

To: Stephen Harper, Leader of the Conservative Party of Canada  
Michael Ignatieff, Leader of the Liberal Party of Canada  
Gilles Duceppe, Leader of the Bloc Québécois  
Jack Layton, Leader of the New Democratic Party of Canada  
Elizabeth May, Leader of the Green Party of Canada

March 22, 2011

Dear Party Leaders,

As the likelihood of a federal election looms, we are writing to seek clear pledges from each of you that your party will take action to restore and strengthen the state of democracy and human rights in Canada.

There is widely-held and very serious concern in Canada that a range of deeply troubling government actions and decisions over the past several years have significantly eroded fundamentally important democratic and human rights principles and institutions in our country. The concerns are shared by organizations large and small and by Canadians from all walks of life, from coast to coast to coast.

Most significantly, the space for voices of dissent and advocacy to express opinions and engage in debate about important human rights concerns has shrunk dramatically – in ways that we have never before witnessed in Canada. Instead, organizations and individuals who have advanced positions that run counter to the government's or have highlighted concerns about government policies, have been punished, maligned, fired and silenced.

Some examples have attracted widespread political and media attention: the “in and out” scandal over the Conservative Party's funding scheme; the Prime Minister's controversial prorogation of Parliament in 2008 and 2009; the abolition of the mandatory long-form census; concerns that Minister of International Cooperation Bev Oda misled Parliament about the defunding of the inter-church human rights organization, KAIROS; and – most recently – the unprecedented committee finding, soon to come before the House of Commons for a final vote, that the government is in contempt of Parliament.

Other examples are unknown to most Canadians, such as the lengthy list of organizations involved in advancing women's equality that have lost crucial public funding for research and advocacy efforts to strengthen the protection of women's human rights in Canada and abroad. Groups providing immigrant and youth services are also being cut back.

More than 200 organizations have come together in a national coalition, Voices-Voix, in response to these unprecedented developments. The groups reflect a remarkably diverse cross-section of sectors and social issues, including human rights, women's equality, international development, the labour movement, the peace movement, environmental protection, and a number of ethno-cultural communities. Many of these groups have never before come together in common cause but have done so now because our shared concerns have become so critical. Already, over 4000 individual Canadians have signed Voice's petition to respect democracy, free speech and transparency.

The coalition has called itself "Voices-Voix" because it is our firm belief that is precisely what is at stake. Voices need to be heard; a wide variety of Canadian voices. They must be able to monitor and speak out; participate and contribute; research and advocate with respect to crucial democratic and human rights issues in Canada. We seek your party's firm commitment to those Voices.

Sincerely,

On behalf of the Voices-Voix Coalition:

*Alex Neve*, Secretary General, Amnesty International Canada (English branch)

*Béatrice Vaugrante*, Directrice générale, Amnistie internationale Canada francophone

*Christine Jones*, Executive Director, Peace Brigades International – Canada

*Damon Johnston*, President, Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg

*Dave Coles*, National President, Communications Energy and Paperworkers Union (CEP)

*David Eby*, Executive Director, British Columbia Civil Liberties Association

*Gary F. McCauley*, Coordinator, Canadians for Democratic Renewal (CDR)

*Gerry Barr*, President-CEO, Canadian Council for International Co-operation

*Ihsaan Gardee*, Executive Director, Canadian Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR-CAN)

*John Gordon*, National President, Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC)

*Kate McInturff*, Executive Director, Canadian Feminist Alliance for International Action (FAFIA)

*Leilani Farha*, Executive Director, Centre for Equality Rights in Accommodation (CERA)

*Marco J. Costa*, President, Marcopolo Resources Inc.

*Maude Barlow*, National Chairperson, Council of Canadians

*Merrill Stewart*, Clerk, Canadian Friends Service Committee (Quakers)

*Michel Lambert*, Director General, Alternatives

*Omega Bula*, Executive Minister, Partners in Mission Unit, The United Church of Canada

*Paul Moist*, National President, Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE)

*Pearl Eliadis*, Principal, RightsLaw

*Penni Stewart*, President, Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT)

*Rob Rainer*, Executive Director, CWP Advocacy Network

*Robert Fox*, Executive Director, Oxfam Canada

*Roch Tassé*, National Co-ordinator, International Civil Liberties Monitoring Group (ICLMG)

*Shannon Mannion*, Liaison, Raging Grannies (Ottawa Chapter)

## Election 2011

### **Pledges to Restore and Strengthen Democracy and Human Rights in Canada**

#### **Voices must be heard**

That is the essence of our democracy. And in order to be heard, voices must be informed, able to speak and be respected. The Voices-Voix Coalition seeks the following clear pledges from each of the federal political parties to restore and strengthen the state of democracy and human rights in Canada.

#### **Voices must be informed**

Individuals, organizations and the media need access to information so as to be able to understand and contribute to important public policy debates. To use their Voices, they need information. But a variety of government funding and other decisions have dramatically constrained the reliable availability of that information.

#### **Will you pledge to:**

- **Launch a process of reforming Canada's Access to Information Act, with an eye to significantly improving transparency in government?**
- **Restore the mandatory long-form census?**
- **Restore funding for research and advocacy related to women's equality rights?**

#### **Voices must be able to speak**

Voices have been silenced in many different ways over the past several years. Some were silenced when arrested at the G8/G20 Summits in June 2010. Others were silenced when they lost public funding for work on such issues as women's equality, refugee protection, the rights of Palestinians and Canada's international development policies. Voices must be able to speak without fear of arrest or other sanctions and may need public support to be heard.

#### **Will you pledge to:**

- **Launch a comprehensive public inquiry, jointly with the government of Ontario, into all aspects of security at the G8/G20 Summits and its impact on freedom of expression?**

- **Put in place a system that will ensure that decisions about funding civil society organizations in Canada are done transparently and without discrimination; and reflect a variety of policy perspectives?**

### **Voices must be respected**

Far too often voices that have disagreed with the government have been punished. Watchdogs doing their job have been fired. Civil servants doing their job have been misrepresented or maligned. The independence of an important parliamentary human rights agency, *Rights & Democracy*, has been severely eroded. Fundamental democratic institutions and processes within which there should be the ultimate public debate and accountability have been undermined, as with the prorogation crisis and the KAIROS defunding scandal. Voices must be respected, even when the message is one of disagreement.

### **Will you pledge to:**

- **Launch a credible, independent and public process that will examine and make recommendations regarding the state of democracy and human rights in Canada?**
- **Review and strengthen the measures that are in place to protect watchdogs, civil servants and other bodies and individuals with similar responsibilities from recriminations when they criticize government policies?**
- **Implement the recommendations laid out in the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs' report, *Rights & Democracy: Moving towards a Stronger Future*?**