

Canada must let public know how it votes on World Bank loan

The Canadian public has no right to know how Canada will be voting on a controversial, \$500 million US loan to Brazil that will speed rainforest destruction, according to Michael Wilson, Canada's governor to the World Bank, in a recent letter to Probe International.

No one knows when the vote for the loan will be taken but the World Bank is under intense pressure to bail out Brazil quickly, and it could come as early as this month or next. When the vote finally is taken, if Mr. Wilson gets his way, the Canadian public will not know if the Canadian government voted for or against it. This is no way for a country that calls itself a democracy to behave. I have sent the following letter to Mr. Wilson in protest.

Dear Mr. Wilson:

I am in receipt of your Feb. 19 letter in which you refuse to make public Canada's voting record at the World Bank. If I understand you correctly, the Canadian government is prepared to discuss its views before and after it votes, but it will not reveal how it actually did vote on loans submitted to the World Bank for financing.

In this way, your executive director to the bank would be able to express environmental concerns to environmentalists, to describe business opportunities to industry, to be all things to all people without ever having to reveal your government's decision after weighing the various interests at stake.

This position is indefensible in a country that calls itself a democracy. The public's right to know where their elected representatives stand, and how their elected representatives act on their behalf, is a fundamental and necessary mechanism of a functioning democracy. Without it, the citizenry cannot ensure accountability of their elected representatives.

You say your government would be "misleading" the public by publishing a list showing whether Canada voted for, against, or abstained on each loan approved by the bank, since this list would not give an accurate reading of Canadian views on these issues. Rather, Mr. Wilson, I suggest that giving the public the "full range of questions and concerns raised by our executive director in the give-and-take of debate" without giving the public the conclusion of that debate — how Canada's representative actually votes — is misleading in the extreme. Would you advocate that votes cast by our

members of Parliament in the House of Commons also be secret? I think not.

The public is not interested in rhetorical statements of concern by Canada's representative to the bank that are not backed up by actions. At the end of the day, money will only leave the World Bank's account for the treasury of a borrowing government if a majority of the bank's shareholders give their approval. How these shareholders cast their vote — whether it is by holding their hand in the air, filling out a secret ballot, or by arriving at consensus through discussion — is irrelevant. One way or the other, the Canadian government, as a shareholder in the World Bank, takes a stand on every single project submitted to the bank. The Canadian public wants to know just what that stand is. Needless to say, the public would be better served if it also received the details of the "give-and-take of debate" as background to the Canadian executive director's ultimate vote.

Perhaps no other loan in the history of the World Bank has been the subject of such intense interest to the Canadian public as the imminent Power Sector II Loan to Brazil. This US \$500 million loan has gained extraordinary notoriety because the people whose rainforest homeland will be destroyed if the loan is approved — the Kaiapo people of the Amazon — have brought their message to the people who would inadvertently pay for this destruction with their foreign aid tax dollars — the people of Canada and other Western nations. As a result, the concerned citizenry in this country wants to know how you, Mr. Wilson, as Canada's governor to the World Bank, are going to vote.

Instead of making the World Bank a more accountable and "transparent" institution, as you promised last autumn in Berlin, you are doing just the opposite by denying Canadians their basic right to know how your government is acting on their behalf. By so doing you are only serving to reinforce the walls of secrecy that have allowed the World Bank to finance ecological destruction and unsustainable development with impunity, and with the anonymity it has come to depend on.

We call on you to live up to your stated intentions to open up the World Bank to scrutiny and thus to release Canada's voting record.

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