



News Release

HARPER GOVERNMENT DEFEATS BILL TO PROTECT GIRLS AND WOMEN FROM VIOLENCE

Opposition parties must act immediately to change the hate law

Toronto, Ontario – April 22, 2007: Last Thursday, the Harper government defeated Bill C-254, a Private Member's Bill introduced by Liberal MP Borys Wrzesnewskyj that adds girls and women to the groups protected under the *Criminal Code* hate propaganda law, a critical change in legislation that has been recommended for over 20 years -- including by Finance Minister Jim Flaherty when he was Attorney General of Ontario.

On April 19, Mr Wrzesnewskyj (Etobicoke Centre) introduced a motion in the House of Commons calling for all party support to pass the Bill. All three opposition parties voted in favour, but the Bill was defeated when Conservative House Leader Peter Van Loan, Conservative Party Whip Jay Hill, and Conservative MP Tom Lukiwski, voted against it. This is the **second time Conservative politicians have defeated this important legislation**, thereby leaving girls and women defenceless against the promotion of violence and hate.

Prior to the afternoon vote in the House of Commons, Mr. Wrzesnewskyj was joined at a press conference on Parliament Hill by Shannon Hogan, representing the Ontario Public School Boards' Association Media Violence Coalition, Joy Lang of the University of Western Ontario's Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children, Toronto anti-violence activist Valerie Smith, and Liberal MPs Judy Sgro, Sue Barnes, Yasmin Ratansi, Sukh Dhaliwal and Lloyd St. Amand, who all spoke in favour of the Bill.

Smith, who has worked for the past 15 years to get this law changed, was in the House of Commons to observe the vote, as were Shannon Hogan and Joy Lang. Prime Minister Stephen Harper, who was lauded the next day in Winnipeg as a champion of human rights by Gail Asper, President of the CanWest Global Foundation¹, Finance Minister Jim Flaherty, who called for this very legislative change when he was Attorney General of Ontario (*Et tu, Mr. Flaherty?*), and Bev Oda, the Minister responsible for promoting and defending the rights of women, all got up and left minutes before the motion was introduced by Mr. Wrzesnewskyj. None of these influential politicians had even five minutes to spend on this issue of vital importance to the safety and human rights of half the Canadian population.

Said Smith, "I definitely expected more from Jim Flaherty since he pushed for this legislative change when he was Ontario Attorney General, and I was offended that Bev Oda did not stay in the House and support legislation of such importance to the very group of people she is supposed to defend and protect.

"As for Gail Asper's lavish praise for Stephen Harper's record on human rights, perhaps she could use her considerable influence to convince the Prime Minister to support the human rights of the female half of the Canadian population."

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¹Gail Asper, President of the CanWest Global Foundation, in her speech made upon the announcement that the federal government will designate her group's proposed Canadian Museum for Human Rights as a national institution, National Post, April 21, 2007

The refusal of the Conservatives to support this legislation is particularly harmful to girls, who are the primary victims of sexual assault in this country. According to a 2006 Statistics Canada report on violence, “being young and female are risk factors for sexual assault”. The report says that 86% of victims of sexual offences reported to police in 2004 were female, and further states:

The vulnerability of youth to sexual violence is emphasized by the fact that, overall, youth under 18 represented 22% of the Canadian population in 2004 but made up 58% of victims of sexual offences.²

In *Stand Up for Canada*, the Conservative’s 2006 election platform, the Tories promised to “**act decisively to ensure that all Canadians – particularly the most vulnerable members of society – can live in safe, healthy communities**”.³ And yet, when they were asked to add **one word** to the hate propaganda law, a change that could have a significant impact in reducing violence against girls, they refused.

“It was really disturbing to watch these grown men use their power, influence and positions of privilege to do something so harmful and damaging to the girls of this country,” said Smith. “I hope voters will raise this at election time, because through this action in the House of Commons, Harper’s ‘New Government’ has shown its complete lack of commitment to their election promise to protect the vulnerable.”

Opposition parties CAN get this law changed: Given the minority situation in the House of Commons, Conservative support isn’t necessary to get this law passed, provided a **votable** Bill is introduced in the House of Commons and is then supported by all three opposition parties. (Bill C-254 wasn’t in line to be voted on, hence the introduction of the special motion in an attempt to get it passed.) The opposition parties have the power to get this law changed without the Tories, so it is **NOT** good enough for party leaders to say the Harper government defeated the Bill and leave it at that.

It is now time for Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion to step up to the plate, make this issue a **party priority**, and work with the NDP and Bloc to introduce a votable Bill without delay. “Borys has been tireless in his attempts to get this legislation passed,” said Smith, “but he can’t do it himself, nor should he have to. As far as I’m concerned, the ball is now in Mr. Dion’s court.”

For additional background on Bill C-254, visit the Hate Propaganda section on The Free Radical web site at http://www.fradical.com/Hate_Propaganda.htm.

For further information, contact Valerie Smith at valsmith@fradical.com, Cell (647) 267-1783

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About The Free Radical: The Free Radical web site (www.fradical.com) is maintained by Toronto anti-violence activist Valerie Smith to provide information on media violence and strategies for combating it. Smith has lobbied on media violence issues for the past sixteen years, with a particular focus on the treatment of women and girls in popular culture. She is the author of the *Action Agenda: A Strategic Blueprint for Reducing Exposure to Media Violence in Canada*, funded and published by Ontario’s Office for Victims of Crime, an agency of the Ministry of the Attorney General. The report is available for free download from The Free Radical web site.

P.O. BOX 90598, MARKHAM EGLINTON POST OFFICE, TORONTO, ON M1J 3N7

² *Measuring Violence Against Women*, Statistical Trends 2006, Statistics Canada

³ *Stand up for Canada*, Conservative Party of Canada Federal Election Platform 2006

BACKGROUNDER

Ontario Public School Boards Association Media Violence Coalition

The coalition includes: the Ontario Public School Boards' Association, Canadian Centre for Abuse Awareness, Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario, Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association, Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association, Ontario Federation of Home & School Associations, Ontario Principals' Council, Ontario Provincial Police, Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation, and Ontario Student Trustees' Association.

Information on Members of Parliament cited

- ◆ Yasmin Ratansi, Liberal, Don Valley East (Ont), Chair, Status of Women Committee
- ◆ Judy Sgro, Liberal, York West (Ont), Past Chair, Status of Women Committee
- ◆ Sue Barnes, Liberal, London West (Ont), Public Safety critic
- ◆ Sukh Dhaliwal, Liberal, Newton-North Delta (BC)
- ◆ Lloyd St. Amand, Liberal, Brant (Ont)
- ◆ Peter Van Loan, Conservative, York Simcoe (Ont), Leader of the Government in the House of Commons
- ◆ Jay Hill, Conservative, Prince George-Peace River (BC), Chief Government Whip
- ◆ Tom Lukiwski, Conservative, Regina-Lumsden-Lake Centre (Sask)

House of Commons Debates, Hansard, April 19, 2007

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj:

Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order. Discussions have taken place among all parties with respect to Bill C-254, An Act to amend the Criminal Code (hate propaganda), first introduced during the 38th Parliament and reintroduced on May 24, 2006. This bill at long last includes the legal word for "gender" in the definition of what constitutes a hate crime.

I hope to find consent for the following motion: That, notwithstanding any Standing Order or usual practice of the House, Bill C-254, An Act to amend the Criminal Code (hate propaganda), be deemed read a second time, referred to committee of the whole, deemed considered in committee of the whole, deemed reported without amendment, deemed concurred in at report stage and deemed read a third time and passed.

The Speaker:

Does the hon. member for Etobicoke Centre have the unanimous consent of the House to propose the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

An hon. member: No.