

## Background

A Liberal government will reinstate the Court Challenges Program, abolished by the Conservative government in September 2006, and double its annual budget to \$6 million.

As the costs of Charter cases increase, so too must our willingness to assist with those costs. The protections guaranteed under the Charter are only as meaningful as the ability of Canadians to access those protections.

The Court Challenges Program of Canada is a non-profit organization which was set up in 1994 to provide financial assistance for important court cases that advance language and equality rights guaranteed under Canada's Constitution.

In September 2006, in a press release titled "Canada's New Government cuts wasteful programs, refocuses spending on priorities, achieves major debt reduction as promised" the Conservative government cancelled the Court Challenges Program despite an independent evaluation done in 2003 that endorsed the Program's purpose and operation. As a result of this decision, the Program had to stop accepting applications for funding.

On the press release, the Conservatives listed the program under the heading "Value for Money – Funding for third parties to further their interests or programs that are not effective, do not achieve results or are being re-focused or targeted for improved effectiveness".

The Conservatives boasted that the cancellation would save \$5.6 million over 2 years in a year in which they were projecting a surplus of \$7.2 billion. In fact, the same day the Court Challenges Program was cancelled for purely ideological reasons, the Harper government announced a \$13.2 billion surplus.

The Court Challenges Program has funded groups who participated in landmark court cases on issues like: minority language rights and the right to healthcare services in official languages, the right of gays and lesbians to marry, and the equality rights of women and the disabled.

The Program also funded Democracy Watch (acting in coalition with the National Anti-Poverty Organization) to intervene in *Harper v. Canada* – the case brought by Stephen Harper, then President of the National Citizens Coalition, challenging third-party election spending limits.

This program has defended minority language rights, equality rights, the rights of women and strong spending limits in an election – no wonder Stephen Harper cancelled it.

On June 19, the Conservative government announced the creation of a new program to replace the Court Challenges Program. The new program deals

exclusively with minority language rights at the expense of the women's equality rights, the rights of the disabled or the rights of gay and lesbian Canadians.