



ONTARIO PUBLIC
SCHOOL BOARDS'
ASSOCIATION

Leading Education's Advocates

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Michael Barrett
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March 27, 2014

To: Joe Preston, Committee Chair
Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, Ottawa

Dear Joe Preston and Committee Members,

Re: Submission Regarding Bill C-23, Fair Elections Act (An Act to Amend the Canada Elections Act and other Acts and to Make Consequential Amendments to Certain Acts)

Ontario public school trustees have examined the proposed amendments in Bill C-23, *Fair Elections Act* and have closely followed the response to these proposed changes both from experts and from voices within the communities that elect trustees to office at the municipal level. The fundamental democratic right to participate in a fair election process is a matter that is respected and honoured by every citizen in Canada and is seen as under threat because of what is contained in Bill C-23. We are ethically obligated to add our voices to the growing criticism not just of the proposed changes but equally of the process being followed to drive those changes through parliament.

In a fair, open and democratic society, legislative bills are to be given the opportunity for full discussion and input by all parties and, at some point, members of the general public. This Bill was first introduced on February 4, 2014, and after four days of second reading debates, referred, by a fairly tight margin, to committee on February 10, 2014. The committee was asked to consider cross country public consultation. This patently reasonable request was denied. This is legislation that affects every single Canadian. We are disheartened to see that broader consultations, and thereby a forum for the public to provide their input, were not agreed to. Additional public hearings about legislative change that affect the rights of all citizens should not be narrowly confined to Ottawa.

There are significant matters affected by this proposed Bill that give us great concern: limiting the powers of the Chief Electoral Officer; the loss of informational and educational programs and the use of media or other means for the purposes of educating the public on the importance of voting and democracy; and eliminating an important and necessary method used for voter identification.

As municipal politicians, we invest time and energy to raise the profile of the democratically locally elected school board trustee so that our electorate has a direct conduit to local decision-making. We strive, as well, to increase participation in the democratic process at all levels of government. Part of this has been in our advocacy to highlight Local Government Week which occurs every October. This is an opportunity to engage students in both elementary and secondary schools in learning that leads to civic awareness, knowledge of the election process, the importance of exercising democratic rights and the fundamental Canadian value of the right as a citizen to have one's voice heard.

We are also currently preparing for Ontario's upcoming municipal elections, to be held on Oct. 27, 2014. With our provincial partners, we are preparing a series of candidate resources and developing a public information campaign that describes the role of trustee and encourages greater participation in the municipal election process. The campaign will include Public Service Announcements and various promotional/public education materials (posters, major newspaper and community paper advertisements, supports for social media applications, etc.) that are aimed at engaging Ontarians and creating awareness. We regard this as a public service and an encouragement of participatory democracy.

The proposed legislation completely contradicts the actions we are undertaking with regard to increasing public awareness. We are dismayed to learn that the proposed changes will limit the role of Elections Canada – an independent, non-partisan agency – and involve the cancellation of public education and information programs (other than to say how, when and where to vote). This will have profound effects on voter engagement, particularly for those who are more likely to experience difficulties in exercising their democratic rights. A concrete example of a successful program is the work done by Student Vote. Many of our member boards in Ontario have had their schools participate in Student Vote during recent elections and we know that this organization has a large presence in schools and classrooms across the country. This is just one program that is now in jeopardy. We fail to understand why the government of Canada would introduce legislation that would eliminate a program that promotes civic engagement among the generation of young people who are the future of this country.

The Bill also contemplates restricting the Chief Electoral Officer's powers from using "any media or other means" to educate the public on the importance of voting and democracy. This runs counter to the transparency and fairness for which Canada is known around the world and there is no honourable justification for such a provision.

The other component of this Bill is the elimination of identification methods that will allow a person to vote. It would seem to be common sense that we as a society would want to encourage voter turn-out, not put up barriers and obstacles that will ultimately turn thousands away from the polls. Reliable reports indicate that as many as 100,000 people could be prevented from exercising their rights. The Bill proposes to remove voter identification cards and the method of vouching. We agree with others that these changes will eliminate a portion of voters who are already marginalized in society: youth, seniors, Aboriginal people, disabled

Submission to Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

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individuals, rural residents and low-income or unemployed individuals. The result will be voter suppression.

We agree with the groundswell of voices across the country that these proposed changes are a direct and cynical attack on democracy. It would be a monumental disrespect to Canadians if the government did not listen to critics of the Bill and were to use its current majority to force these changes upon all citizens.

We join our voices with all Canadians who see the "*Fair Elections Act*" as being anything but fair. Our children, parents and community members expect us to lead by example. As school board trustees we must oppose measures that limit the rights of the public to fully participate in democratic elections and to have access to information that supports and encourages them to exercise their democratic rights.

We ask that the Committee listen to Canadians. We ask that the Committee ensure voter rights are protected and that the use of voter ID cards and vouching continue. We ask that the Committee support the role of the Chief Electoral Officer in undertaking and expanding work that is aimed at public education and information programs, including the use of media outlets to communicate important messages.

We have encouraged all public school board trustees to share this letter with their local MP and their local media.

Yours truly,



Michael Barrett,
President of OPSBA

Copy: Members of the Canadian Senate
Canadian School Boards Association
Kathleen Wynne, Premier of Ontario
Liz Sandals, Ontario Minister of Education
ACÉPO – Association des conseils scolaires des écoles publiques de l'Ontario
AFOCSC - Association franco-ontarienne des conseils scolaires catholiques
OCSTA – Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association
OSTA-AECO - Ontario Student Trustees Association
AMO - Association of Municipalities of Ontario
City of Toronto Council Members