

Judith Timson

O Tories, try updating more than lyrics

I'm not sure who the Harperites are talking to about contraception, but it isn't the women I know



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Wow. For a Prime Minister and a government that presumably would like more women to vote for them next time around, the Harperites have given anyone interested in women's issues a couple of pretty strange weeks since they returned, all "recalibrated," to Ottawa.

First there was the national anthem debacle. In an otherwise eye-glazingly dull throne speech, up popped the idea that the government was considering messing with the lyrics to possibly make our 100-plus-year-old song more gender neutral. After predictable flapdoodle, the government backtracked, saying it had heard from the people "loud and clear" and would leave the anthem alone.

Not so fast, buckos. (But we'll get to that in a minute.)

Next, there was widespread alarm over an otherwise laudable G-8 initiative to save lives and improve the health of mothers and children globally.

The new government package will not, in Foreign Minister Lawrence Cannon's memorable phrase, "deal in any way, shape or form with family planning. Indeed, the purpose of this is to be able to save lives." As if birth control had nothing – instead of, say, everything – to do with the health and length of women's lives.

Let's deal first with the anthem. As a feminist with other things on my mind, I hadn't really given much thought to the "all thy sons" line (the original version had actually been "thou dost in us command"). But since the government brought it up, I've given it a lot of thought. Of course we should change it. Women soldiers are dying for this great country. Female athletes are winning medals for its glory. Equality of rights is enshrined in the charter. So let's give "both founding genders," as our only female Prime Minister, Kim Campbell, once put it, their due.

And forget about O Canada being too sacrosanct to change. Certain religious groups – the Jews, for example – have amended text more than 1,000 years old to reflect gender equality. In many Jewish households, the "four sons" who have different ways of asking questions in the upcoming Passover seder have become the "four children." The "sons" were there in the ancient text, explains Rabbi Michael Dolgin of Toronto's Temple Sinai, because "that's who the learners were back then." Furthermore, in many Reform congregations, an ancient prayer invoking the names of the patriarchs now includes the matriarchs. No lightning bolts have ensued. And our daughters, some of them very good learners indeed, now recognize themselves in their religion.

If you can amend a millennium-old religious text to reflect gender equality, you can certainly change an anthem a mere 102 years old. My vote would be for "True patriot love/ in all of us command." In fact I intend

to sing it that way from now on. Consider it our grrilla anthem. If enough people sing it, it will gradually become an accepted alternative. This may not be an earth-shattering women's issue, but it's an easy and generous change to make.

As for the troubling second issue, of why the federal government does not consider family planning a necessary part of its international program to improve the health of mothers and children, let's hear what U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has to say about the U.S. program. On the blog Impolitical, there is a YouTube video of Ms. Clinton asserting to a congressional hearing last year that family planning "is an important part of women's health."

She mentions the suffering she's seen in some African countries where girls as young as 12 get [pregnant](#), and in some Asian countries, where "denial of family planning consigns women to lives of oppression and hardship." She was firm in including access to abortion as part of the package.

Here, Liberal MP Dr. Carolyn Bennett has argued passionately that family planning – especially the need to space the births of children – is inseparable from a mother's health.

This is a pivotal women's issue. I don't know who Mr. Cannon and his boss are speaking to, but it's not to the women I know, who come from a variety of ideological, ethnic and religious backgrounds, and whose lives have depended utterly on adequate access to family planning. Why should the lives of women in poor and developing countries be any less dependent?

A recent Nanos poll showed that the Liberals and Conservatives are almost neck and neck and that Mr. Harper's much longed for majority is still out of reach. If the last clumsy two weeks are any indication of the Conservatives' handling of women's issues I bet it won't be women voters who give them the love they need.