



CITIZENS *for* PUBLIC JUSTICE

December 1, 2008

The Right Honourable Stephen Harper
Prime Minister of Canada
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Dear Prime Minister Harper,

We were made aware through the Economic and Fiscal Statement of Finance Minister Flaherty that your government plans to eliminate “the \$1.75-per-vote taxpayer subsidy for politicians and their parties, effective April 1, 2009.” Subsequently, we are aware that your government decided to withdraw this measure.

Nevertheless, as a public justice organization we wish to sincerely question the wisdom of such a policy. It could weaken Canada’s democratic system and encourage voter apathy, which already reached a worrisome 41% in the most recent election – higher than the per cent of votes any party actually received. Public subsidies to political parties can provide Canadians with an added incentive to get involved in political campaigns and vote for candidates whom they support, even if these candidates have little chance of winning in our first-past-the-post system. With voter apathy already reaching levels never seen in Canadian history, why would democratic Canadians support moves that could well decrease even further the number of persons who bother to vote?

Politicians have already ensured that political parties receive public subsidies by means of extremely generous tax breaks. A donation to a federal political party nets the donor as much as 75% of that amount as a tax credit – which is at least triple the tax breaks for a donation to a registered charity. The government’s proposal was not to end taxpayer subsidies, then, as only a particular variant of subsidy was targeted. The debate then is really about different forms of taxpayer subsidy and who benefits from them.

Your proposed change in policy was announced during a speech on economic matters, yet it would have had a very minimal impact on governmental finances. Subsidies as tax breaks leave low-wage earners, students and other societal classes with less chance to donate and benefit than others. A robust democratic system is best served by diverse forms of public support, with limits to ensure that no one group dominates.

The present publicly funded system was meant to provide a better balance to the electoral system, which in the past was funded disproportionately by large interests – corporate and

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labour. Will your government's next step in this process be to remove the limitations that have been placed on private donation levels and sources? While we do not oppose electoral reform, it has to be done fairly, and measures must be taken to increase, rather than limit, broad civic participation.

We believe that any change in the system should warrant prior consultation with Canadians. Unfortunately, this proposed change did not seem to be part of the platform of any political party in the recent election, and received no mention at all in "The True North Strong and Free: Stephen Harper's Plan for Canadians." Since such a proposal was never debated, it arrived as a complete surprise to the population.

Our organization, Citizens for Public Justice, has long worked to increased citizen participation in public affairs. We believe that all Parliamentarians should be vitally concerned with enhancing participation in the political process, and should develop more opportunities for civil debate of the major challenges that face our nation. We joined thousands of Canadians in protesting the initial decision of the major broadcast networks to prevent the participation of the leader of the Green Party in the leaders' debates. CPJ recognizes that reform to the electoral system, allowing for more enhanced participation by Canadians, is very beneficial to the common good. Activities that limit, constrain and even exclude Canadians from participation in the political process are not helpful.

Rather, we believe that political parties should democratize their internal operations, allow more free votes in the House, and encourage more participation of women and ethnic minorities in all levels of politics in order to better reflect the makeup of our wonderful country.

CPJ is a national organization that promotes public justice in Canada by shaping key policy debates through research and analysis, publishing and public dialogue. CPJ encourages citizens, leaders in society and governments to support policies and practices that reflect God's call for love, justice and stewardship. We value the electoral system, as a prime measure of our democratic intent. For the reasons expressed above, we commend you, Mr. Prime Minister, for reconsidering your intention to introduce this very controversial and unhelpful reform.

Sincerely,



Kathy Vandergrift
Co-Chair



Jim Joosse
Co-Chair