

Senator of the Month

Senator Nancy Ruth (ON) has been on the front lines of feminism for decades. In 1981, she marched with other women to support gender equality in Canada's new *Charter of Rights*. Now that the principle is enshrined in our Constitution, her attention has shifted to making it work in practice.



GDC: What have you accomplished in four years as a Senator?

NR: I am a feminist, a 60s, 70s, 80s feminist, and I do what I always do, organize and try to change the world. I bring my feminist analysis to my work in the Senate. For example, as a member of the National Finance Committee; I look at the figures and ask, "How is this helping women?" How does this help issues like violence against women? How does this help women get loans at the bank? How does this help women get housing? How does this stop them starving? And you can imagine it is difficult to get answers to such questions. But that is what I do.

One thing I've done is get an action plan to advance women's equality in 2008 February's budget. I asked the Auditor General if she'd do a gender based analysis of four or five departments to see how they're doing in terms of compliance with various international covenants to which Canada is a party. It took me two years to get that together, with a lot of help from a lot of other women in the Commons and other parties. The report will come out in the spring.

GDC: Describe what you were like as a little girl.



NR: I was a tomboy and I fought for the same rights and privileges that my older brothers had. That meant that you had to ride a bike, climb trees, skate, and swim a mile before you were 10. These were the tests that my father set. If you did well in school, you got goodies. So I tried to be like them because that is how I gained my father's love.

GDC: Tell me about your calling to be a United Church Minister. Was it a calling?

NR: It was a calling to serve God and you have to find a way to do that. Because I came from the United Church, it was the route I went. The importance of that part of my life is that it led me to politics.

GDC: How did it lead you to politics?

NR: The Church fired me!

GDC: Really? I didn't think that happened! I presume that you didn't do anything illegal?

NR: The surface reason is that I was not working in a congregation, that I was consulting. But there were 11 of us discharged at the same time. It all had to do with whether or not one fitted in with the narrowest understanding of a minister. And I did not fit in, I never fit in.

GDC: As a minister or in general?

NR: No, in general, I don't fit in. I'm fat, I'm short, I'm a lesbian, and I'm a Conservative. I don't fit in with most people I know. Never have.



GDC: My understanding is that the Church has a rigorous discernment process to determine whether or not you are a right fit. So I'm wondering what would have changed from then until they let you go.

NR: Feminism. I studied theology in the early 60s. I encountered feminism in '68, after my studies. There were no courses in "feminist theology" in the universities in the 60s anywhere in Canada. I helped create the first one.

GDC: Would you have called yourself a feminist when you entered the Church? Did you have some notion or philosophy of feminism ingrained in you?

NR: The word did not exist. But I knew it wasn't right to be told by a bunch of guys what to do. It still isn't right.

The biggest thing I struggle with in Parliament is the resistance to do anything for women and girls. We have just come through the richest time of Canada's growth. Huge economic wealth was created. What did we do to alleviate poverty? Even when we have money nothing happens. Why?

Senator Mitchell (AB) and I sat on the National Security and Defence Committee in the last parliament and we tried to get a study on United Nations Security Council resolutions 1325 and 1820 by which Canada is bound. We wanted the study to look at Canada's compliance. The resolutions deal with women, peace and war. They specify that rape cannot be used as a tool of war, and that peace negotiations must involve women or there'll be no



peace. This has been shown over and over again to be true. And our committee simply wouldn't look at the resolutions. They said they belong in the Human Rights Committee, which is nonsense. There is such resistance to making women's issues central to the work of Parliament and its committees.

Our culture does not value women and girls. It does not understand that the decisions we make without involving women and girls are not as good as they could be. It's a fundamental flaw and it permeates political parties. Power has to be shared for justice to happen.

GDC: I often see the word feminism referred to as the f-word, as a word that has varying, sometimes negative connotations. What does it mean to you? How do you feel as a feminist who has worked so hard?

NR: It sometimes bothers me. It is not a word that is used much in language today, although some of us older women still use it. But language does define reality. I do believe that language is the power of the ruling class to define reality in its own terms and to oppress anybody it wants to, by slurs and racism and pornography. Language use is not a game.

GDC: What drives you to be so active in women's issues?



NR: Rage. It drives most activists. It manifests itself in different ways. I certainly was a lot more of a fireball in my 40s than I am heading into my 70s. I had seen my mother abused both psychologically and physically. Furthermore, I participated in the verbal abuse to win my father's approval. I had bought into the way my father behaved until I encountered feminism in my mid twenties and then I realized I'd been sold a bill of goods. The abuse I'd seen and heard towards my mother, and had also participated in, had to stop – not only in my family, but everywhere in society. So it was just rage that motivated me for 25 or 26 years . Now it is pain.

GDC: So it all came down at once ...

NR: Yeah, it was like coming out of the Garden of Eden onto a lava bed when I met feminism in 1968. It was like "What? Where have I been living?" I had my blinders on.

Now, you learn over your life time to plant many seeds. A few will grow but they all won't. The issue I'm trying to work on right now is violence against women and girls because when there's an economic downturn, there's usually an increase in violence. But what can we do about violence? I would like the Prime Minister to take leadership on this critical issue.

GDC: I have a question, when you talk about the Prime Minister taking a stand, I cannot help but think about Question Period which is a form of verbal violence. I am not yet 30 and my image of women in politics was Belinda Stronach being called a "slut" over there in the House of Commons. So how can we have confidence that our government will effectively take on non-violence measures when verbally their interaction is violent?

NR: That is an excellent question. I have no answer, but we have to try to keep working at it. I mean, when I first joined the Conservative caucus, it was very clear the Prime Minister wanted to clean up the language of the House. Then as the election approached last fall, the attacks proliferated. It was just awful. Your comment begs the question of the personal being political: you can't denounce such behaviour in one place and be complicit in the other.

GDC: Do you have faith that our government is supportive of women's issues when so many women's programs have been cut in the last while? For example, the Women's Future Fund (WFF) and LEAF, both of which you founded, and the Women's Health Network ...

NR: What the government has done in cancelling the subsidization of groups like the WFF, needed to be done. It was not a good use of taxpayers' dollars. It did not need to be done to LEAF etc. But all these cuts (the Court Challenges Program, for example, and the possible cuts to political parties' spending) are all ways to silence those who speak against the State. That concerns me. Philosophically, I would think that those on the right side of my party would say "If people want to speak out they should speak out, they should gather their own money and speak out. No one is stopping them, but don't ask the State to pay for it." People on the redder side of the party, which would include me, would say "Although the State has no legal obligation whatsoever to support dissident voices, we do support court systems where people have the right to defend themselves, where alternative voices are heard, where challenges to State laws can happen." It is a good thing for a democracy for the government to assist those who speak against it, which would include women's groups.



This is not just an issue for the Conservative party or the Liberal Party or the NDP party. None of them has fixed poverty, none of them has fixed violence against women, none of them has raised women's wages.

GDC: Has there been progress?

NR: Oh sure, I would not be here if there wasn't progress. There is always progress, but it is so, so, so slow.

GDC: You were appointed by a Liberal PM, sat as an independent PC, then joined Harper's Conservative caucus in 2006 when they formed the government.



NR: I said 'yes' to being a Senator because it was time for this outsider to be an insider. Being on the Hill was always a dream of mine. But I wanted to be at the decision making table. I wanted access to the ministers and their decisions. I'm here to do things and you can only do things if you have access. So I joined my party's caucus and I just love being there.