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PUBLIC STATEMENT AND SUBMISSION

to the

Ontario Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform

Special Forum for Persons with Disabilities

Monday January 23, 2007

7:00 pm – 9:00 pm

Sponsored by

**Canadian Hearing Society
271 Spadina Road, Toronto**

Good evening,

(IF THEY DON'T INTRODUCE YOU... My name is Scott Simser.)

I would like to thank the members of the Ontario Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform for coming tonight to hear from all of us, and for giving me the opportunity to speak.

Many of you know me from my days in Toronto as a practicing lawyer and as a board member of the Canadian Hearing Society. I now live in Ottawa with my wife and two sons, but it's sure nice to be back this evening.

Many of you may NOT know that just recently I decided to seek the nomination to run for political office in my west Ottawa riding.

Now I happen to be deaf, so there is going to be a few barriers along the way... the types of barriers that are all-too-familiar to many of you... and ones that I've faced many times before... years ago as a student, more recently as a lawyer, and now as a political candidate:

- Nomination meetings and all-candidates-debates will need to be accessible for me through real time captioning and sign language interpreters. Otherwise, I will not have a level playing field with my opponent.
- If I win the nomination, then there is the pre-election stage, more meetings and outreach to local residents and party officials.

- Once an election is called, the riding campaign would kick into high gear, increasing even more my need for accommodation.
- And if I am ever fortunate enough to be elected as a member of parliament, my access and accommodation needs will change once again.

I am at a disadvantage in my campaign if I have to rely on my own resources or even the donations of my supporters to cover the cost of access... costs that non-disabled opponents won't face.

These are barriers that one of my role models knows all about, Gary Malkowski, Canada's first Deaf provincial member of parliament, and he is here tonight.

Whose responsibility is it to pay for disability-related costs? The legislature? The government? The political parties themselves? I think I know the answer: it's a shared obligation, and a legal one, but more on that in a minute.

The Citizens' Assembly has identified a number of principles for changing or improving Ontario's electoral system. Two are particularly relevant for people with disabilities: fairness of representation in the legislature and demographic participation in election campaigns, including voting, and supporting or joining political parties. To achieve these principles, another one must be added: accessibility and the duty to accommodate disability.

You will be interested to know that on December 13th, the United Nations adopted, in record time, the new *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*. I think it is worth noting a few excerpts. Under Article 29 of that Convention, States Parties are required to:

(a) Ensure that persons with disabilities can effectively and fully participate in political and public life on an equal basis... including the right and opportunity... to vote and be elected... :

[by]... (i) Ensuring that voting procedures, facilities and materials are appropriate, [and] accessible... ;

[by]... (ii) Protecting the right of persons with disabilities to vote... and to stand for elections, to effectively hold office and perform all public functions at all levels of government, facilitating the use of assistive and new technologies where appropriate;

[and by]... (iii) Guaranteeing the free expression of the will of persons with disabilities as electors... ;

States Parties are also required to:

(b) ... encourage... [disabled persons'] participation in...

(i) ... the activities and administration of political parties

These are the steps that need to be taken... the steps we have a right to expect – so that we as Deaf, deafened and hard of hearing citizens, and others with disabilities including some seniors, can act as full and contributing members of our communities.

This is a matter that urgently needs public attention. The Canadian Association of the Deaf is speaking out... so is the Canadian Hearing Society... and many of you tonight. Even my riding association has begun a project to make campaigns and events accessible.

Beginning this March 30th, Canada and other UN member States will have the opportunity to do the same, by hopefully signing and ratifying the new disability rights convention.

In the meantime, let's not lose sight of the fact that access and accommodation for persons with disabilities are already fundamental human rights guaranteed under the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, as well as under our Federal, provincial and territorial human rights legislation.

I urge the Citizens' Assembly to have regard for this when it prepares its report this spring.

I'll end by reminding you that the last time I stood here was almost exactly one year ago during the Federal election. It was a memorable evening for me because it was the first time I could fully participate as a deaf citizen in an all-candidates-debate. Thanks to CHS for making that event, and this one, fully accessible with interpreters, real time captioning and an FM system.

That night I realized how 'hungry' we all are to participate in our democratic and political institutions. It's time to remove the barriers and let in people with disabilities!

And please hurry... before someone calls another election!

Thank you.