



Social Development Centre
— WATERLOO REGION —

**Presentation to the
Standing Committee on General Government
Regarding Bill 201,
*An Act to Amend the Election Finances Act
And the Taxation Act, 2007***

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Presented by:

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The Social Development Centre Waterloo Region is an independent community based organization accountable to our local community. We are one of 20 community based social planning bodies across Ontario that are members of the Social Planning Network of Ontario and one of more than 1,000 social and community organizations in Waterloo Region.

We have provided social planning, community development and community information services in Waterloo Region for five (5) decades. Our focus is people and our mission is to advance community through active participation and objective knowledge.

We make community information resources available to the community and provide help people find the help they need. We support reference and action groups who focus on important issues including disabilities and poverty. We undertake social research and coordinate community events such as forums on social issues, all candidate sessions during elections and workshops on community development or using social data.

Our goals are to:

1. Increase understanding of social resources, assets, issues, needs and context of the local community by those who need this knowledge to take action.
2. Increase citizen participation in social, economic and political life of the community.
3. Build social cohesion through relationships, collaboration and community action.
4. Reduce inequitable access to knowledge resources resulting from emerging technologies.
5. Develop the social infrastructure of the community – people, organizations, services and policies.

The values that guide our work are:

- Social Justice:** We are committed to equal treatment and fair access for all members of the community.
- Participatory Democracy:** We value democracy practiced daily and encourage everyone to participate in decisions or on issues that affect people.
- Community Knowledge:** We believe local community based knowledge is a public good and is essential to help all stakeholders understand the community and its people, assets, resources and needs.
- Diversity:** We recognize, highly value and seek out the multi-dimensional character of community members which includes a rich variety of backgrounds, abilities and experiences.
- Relationship Building (Social Capital):** We are committed to building positive relationships in all areas of community and in our face to face contacts, organizational connections and community action.

Not long ago, we met with over 60 representatives from community groups that work on social development, democratic reform and the environment and together we explored whether we had common goals that drove our community involvement. As it turned out we did and came to fairly easy agreement that our common values are:

- Equity and fairness
- Leaving a legacy for the future
- Compassion
- Being part of a community of voices

I believe you share these values as well. When I think of the purpose behind the Elections Finances Act and proposed revisions, what stands out for me are the principles of fairness, providing an even playing field, democratic process, transparency and openness. These are quite evident. I truly support these principles and want these front and centre in elections and everything related to political life in Ontario, particularly when finances are concerned. I share your desire to get it right and not give an unfair advantage that benefits only some.

The proposed changes to the Elections Finances Act, however, are problematic for a community organization such as ours that devotes time to educating and advocating on various social issues. The list of activities defined as “*political advertising*” means *advertising in any broadcast, print, electronic or other medium with the purpose of promoting or opposing any registered party or the election of a registered candidate and includes advertising that takes a position on an issue with which a registered party or candidate is associated ...*

This definition blurs an important line between political partisan activity and issue focused activity. With this definition, at any point in time in the six months prior to an election call and during the election period, community organizations may not be able to address issues or participate in public dialogue on social issues for fear these might become identified with a party or candidate.

Furthermore, it is not clear what ‘*political advertising*’ includes. The following list seems incomplete given the range of activities that are possible when addressing social issues\;

(a) *the transmission to the public of an editorial, a debate, a speech, an interview, a column, a letter, a commentary or news,*

(b) *the distribution of a book, or the promotion of the sale of a book, for no less than its commercial value,*

(c) *the transmission of a document directly by a person or a group to their members, employees or shareholders, as the case may be,*

(d) *the transmission by an individual, on a non-commercial basis on the Internet, of his or her personal political views, or*

(e) *the making of telephone calls to electors only to encourage them to vote; (“publicité politique”, “annonce politique”)*

What of election and policy related activities such as debates, discussions, panel presentations issues or key policy directions? Where do these fit?

At the Social Development Centre we have worked consistently in recent years to provide a clearinghouse of information for voters and candidates across Waterloo Region. We work with partners locally, cross-province and Canada-wide to prepare issue papers to provide background on key issues and how policies relate to the issues.

We organize all candidate-community round table discussions where constituents meet and talk with candidates. Candidates tell us these are refreshing and enlightening – the animosity of the traditional debate is absent at our events. The opportunity to talk to people about issues that matter to them is, for some candidates, the best education they have gotten through their candidacy. These events have achieved a reputation and our success has overcome us – last year during the Federal Election we had sessions with over 250 attendees so we must now consider other ways to enable meaningful dialogue.

We have worked with community members – we support a local poverty free group and a disabilities and human rights group who speak to issues, make policy submissions and act as resources in all candidate sessions. Hear what they have to say: <https://youtu.be/uh0ySNJ6yNg>



With considerable community input we have developed a framework for assessing policies and programs against local criteria for achieving poverty elimination. We have applied this framework to party platforms and have produced platform analyses for all parties with a published platform. In the last Federal Election we took this one step further and hosted a day-long session to which candidates and their teams and the community were invited in to roll up their sleeves and analyze platforms, their own and others, against these well-developed criteria for poverty elimination. This framework is provided at the end of this submission.

At the Social Development Centre we are rigorously non-partisan. We have never been nor are we now a *‘third party political advertiser’* and I hope you agree. The proposed changes to the Elections Finances Act include definitions that make me question if we might and when we might. This is not a comfortable place to be when our intention is to ensure both citizens and potential political representatives have the information they need to understand issues and the needs of our local communities.

Greg Essensa, Ontario’s Chief Electoral Officer presented to you on June 6, 2016. *“That means that I would need to advise organizations who wish to comply of what the “real” rule is. The “real” rule is not whether the advertising is associated with a party or a candidate; the “real” rule is whether it may become associated with a party or a candidate.”*

The ambiguity I sensed is real. I ask that there be a tighter definition to distinguish issue advocacy from political advocacy. Otherwise my organization, and the community work we do, will be seriously compromised and may be blocked altogether.

A secondary issue related to ‘political advertising’ is that extending the period to six months before an election makes little sense. If the definition of *‘third party’* and *‘political advertising’* is tightened up as I have requested, I suggest the definitions apply at any time – something is *‘political advertising’* or it is not – at any time. Someone is a *‘third party’* or they are not – when they are engaged in making contributions or *‘political advertising’*.

Although my primary purpose for this deputation is the ‘third party political advertising’, I want to speak also to the fundamental reason behind the proposed revisions to the Act which, as I understand, is to provide a more even playing field during elections.

In consideration of the experience we have had in helping to keep elections, party platforms, policies and budgets more understandable to citizens, particularly those who are most vulnerable in our community I question if it is possible to have an even playing field – ever and certainly not now.

There is so little understood about the necessary skills and capacity that are required to comprehend systems, issues, protocols and processes let alone actually step forward and work to influence those directly or indirectly through our political channels.

It is a lot of work to stay on top of candidate information during an election and identify and frame issues based on a larger understanding of community needs and not just on short term, personal benefit. These are huge undertakings which are not understood as needing skill let alone time. For many citizens, there seems to be an all-or-none to political involvement – you are a candidate or you have a vote. For many of us, there is not much in between.

This is ultimately where leveling the playing field should happen– by cultivating active meaningful citizen involvement and by taking the mystique and secrecy out of the process at every step along the way, particularly in government budget deliberations. Unless we do this, there will always be an advantage toward those who can invest the time, have the skills, make the contributions to be recognized and/or to lobby over time to get their interests heard.

Our main hope lies in having sufficient checks and balances to ensure transparency and openness at least in relation to financial contributions. Banning donations from corporations or unions will not likely result in a fairer playing field. Rather, the result may be even less openness and transparency which is opposite to what is needed.

Thus I offer a simple approach to defining ‘*third party*’ contributions and ‘*political advertising*’ so that ‘*third parties*’ are defined in a more transparent way and expected to be more open in their political activities:

- Define ‘third party’ is an individual or organization that contributes directly or indirectly to a political party, political campaign, candidate or potential candidate.
- Define direct contributions as financial donations or donations in-kind of substantial value or that would otherwise be an expense during a campaign or for a party.
- Each person or organization giving or receiving these donations must document these as per the levels defined in the Act and these need to be reported on to the respective electoral body that as per the Act. This information must be available publicly so it is clear who has contributed, how much and to whom.

- ‘*Political advertising*’ is any communication, advertising or message in any media or format at any time during, before, after or in between election periods in which a political party, candidate, potential candidate or elected official is the subject, mentioned directly or alluded to, the latter outside of their official elected role. This would include supportive and negative advertising. Any such advertising will include a statement of which party, candidate, official they are supporting and permission from that body, candidate or elected official to advertise on their behalf.
- Define ‘*political advocacy*’ separately from ‘*issue advocacy*’ insofar as the latter is ‘*political advocacy*’ if it meets the above definition –i.e. is about a party or elected official or candidate or campaign.
- Anyone or any organization that devotes time and funds to ‘*political advertising*’ over a limit defined in the Act must be endorsed by a party, campaign or candidate or registered as a lobby group and they must include this information in any communication, messages or presentations they make about to our a political party, official, candidate, campaign or issues.

I appreciate this opportunity to speak to the Committee today. I recognize the challenge before you in revising such an important piece of legislation that is likely well below the radar for many.

With respect,

Trudy Beaulne

**Social Development Centre Waterloo Region
Local Framework for Successful Poverty Reduction Outcomes**

