrophic—incidents of being human, or female. Income support programs—like unemployment insurance, social assistance and public pensions—have softened women's economic dependence on men.

A Canada in which women can flourish is, by definition, a Canada with a strong base of social programs and services that gives women liberty to enter the paid labour force, participate in higher education and in public life, and make art. But in your sketch of a vision of Canada at the end of *True Patriot Love*, there is no social Canada. You imagine a

Canada of high-speed rail lines and better east-west energy grids, but not a Canada where there is an east-west (and north) grid of core social programs that ensures the basic components of a decent life for everyone.

Most people agree that Canada has gone backwards in the last 15 years on the central issue of equality for its people. The Liberals need to confront this fact, accept your own responsibility for it and show that you can take the practical steps necessary to change it.

A political party that works for women has to believe in a strong federal government role in social policy and in intelligent use of the spending power. For the Liberals, this may be a hard one. It was the Liberals in the 1990s who moved from federal transfers to the provinces with conditions attached—that specified how the money was to be spent—to completely unconditional transfers that can be spent on anything and with no accountability. This single move has turned Canada's social program infrastructure into a creaky, diminished and uneven patchwork. In the absence of conditions attached to transfer payments, provinces have diminished social assistance programs so ruinously that Canada has thousands of homeless and hungry people. Affordable, quality child care is available

in Quebec but not everywhere else in the country. Civil legal aid is in crisis, even though this program is intended to ensure that not just the rich can use the law when they need it. Women are the main users of civil legal aid; many now appear in courts unrepresented in family law disputes and settle for less than they are entitled to.

The federal government has withdrawn from the social policy field in other ways, too, not just by changing over to unconditional transfers. For example, Canada, unlike virtually every other developed country in the world, has no national housing strategy anymore.

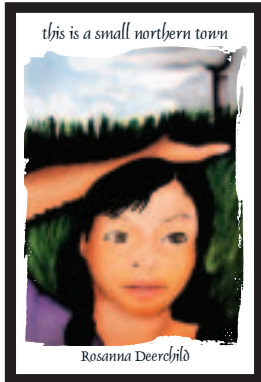
A country must have a social vision. Social programs do not need to be designed or delivered in uniform ways, and Canada can easily recognize the differences that the collective rights of the people of Quebec and of Aboriginal peoples make to social program delivery. But a coherent, reliable social program infrastructure is central to any country committed to the equality of its people.

So a political party and a prime minister for women need to show leadership on the social program front. No federal leadership on social spending means that women do not have a country to belong to, only a province.

You have much to answer for. The Liberals gave us unconditional transfer payments in 1995 and cut the transfers, too, in order to retire the deficit. The repeated claim that the Lib-

“Liberty, if it is simply defined as freedom from state interference, is not liberty for women.”

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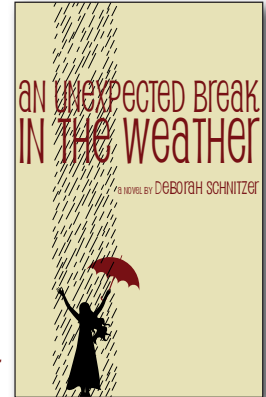
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featuring a conversation with and epilogue by Sara Ruddick

eral Party is the valiant David who slayed the Goliath—deficit is too thin by now because, years later, we can see the long-lasting damage done by the way the deficit was defeated—by cutting social spending so deeply and so fast, and by backing the federal government out of social policy. Also, when the surpluses started to roll in so soon, in 1998, the Liberals did not repair the damage. With this record, and now in a time of more deficits, it is crucial not to cut social spending again. We need social programs strategically rebuilt through the period of recession and deficit, not dismantled even further. Canadian voters—women and men, too—need to know where you stand.

Ed Broadbent told the NDP convention recently that it was time to mount an all-out attack on inequality in Canada. I agree. Not bits and pieces, but a planned, comprehensive, stay-the-course strategy. Of course, Ed Broadbent does not mean *women's* inequality; he means the inequality that is created for everyone when resources are not shared and fairly distributed. An attack on inequality and an attack on women's inequality are overlapping strategies; they could be mutually supportive.

But we cannot forget that women's inequality is particular and complicated by racism and disability discrimination; it cannot be achieved through gender- or race- or disability-neutral strategies. The patterns of women's lives are different from men's in central ways—women need reliable supports in place for all caregiving, and fair pay for caregiving work in the paid labour force.

Women contend with men's violence and sexual abuse; we need that violence to stop, and we need adequate income supports and affordable housing so that women and children can leave violent men and survive. If we tackle social and economic inequality broadly, with a sophisticated commitment to women, we can move towards equality for all women and children and men.

I fear that in the next election the Liberals will offer women scraps, but not vision. I expect you will promise to reverse some of Harper's ugliest assaults—the cancellation of the Court Challenges Program, the twisted Status of Women funding guidelines, the gutted pay equity legislation. But undoing these assaults will not undo the deep erosion of social programs that has occurred over the last decade, and the disproportionate impact this has had on women. Scraps do not add up to the density and coherence of interlocking policies and resource allocations that are needed to make a real and long-lasting difference.

The thing about love of country is that, to keep it alive,

narrowing the gap between the land we live in and the land we imagine must be a real, in-our-lifetime possibility. "One day your time will come" does not cut it if you are a 16-year-old homeless girl in Vancouver.

I and millions of other women have marshalled a lot of courage, faith and determination over the last four decades, but we have not narrowed the gap enough. Yes, we have made some important changes. Yes, we have taken steps forward. But we have also slid backwards. In 2009 in Canada, hundreds of Aboriginal women are missing and murdered, treated by violent men and by Canadian police forces, in the words of Bev Jacobs of the Native Women's Association of Canada, "as though they were garbage." Thirty-six percent of Aboriginal women, 29 percent of women of colour, 23 percent of immigrant women, 26 percent of women with disabilities and 38 percent of single mothers are living below the poverty line. Canada has one of the worst child care systems among developed nations. Our representation of women in elected positions is 46th in the world. And inequality is growing faster in Canada than in most OECD countries.

Some commentators, like Nicholas Kristof in the *New York Times*, now acknowledge that equality for women is the biggest global challenge and that equality, if achieved, could provide a solution to many of the world's ills, including poverty and extremism. But facing into this world-sized challenge has to start at home. If politicians in Canada are not willing

to invent a more equal sharing with women in terms of money, power and political leadership, why should they expect their counterparts in the developing world to do so?

What we are looking for is a fundamental shift, a new government that is fully committed to the equality of women. The National Women's Liberal Caucus has made a solid start on a blueprint for a new social, economic and political agenda for women in its *Pink Book Volume III* (available at www.liberal.ca/pdf/docs/pinkbook_en.pdf.) But the *Pink Book* is "recommendations to a new federal Liberal government" from the federally elected women in the party. We have not heard yet that this is your policy.

It's time for you to speak. And act. ❁

Shelagh Day is an author, activist and expert on women's human rights who has worked with governments and non-governmental organizations on the interpretation and implementation of constitutional equality rights, anti-discrimination laws, and Canada's international human rights obligations. She received a Governor General's Persons Case Award in 2008 for her contributions to advancing the equality of women in Canada.

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