

December 5, 2006

Dear Member of Parliament:

On behalf of the over 220 Canadian and international organizations that, as members and partners of the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network, look to us for leadership on human rights issues, I write to urge you to vote against introducing legislation to reverse the right to equal marriage for same-sex couples.

Promoting and protecting human rights is central to our work combating the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Laws and policies are important elements in defining and fulfilling these rights. Last year, with the passage and coming into force of the *Civil Marriage Act*, Canada became a world leader in enshrining equal rights for same-sex couples.

Now, by reopening debate on this issue in the House of Commons and possibly backpedalling on the equal right of same-sex couples to marry, Canada is in danger of joining the ranks of countries that champion human rights only selectively to suit political circumstances. The consequences of such an outcome would be damaging, not only to people in Canada, but to those around the world who look to our country for inspiration and guidance on human rights.

The Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network works with organizations, in Canada and internationally, that fight the stigma and discrimination that hinder effective responses to the AIDS epidemic. In many cases, the struggle of these people to realize their human rights is a constant and pitched battle. These include

- colleagues in Jamaica, where gay men are harassed, beaten and even killed with impunity;
- people in emerging civil society groups in China, where gay and bisexual men and lesbians are risking their safety to assert their human rights publicly; and
- NGOs in the former Soviet Union and on the Indian subcontinent, where gay men are beaten, derided and arrested unjustly.

Wherever we go, such courageous human rights activists ask us how Canada came to embrace the equal rights of sexual minorities in a way that is admired and even dreamed of by people who thirst for human rights across the world.

If the House of Commons votes in favour of reopening the law on equal marriage, our members in Canada and around the world, who have fought long and hard for human rights, will be asking us, and themselves, why Canada would even consider taking such a backward step.

In far too many countries, it is often politically easier to nourish prejudices and irrational fears than to stand firmly in favour of human rights. To serve political needs, sexual minorities — gay, bisexual, lesbian and transgender persons, among others — are criminalized, marginalized, and called threats to security or to established social values.

But such trumping of human rights by political expediency does not reflect the values enshrined in the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. In light of the hatred, violence and persecution faced by gays and lesbians in too many parts of the world, it is all the more important that Canada present a counter-example as a country that respects and cherishes the dignity and human rights of gays and lesbians, including the right to equal marriage.

This week, you and your colleagues can stand up for Canada's leadership and commitment to human rights. We urge you to do so by standing against reopening the question of equal marriage.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Joanne Csete". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Joanne" being more prominent than the last name "Csete".

Joanne Csete
Executive Director