

NEW STIRRINGS IN WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

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By Carol Goar, [The Toronto Star](#), 12 March 2010



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Judy Rebick thinks the reason goes deeper. The former president of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, author of a history of Canadian feminism (Ten Thousand Roses) and professor of social justice and democracy at Ryerson University, felt something different in the air this time.

There were more women in their early 20s than she'd ever seen at International Women's Day events. There were more women of colour. There were more men and children. "This is what the women's movement is going to look like in the future," she said.

Why attendance shot up at this year's event remains a bit of a mystery.

Stephen Harper didn't do anything overtly provocative. It has been clear since he became prime minister in 2006 that strong, progressive women had no place in his government. He signalled at the outset that he did not support publicly financed child care, pay equity legislation and programs to promote gender equality. But they went on the chopping block four years ago.

The latest assault on Canada's 12-year-old gun registry is neither new nor surprising. Since the Conservatives took office, they have been trying to rewrite the Firearms Act. The only reason Bill C-391 has a better chance of becoming law than their past efforts is that 20 opposition members – 12 New Democrats and eight Liberals – have approved it in principle.

The current minister of state for the status of women, Helena Guergis, is no worse than her predecessors in substantive terms. It's true that Bev Oda and Josée Verner didn't behave like petulant prima donnas in public, but neither did they achieve anything. There is no room in the Harper government for a women's minister who challenges the status quo.

The impetus certainly didn't come from the opposition parties.

Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff issued a limp International Women's Day statement: "I invite all Canadians to participate in events in their communities that celebrate women. And I encourage everyone to make every day women's day by doing your part to ensure a bright, safe and prosperous future for all women and girls."

New Democratic Party Leader Jack Layton, who is battling prostate cancer, could not participate in this year's women's day march. He pledged that his party would "never stop in our efforts to ensure the full and equal rights of all women."

Bloc Québécois Leader Gilles Duceppe spoke out forcefully in the House of Commons, demanding that Harper explain why "improving the socio-economic status of women is the least of his concerns." But his message was aimed at Quebec, not Ontario.

Rebick can't identify any single trigger for this year's surge of energy. She thinks it stemmed partly from pent-up frustration, partly from Toronto's nature as a global city, and partly from the presence of students, immigrant women, environmentalists and anti-poverty activists joining what had traditionally been a feminist march.

She should have seen it coming, Rebick said. She'd written about the emergence of a diverse, inclusive citizens' movement in countries such as Bolivia. She had predicted the women's movement would become a coalition for a broader, deeper change.

But it caught her off guard when it happened on her own doorstep.

