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SPEECH FOR PRESENTATION OF "TOWARD EQUALITY" TO PARLIAMENT, MARCH 4, 1986

OTTAWA, March 4, 1986 -- I am pleased to have tabled today Toward Equality the government's response to the report of the Parliamentary Committee on Equality. This document outlines the government's detailed response to all of the 85 diverse recommendations presented in Equality for All.

I would like, on behalf of the government, to commend the Subcommittee for the fine work that they have done in consulting Canadians on a wide range of difficult issues. The views expressed by Canadians have been very helpful to the government in the preparation of Toward Equality.

Toward Equality is an important part of this government's commitment to equality and social justice for all Canadians. The equality initiatives taken by the government mean new opportunities and greater fairness for all Canadians in their efforts to find a job, to build a future, and to play a full and equal role in society.

Equality and social justice require that persons be treated on the basis of their own qualities, not on the basis of any stereotype or other false assumption.

Equality and social justice require that individuals be given a fair chance to make their own way in society and that when opportunities are not fairly distributed, positive action be taken to ensure that they are. This includes eliminating systemic discrimination.

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The initiatives proposed in Toward Equality are a reflection of this government's commitment to these principles and a recognition of the needs of many Canadians still unfairly and unjustly discriminated against.

But meaningful equality cannot be imposed. We have confidence that the Canadian people will make the most of their own opportunities and allow others to do the same on an equal footing if the government provides the right leadership. The initiatives contained in the document I have tabled today demonstrate the government's commitment to providing this leadership.

We have not waited for the courts to make decisions on all difficult issues. Nor do we intend to force Canadians to go to court to find fairness and equal treatment under federal laws or in the federally regulated private sector. In fact, in many areas the government's equality initiatives go beyond a generous interpretation of the Charter requirements where this is necessary to achieve full equality and social justice.

I would like to take the time of the House to review just some of the measures contained in the Toward Equality document. The government agrees that human rights legislation should in general have primacy over other laws. We have also decided to amend the Canadian Human Rights Act to incorporate the concept of reasonable accommodation and have agreed, as part of the review of this Act, to consider amending it so that it states expressly that systemic discrimination is prohibited. We believe systemic discrimination is encompassed within the Charter guarantees.

I am currently re-examining the Canadian Human Rights Act to ensure it complements the Charter and is an effective instrument to ensure non-discrimination and fairness in the private sector.

The government will take whatever measures are necessary to ensure that sexual orientation is a prohibited ground of discrimination in relation to all areas of federal jurisdiction.

This government believes in equality of opportunity. Our economic policies are putting Canadians back to work by the

thousands every month and creating hope in every region of this country. Our social policies seek to ensure that every Canadian has a full and equal opportunity to be employed and share in Canada's renewed economic prosperity.

We are proposing the abolition of mandatory retirement as an absolute rule.

The government is fully committed to expanding the role of women in the Armed Forces and will ensure that women will be able to compete for all trades and occupations in a manner consistent with the requirement of the Armed Forces to be operationally effective in the interests of national security.

Already this government has proposed an employment equity program to enhance the level of participation of disadvantaged Canadians in the workplace.

We have acted and will continue to act to extend benefits to part-time workers to ensure they are treated fairly.

We have made a commitment to resources for the Human Rights Commission to actively pursue implementation of equal pay.

Reforms will be made to the Canada Pension Plan to ensure its provisions fully comply with the Charter equality guarantees.

We have made progress and will continue to take initiatives to ensure Barrier-Free Access for disabled individuals.

The government will take measures to ensure that the mentally disabled have full voting rights, and equal protection and equal benefit under the Criminal Code.

This is a progressive initiative, Mr. Speaker. It demonstrates our leadership in promoting equality, fairness and social justice.

Mr. Speaker, we are convinced that all Canadians will join with us both in the spirit and the letter of the law; that all people across the country share our commitment to fairness and equality in our society.