



Canadians must have a voice

By Maria Minna, M.P.

The Canadian public must be given a ring-side seat on all international agreements that impact on our sovereignty and/or impact negatively on Canadian standards and quality of life so they can judge for themselves what is, or is not, in our nation's best interests.

That's not what happened at the recent Security and Prosperity Partnership meeting in Montebello involving Canada, the United States and Mexico.

Instead of respecting the Canadian public's right to know by ensuring the participation of non-government organizations, Prime Minister Stephen Harper conducted the discussions behind closed doors and consulted only with representatives of corporate Canada.

I was particularly appalled at the deliberate maneuvering of the Harper government to prevent public discourse on the issues at stake.

When I was Minister of International Cooperation, I ensured that funding was made available for civil society and non-government organizations to conduct a parallel conference to the Summit of the Americas that was held in Quebec City in April 2001. As a result, groups representing the Canadian public were able to hold discussions and make recommendations to the government leaders and their respective officials.

At the recent Security and Prosperity Partnership meeting in Montebello, however, Mr. Harper shut civil society out and thus ensured that his private meetings would not be subjected to public scrutiny.

Space was denied to the Council of Canadians for their parallel policy conference. Protesters and other members of the public were silenced by armed guards. And, police officers in disguise were among the protesters acting as agents provocateurs.

That is not the way it was supposed to be. The previous Liberal government, which initiated the Security and Prosperity Partnership, took steps to ensure that: a) Minutes of the meetings would be made public; b) Consultations with civil society and non-government organizations would take place; and, c) Parliament would ratify, or amend, any potential agreements.

Broad-reaching public consultations were to be held across Canada prior to the meeting and Parliament was to debate and vote on multilateral agreements entered into at the meetings.

Instead, the Conservative government went to great lengths to prevent transparency and open discourse and even shut down Parliamentary hearings questioning the process.

What's even worse, Mr. Harper has made it clear that he has no intention of subjecting the recent international agreements to Parliamentary review and approval. He intends to use Royal Prerogative – just like he was the King of Siam – to enact the agreements that he entered into in secret.

In order to be effective and democratic, the Security and Prosperity process must be more transparent with a greater degree of public accountability. My Liberal colleagues and I are calling on Mr. Harper to disclose the complete list of Security and Prosperity Partnership working groups, their contact people and participating memberships; disclose discussions that are under way on a quarterly basis, and provide opportunities for public input.

There were key issues that I feel needed to be discussed at the meetings in Montebello. Issues like: a) Protecting Canadians' health by not harmonizing pesticide levels on imported fruits and vegetables with those of the U.S.; b) Standing fast on the premise that Canada would not negotiate the export of bulk water from all major drainage basins in Canada; and c) Demanding that the U.S. Department of Homeland Security return to negotiations to streamline border pre-clearance.

Were those issues discussed? Your guess is as good as mine.

Such issues involving Canadian sovereignty and the protection of our interests must come before Parliament in an accountable and transparent manner. The Canadian public must be fully informed and involved.

Instead, Mr. Harper is making deals with President George Bush without public consultation and this is simply unacceptable. Canadian deserve better.

The Security and Prosperity Partnership deals with issues that are crucial to Canada's future. That's why my Liberal colleagues and I are committed to calling on the government to inform Canadians on what is happening with these negotiations and to come clean with Parliament and all Canadians.