



Mennonite New Life Centre
1774 Queen St E
Toronto ON
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August 3, 2010

Prime Minister Stephen Harper
Office of the Prime Minister
80 Wellington Street
Ottawa
K1A 0A2

Dear Prime Minister Harper:

Re: Employment Equity

The Mennonite New Life Centre, as a settlement agency committed to opening doors to fair and meaningful employment for newcomers, is deeply concerned by the public reasons given for the recent announcement of a major review of federal employment equity. Public comments made by Hon. Stockwell Day, President of the Treasury Board, and Hon. Jason Kenney, Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism, suggest that employment equity is excluding qualified applicants from jobs in the federal public service based on grounds of race or ethnicity.

Coming just as the country is emerging from a recession, such comments have the potential to feed unfounded fears of so-called “reverse discrimination.” Times of economic challenge often raise public fears of perceived “outsiders” coming to steal “our” jobs. Talking about “merit” and “equal access” becomes a way of maintaining a sense of ownership and control. There may in fact be opportunity to improve on some of the more complicated tools of employment equity in order to avoid perceptions of exclusion. However, our elected leaders have a responsibility to shape public discourse in a way that recognizes the rights and contributions of all Canadians, rather than pitting one group against another.

In fact, we suggest that the primary goal of employment equity is to ensure equal access to jobs for all qualified applicants, regardless of gender, race or dis/ability. Employment equity legislation seeks to redress historic inequities experienced by four designated groups: aboriginal peoples, members of visible minorities, persons with disabilities, and women.

Members of these groups have experienced, and continue to experience marginalization and under-representation in the labour market. A recent report of the Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights, *Reflecting the Changing Face of Canada: Employment Equity in the Federal Public Service*, found that employment equity targets among the four designated groups were not

fully being met, especially for visible minorities. Based on data available for the core public service in 2008-2009, visible minorities were represented at 9.8%, a figure that was much lower than their workforce availability rate at 15.3%.

Newcomer participants in a research project conducted by the Mennonite New Life Centre named discriminatory hiring practices among the principal obstacles faced by immigrants in their search for employment commensurate with their skills and experience. When asked to propose policy solutions, they gave priority to employment equity legislation, together with government support for paid internships for the internationally trained. By tapping into an underutilized pool of skilled labour, employment equity and paid internships have the potential to strengthen our economy, inserting critical capacity for creativity and innovation, together with understanding of and connections to a global marketplace.

We urge the federal government to continue to play a leadership role in the area of employment equity by strengthening employment equity measures, educating the public about the rationale and benefits of employment equity, and working with provincial and municipal governments to extend the reach of employment equity. By doing so, you can play a critical role in harnessing the full potential of Canadian workers, to the benefit of all Canadians.

Sincerely,



Tanya Chute Molina
Executive Director