

**Taking the Human Rights Agenda
To
Members of Parliament and Senators**

**Prepared by
Amnesty International (AI)
Canada**

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We begin the New Year in a parliamentary environment that is likely to be receptive to human rights issues. The 39th Parliament will come into existence after the federal elections of 2006. The Liberals, the Bloc Québécois, as well as the New Democratic Party (NDP), and the Green Party highlight human rights concerns in their election platforms. The members of the Conservative Party also have a tradition of listening to citizens' concerns.

We need to make an effort to inform individual MPs of our major concerns in the area of human rights, so that they will take these into account when they formulate their positions for caucus, committee, and House of Commons proceedings. Many Canadians view our commitment to promote human rights among the values that define our country.

Approaching MPs

Some of us have discussed human rights and Amnesty International's concerns with our MPs in the past. For others among us, this is a new experience that might make us feel uneasy. It is good to remember that (1) MPs are accustomed to being approached by constituents and that (2) the name and work of Amnesty International carries considerable credibility and authority – even though in a few cases you might have to introduce AI to your MP.

In taking our Human Rights Agenda to our MP, we are engaging in a process of advocacy which is trying to influence decision makers, as old as politics itself, and just as legitimate. Advocacy can be done by a small group or an individual through face-to-face meetings, letter writing, phone calls or brief presentations.

All politicians expect to be advocated. It is their duty to know what constituents think and to acquaint themselves with all sides of an issue. Those who are friendly to your position may give you more time. However, even those opposed can be influenced by a direct show of community support for an issue. Always keep in mind that politicians are people too.

Many of us believe politicians to be more knowledgeable than us because they are in decision-making positions. We worry they might ask questions that we can't answer. Experienced advocates tell us that after meeting with politicians, the mystery that surrounds politicians quickly fades. They are ordinary people who come from a variety of backgrounds and are often responsive to us, the people who can affect their future.

Why are Canadian Members of Parliament (MP) and Senators an important audience for Amnesty International?

MPs and Senators can play a significant role in keeping human rights issues on the Canadian political agenda. Sending a campaign postcard or a letter to an elected official is a powerful way to get our

message across, but direct personal contact between constituents and politicians at the local level is an even more effective form of campaigning.

What action can elected officials take to support human rights work?

Letter: The most common action a Member of Parliament or Senator can take is to write a letter to a Cabinet Minister within the Canadian government. The MP may not agree with the concerns highlighted in the Human Rights Agenda (HRA), but if you ask your MP will usually feel obligated to write to the minister outlining your concerns and asking for a reply. If a response is obtained, the MP will then forward this reply to you, the constituent.

Appeal: We can ask an MP to write an appeal on one or more of the cases on which Amnesty or your group is presently working.

Parliamentary channels: We can encourage an MP to ask a specific question in Parliament pertaining to a human rights issue raised in our Agenda. The MP may take action by pursuing discussions on a particular human rights issue at the appropriate Parliamentary Committee on which s/he is a member. Further, the MP may be compelled to work with political colleagues to develop and table a private members' bill or resolution in the House of Commons as a means of advancing an issue within Parliament.

Write: We can support (with information and advice) a politician who is willing to write an article on key human rights issues for the riding newsletter, publish an article or commentary in a local or national newspaper or magazine, or highlight a human rights concern when they speak in public.

Are approaches to MPs and Senators effective?

Yes. The more MPs and Senators hear about human rights issues from their constituents, the more likely that the topics raised in our Agenda will become prominent on the political agenda.

Bear in mind that while we're not talking, the decision-makers are listening to people whose suggestions may impair human rights.

Do I need to be an expert?

No. We speak credibly as human rights defenders of all shades. Through our commitment to human rights and justice we will get across the key messages contained in the Agenda. Remember, MPs need to keep on top of a wide range of issues. Often, you will indeed be more knowledgeable about a particular issue than your MP. Most MPs are grateful for whatever information you can provide. In cases where you do not have the information your MP requests, please inform the MP that you will gather this information and forward it to your MP. You can point to positive opportunities for changes – to a country's traditions or ideals that support human rights like Canada.

Does it matter to which party my MP belongs?

No. The party in power formulates current government policy, but all MPs have influence in Parliament, in their party's policies and through various levels of government.

What if my MP shows no interest in human rights issues?

If your MP does not appear interested in human rights issues or in the recommendations raised in our Agenda, it is essential that we keep raising our concerns. There are various ways in which we can do this: 1) research your MP's interests and integrate our concerns with their interests; 2) request the help of Amnesty Members who are constituents of your MP in order to send group letters, which may put pressure on the MP. It may take time to see results, but it is worth persisting. Keep requesting meetings. However, if your MP continues to resist your approach, you may want to step up the pressure by sending a letter to the local paper or mentioning the MP's lack of concern for human rights to a local reporter. The power of political pressure is hard for any elected official to ignore.

Who is your MP?

If you don't know who your MP is, check out the House of Commons' website at: <http://www.parl.gc.ca>, or phone the Government of Canada Information Line at: 1-800-OCANADA.

When is a good time to meet with an MP?

Please note that with the upcoming elections, the set dates may fluctuate.

What should we do if our MP is a member of cabinet?

If your MP is a member of cabinet, with one of the following portfolios (each has some responsibility in the area of human rights), please contact Alain Roy Amnesty International Program Director, at aroy@amnesty.ca or phone 1-613-744-7667 (Ext 248) before your meeting in order to ensure that we coordinate our approaches to these senior ministers:

Pierre Pettigrew, Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Trade

Joseph Volpe, Minister of Citizenship and Immigration

Jim Peterson Minister for International Trade

Irwin Cotler, Minister of Justice

Aileen Carroll, Minister for International Cooperation

Bill Graham, Minister of National Defence

How can we coordinate our approaches and delegations?

If there is more than one Amnesty International Community and Youth & Student group in your constituency, please work together to prepare your approach to your MP.

Amnesty International groups in Québec and other communities where there are Francophone Amnistie Internationale groups should also coordinate your approaches. Please note that the document "Above All Else: A Human Rights Agenda for Canada" is available in French.

Your lobbying session

Beforehand:

- Discuss this opportunity with your group members, other Amnesty International groups in your constituency, and/or other likely allies in your community.
- Prepare the appropriate documents and materials you wish to present to your MP. In addition to a copy of our Agenda, include related information about Amnesty International and our work, such as a copy of our front-line pamphlet "Defending Human Rights".
- Through a letter of request and phone contacts, arrange to meet with your MP. Phone your MP's local constituency office, explain who you are, that you want a meeting, and what you want to discuss. Follow up this call with a letter to your MP that reiterates the same points and welcomes a meeting at your mutual convenience. Note that executive assistants of MPs often have considerable influence over what gets an MP's attention. Include in your letter a reference to our national website (www.amnesty.ca) for your MP's information and invite them to visit this site.
- Hold one or more preparatory meetings of the delegation before seeing the MP. Review the experience and comfort levels of the delegation members. Determine who has met with the MP before and use their experience. Set goals for the lobbying session and decide on what your expectations for the MP will be.
- Consider parts of the meeting and decide on spokespersons: introduction; key recommendations in the Agenda; items which relate to the MP's particular interests and/or portfolios or which can be worked into their areas of interest; ask the MP to sign a current appeal; arrange future dialogue.
- Prepare to set an effective working tone for the meeting. It is not a confrontation but rather a dialogue about building respect for human rights in Canada and abroad.

During the meeting:

- Ideally, the delegation that meets with the MP should be comprised of 2-4 people of varying ages and backgrounds.

- Be prompt and courteous. Agree on the length of your meeting (it is reasonable to expect 30 to 60 minutes).
- Ensure that you exchange your Business Cards with your MP and all of his staff prior to beginning the meeting.
- Do not necessarily expect immediate agreement on key issues and do not attempt quick conversions to Amnesty's points of view.
- Clarify both shared and differing points of view on key issues.
- Identify whether your MP has special opportunities to influence government support for specific recommendations in the agenda.
- If there are questions you cannot answer, or issues about which you are uncertain, explain that you don't have the answer and that you would be happy to provide the information soon as possible.
- Keep the meeting focused on achieving the results you set for yourselves.
- Be prepared to answer the question "what concrete action can I take?"
- Ask your MP to sign one of our appeals, such as the current postcard appeal to stop violence against women in Colombia.
- Following your meeting, please tell the national Amnesty International office what and how you did by filling out the attached feedback form.

The importance of follow-up:

It is important to take ongoing steps to build a relationship with your MP – after all, s/he may be a key player in setting and monitoring action on national government policy, including policy and action on human rights concerns.

Write a follow-up letter to your MP to thank her or him for the meeting: summarize the key points of your discussion; reiterate commitments to action that were made and provide whatever further information was requested. You may also wish to invite the MP to a local event and whenever possible, provide an update on an appeal action taken by the MP.

LET'S GO FOR IT!

The involvement of you and your group in this important lobbying action will make a difference in establishing human rights as a more central part of the Canadian government's political agenda and strengthening Canada's leadership role in the protection of human rights. We look forward to hearing from you about the results of your endeavors.

Thank-you for participating in this action.

Should you require further advice and support on advocacy work pertaining to this Agenda, please contact:

Alain Roy, Programs Director, Amnesty International

Email: aroy@amnesty.ca

Phone: 613-744-7667, extension 248

For extra copies of these materials, please contact:

Jenn Farr, Materials Distribution Coordinator, Amnesty International

Email: jfarr@amnesty.ca

Phone: 613-744-7667, extension 264

We need feedback

Our shared efforts to build government support for the human rights agenda will be strengthened if you could let us know:

- * which MPs and Senators you have approached
- * the key outcomes of your discussions with elected officials

Please take a few moments to complete and return the attached feedback form.

Even if you do not meet with your MP in the coming months, this will be helpful information.

Please return the feedback form as soon as possible after you meet your MP or Senator.

HUMAN RIGHTS AGENDA FEEDBACK FORM

Please return this form to: Alain Roy, Amnesty International, 312 Laurier Avenue East, Ottawa ON K1N 1H9. Request an electronic version of this form from Jenn Farr: jfarr@amnesty.ca.

Please return this form as soon as possible after you meet with your MP.

— Name (of person completing form):

— Phone: ()

— Email: _____

— Name of your riding and MP/candidate met:

— Did you meet with your MP/candidate to discuss the Agenda? Yes () No ()

(If no, please return this form, with any comment you wish but you do not need to answer the following questions)

— Numbers, location and/or names of Amnesty International group(s) who met with MP:

— Date of meeting:

— How many Amnesty members participated in your meeting ().

Please list by name and function (if you can) any associates/advisors of the MP who participated in the meeting:

— Indicate which of the key areas of the agenda you discussed:

- 1) Transparent and accountable implementation.
- 2) The rights of Indigenous peoples.
- 3) Security through human rights.
- 4) Justice and oversight.

— Indicate with an x, on the following scale, the tone of the MP's response to the Agenda:

Negative

Receptive

Interested

Strongly Unsympathetic

Strongly Supportive

— Name the one area/issue of the Agenda that received the most attention from the MP (positive or negative) and indicate the key elements of the MP's response.

— If different from the above (and if relevant to your discussion), name any aspect of the Agenda to which the MP suggested s/he would lend especially strong support.

If your MP requested further information or other follow-up on specific issues and you need help to provide it, please contact Alain Roy at: aroy@amnesty.ca