

PRESENTED TO THE SPECIAL JOINT COMMITTEE  
ON THE CONSTITUTION

by

Federated Women's Institutes of Canada  
28 - 46 Elgin Street, Ottawa, Ontario.

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The Federated Women's Institute of Canada (FWIC) as Canada's only national rural women's organization, acts as co-ordinator and clearing house for ten provincial units. FWIC is a voluntary association, non-partisan, non-denominational and non-sectarian. The provincial units are autonomous bodies with membership at the branch level and groupings of branches into districts and divisions, forming an adult education and communication network. In total Federated Women's Institutes speaks for some 51,000 members across the breadth of Canada.

During 62 years of existence, work of the Federated Women's Institute has been proof of adherence to the motto "For Home and Country". Dedication and commitment to Canada has been, and is strong. Creating bonds of friendship and understanding among people across Canada, assisting in the integration of new Canadians, striving to understand issues of national importance and promoting responsible citizenship are on-going purposes of Federated Women's Institutes of Canada.

In 1977 the annual Board meeting of FWIC affirmed as policy the following statement on national unity:

STATEMENT ON NATIONAL UNITY

Since National Unity is one of the most pressing issues facing Canada today, the Federated Women's Institutes of Canada reaffirm our belief in a United Canada and strongly urge our fellow Canadians to do everything in their power to appreciate our diverse cultures and to keep our nation as one.

At the branch level, W.I. activities have included the use of program and resource material relative to Canadian Unity, responsibilities of citizenship, the challenges facing federalism, observations of Canada week, energy conservation measures, and exchange visits between members from different provinces to cite a few examples.

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ing concerns of citizens in the very diverse and unlike regions of Canada.

At the federal level of the Women's Institute following the 1979 Triennial Convention of FWIC a Special Committee on Canadian Unity was created with a mandate to seek out ways of promoting unity throughout Canada. Very recently FWIC has distributed to each province a comprehensive kit of materials suitable for groups wishing to familiarize themselves with proposed resolutions respecting the constitution of Canada.

#### THE POSITION OF FEDERATED WOMEN'S INSTITUTES OF CANADA

Our organization regrets that the short time period between issuance of the publications of the Government of Canada intended to encourage public discussion and the sittings of the Special Joint Committee on the Constitution, negated any opportunity to formulate a position paper accurately reflecting the opinions of total FWIC membership. However, in seeking opinions from many key members of FWIC representing all provinces of Canada concerning proposed actions that may directly affect Canadian women, certain basic attitudes became apparent.

1. Members of FWIC support the concept of Canada as a unified nation but recognize that regional and cultural diversity is a Canadian reality and that it is essential that national and regional interests must complement each other in the effort to create a better nation.
2. Members of Federated Women's Institutes of Canada in general support the protection of women's rights under the federal government's proposal to entrench a charter of rights and freedoms in the Constitution. However, a substantial number of respondents feel strongly that a Charter of Rights

and Freedoms should not be entrenched in the Constitution on these grounds:

- democratically elected representatives rather than the courts should be the front line of protection. Judges are appointed, not elected and are not accountable in our political system.
- the enshrinement of 'Charters of Rights' in constitutions of oppressive regimes have not protected basic rights of the individual.

3. In the main, those FWIC representatives \*(see footnote) consulted approved the presentation of the National Advisory Council on the Status of Women to ensure that rights for all women are guaranteed in the proposed charter. There were reservations however, some individuals feeling that the concentration on women's issues might tend to deflect attention from major issues of constitutional change.

4. The position of Federated Women's Institutes relative to concerns that the Charter of Rights and Freedoms include certain protections for women follows. Four areas of importance are discussed in turn:

-an equality clause which guarantees women "equality of rights under the law without regard to sex ..."

Complete support of those responding (with the exception of those who did not approve entrenchment) because the wording "of rights" rather than a promise of equality "before" the law as suggested in the proposed charter makes the guarantee of full equality abundantly clear

-specific mention of women among those groups for which "affirmative action" programmes may be allowed;

A majority of those responding (with the exception of those

who did not approve entrenchment) approved this measure. Those disagreeing felt strongly that both men and women should be hired on the basis of their capability and that compulsory employment of poorly qualified women may do a disservice to their efforts toward equality.

-directions to remove any law which discriminates on the basis of sex, whether the law discriminates against all Canadian women or only some of them;

Almost complete support of those responding (with the exception of those opposing entrenchment).

-a clause guaranteeing the appointment of a representative number of women to the Supreme Court of Canada.

A majority of those responding (with the exception of those opposing entrenchment) gave support to this proposal. Those who dissented stated that women should receive appointments because they are capable of performing the service in a satisfactory manner and not because it is necessary to fill a specified number of posts with women appointees.

## CONCLUSION

Federated Women's Institutes of Canada represents groups of women meeting together in the rural areas, hamlets, towns and in a few cases the cities of Canada, groups widely dispersed over the 3,000 miles east and west. These women meeting together in triennial conferences recognize the disparities, the needs and the resources unique to the various areas of Canada. Theirs is a firm belief in the unity of Canada, and a conviction that we have the ability to shape an even better nation. In the words of Jacques Monet, Canadian Historian:

"The challenge of brotherhood, of an experiment that bursts through the limits of nationalism to embrace men of diverse warp and diverse tongues, is what it means to be a Canadian. You see, it is not a question of economics or common sense: it is a question of the heart."

The opportunity of presenting this brief submission is appreciated.

Submitted by,

EMMIE ODDIE

President, Federated Women's Institutes  
of Canada.

Footnote \*

FWIC representatives received the questionnaire sponsored by the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women and supporting material.