

****Note: The letter sent to Canada's Chief Electoral Officer follows****
Version française disponible sur demande

March 20, 2007

NDP CALLS FOR REVIEW OF NEW ELECTION PROCEDURES FOLLOWING SASKATCHEWAN VOTE FIASCO

NORTHWEST TERRITORIES – Canada's Chief Electoral Officer must review the impact of changes to voter identification requirements, which contributed to extremely low voter turn-out during Monday's by-election in Northern Saskatchewan, the Member of Parliament for the Western Arctic announced today.

"Despite my warnings in Parliament, Liberal and Conservative MPs turned their backs on voters in Northern ridings when they voted in favour of changes to the Canada Elections Act," said NDP Northern Development Critic Dennis Bevington.

Voter turn-out in the Desnethé-Missinippi-Churchill River riding dropped to 25 per cent from 58 per cent in the previous federal election. First Nations leaders squarely laid blame on the changes to the Elections Act.

The new regulations require all voters to produce a photo identification containing proof of street address at the polls. However, many voters in remote ridings do not have municipal addresses.

Prior to Parliament's vote to amend the Act, Bevington warned Opposition MPs that more than one million Canadian voters in Northern and rural ridings could lose their right to vote if the changes were implemented.

A March 18th Globe and Mail article "Tories take Saskatchewan by-election," reported some voters in the Northern communities of Pelican Narrows, Fond du Lac and Wollaston were not able to vote in the March 17th by-election due to new regulations forcing voters to produce identification showing proof of street address.

"Nearly 30 per cent of NWT voters, over 80 per cent of Nunavut voters, and more than 16 per cent of Yukon voters could lose their right to vote because of this change made in haste," Bevington said in an October 26th news release.

"But despite my warnings, the Liberals and Conservatives went ahead and voted in favour of the bill. And now we have seen proof of the disruptive effect of that crucial bill," said Bevington.

Charlie Angus, the NDP's Critic for Democratic Reform, has asked Canada's Chief Electoral Officer to investigate the impact of the new voter identification as a result of voter turn-out in the Saskatchewan by-election. Bevington gives Angus his full support.

"I do not want this to happen to my constituents in the Northwest Territories. The right to vote is a Charter Right. Parliament needs to recognize the problem and do whatever it takes to ensure that this fiasco is not repeated in the next general election," concluded Bevington.

For more information contact: Tara Kearsey, Communications Assistant to MP Dennis Bevington at 867-669-881.

OTTAWA
March 19, 2008

M. Marc Mayrand
Chief Electoral Officer
Elections Canada
257 Slater Street
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0M6

Re: New Voter Identification Requirements and their impact on the March 17th by-elections

Dear M. Mayrand,

I am writing today to request that you investigate the impact of the new voter identification bills – including the recently enacted bill C-18 (verification of residence), and its predecessor, C-31 – on the four by-elections that took place on March 17, 2008.

Anecdotal evidence has surface through the media and other sources that some eligible voters in these by-elections, particularly aboriginal voters, were refused a ballot due to inadequate identification verifying their residence.

We note your report last fall on the unintended consequences of widespread rural disenfranchisement that resulted from the passage of bill C-31 (voter identification) in the first session of the 39th Parliament and the follow-up bill that was supposed to fix this problem bill C-18 (verification of residence). Given the passage of these bills, I ask you to pay special attention to the effect of these bills on voters in the rural, aboriginal and remote communities of Desnetha-Missinippi-Churchill River.

This riding is dominated by rural and aboriginal voters and reports so far are raising serious concerns about possible systematic disenfranchisement of aboriginal, rural, student, and transient voters – those without permanent addresses or without sufficient identification verifying their residences.

Last fall at the committee hearings on C-18, I proposed amendments to the bill that would have allowed all electors to swear an oath to verify their residence for the purposes of casting a ballot. I think it would be useful to assess what the impact of this amendment allowing sworn declarations would have had on the problems being reported from Monday's by-elections.

When C-31 was introduced, the public was told that the bill's intent was to protect Canada from the problem of voter fraud. Given that a thorough investigation revealed that virtually no voter fraud took place in the 2006 general election, it seems to me that these bills are doing much more harm than good to our democracy.

The NDP is committed to open and fair elections where every eligible Canadian voter is given a fair opportunity to cast their ballot. Aboriginal voters, student voters, transient voters or any other voters without permanent addresses all have a right to vote, and provisions should be made in our electoral law allowing them to exercise that right.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. We will be forwarding further specific information to you and the Commissioner of Canada Elections as available, but if I can be of any assistance in the meantime, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Charlie Angus, MP
NDP Critic for Democratic Reform
Timmins – James Bay