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May 30, 2012

Dear Prime Minister,

We are writing this open letter to you as individuals and representatives of organizations dedicated to strengthening the protection of human rights and food security, in Canada and around the world. We are deeply troubled by the Government of Canada's treatment of the United Nations human rights Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier De Schutter, during his recent mission to Canada.

Mr. De Schutter is an internationally renowned expert on the right to food. He was appointed as the Special Rapporteur on the right to food by the UN Human Rights Council with the support of Canada. The Government of Canada frequently cites its encouragement of missions by UN mandate holders as evidence of its good standing and promotion of human rights – including at Canada's 2009 Universal Periodic Review before the UN Human Rights Council.

Mr. De Schutter came to Canada on mission at the official invitation of your government. The Canadian Government assisted in arranging Mr. De Schutter's itinerary described in an Aide Memoire which was released publicly in advance of his visit. The government knew that Mr. De Schutter would prepare a report on the mission to the UN Human Rights Council. The government also knew that Mr. De Schutter's mandate is to promote the right to food in all countries, subject to maximum available resources. It would certainly come as no surprise to your government that Mr. De Schutter would have concerns about the well-documented extent of hunger in a country as affluent as Canada. This has been identified as a growing concern by a number of UN human rights bodies as well as by organizations across the country for many years.

Despite all this, Mr. De Schutter has been subjected to unprecedented attacks on his integrity and professionalism simply for having accepted Canada's invitation. His mission was described by the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration as "completely ridiculous." He was accused of wasting money that Canada has contributed to food aid by coming here. He was told that he should not get involved in "political exercises in developed democracies like Canada." The fact that he would write a report that refers to food security issues of Aboriginal Peoples in Canada was described by your Minister of Health as "insulting."

Your government went beyond attacking the mission itself, however. In a highly charged atmosphere in the House of Commons, your Ministers proceeded to attack Mr. De Schutter personally. He was described as an “ill-informed”, “patronizing” “academic” who engaged in “lecturing”. He was referred to as “this guy from Belgium” and criticized personally for the policies of his “home country” in relation to Canada’s seal hunt. He was attacked for never having “delivered any food to anyone anywhere.” The Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs stated that “it is an insult to Canadians and their tax dollars that this fellow came over here to waste the dollars they have contributed.” Government members, including the Minister of Foreign Affairs, repeatedly rose to their feet to enthusiastically applaud the portrayal of Mr. De Schutter as an ill-informed meddling outsider.

This was not the first time in recent months that Ministers of your government have exhibited disrespect for UN Special Rapporteurs. James Anaya, the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples received similar treatment when he expressed concern about conditions in Attawapiskat in December 2011. Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development John Duncan characterized a statement from Mr. Anaya, expressing concern about the deplorable housing situation in Attawapiskat, as being a “publicity stunt”.

Prime Minister, there is no line to be drawn between protecting human rights at home and protecting them in the rest of the world. Human rights are universal and do not only apply to developing nations or countries in which there are military dictatorships. Your government appropriately recognized this when Canada’s record was examined through the UN Human Rights Council’s Universal Periodic Review process in 2009, noting that: “Canada recognizes that no country, including itself, has a perfect human rights record, which emphasized the importance of every country opening its human rights records to scrutiny, domestically and internationally.”

People in Canada are entitled to the fulfillment of their human rights. In the case of rights such as the right to food or housing, such fulfillment is to be assessed relative to the resources available. To suggest that widespread hunger in so affluent a country as Canada ought not to be of concern to the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food because hunger is more severe in some poorer countries is to completely misunderstand the nature of Canada’s obligations under international human rights law and the mandate of the Special Rapporteur.

Mr. De Schutter’s preliminary reflections in fact echo many of the concerns that Parliamentary committees, civil society organizations, independent research institutes, UN treaty monitoring bodies and experts have stated for years: the need to address food insecurity amongst low-income people in Canada; the links between chronic diseases and unhealthy food; the specific concerns of Aboriginal peoples; and the need for a national policy which will respect, protect, and fulfil the right to food.

While there is much to be proud of with respect to the protection of human rights in Canada, there is a pressing need to do better. The human rights of many in Canada, including Aboriginal peoples and those living in poverty, without adequate food or housing, are violated daily. If the UN ignored these violations or failed to hold Canada accountable in the same way as other governments are held accountable, the entire UN human rights protection system would be discredited. When Canadian

officials disregard or show disrespect for international human rights experts and mechanisms, other governments can be expected to follow suit.

Prime Minister, if the government disagrees with the recommendations from internationally mandated experts such as Mr. De Schutter, those arguments can respectfully be put on the public record to be discussed. Similarly, if the government has concerns about the timing or nature of media interviews or press statements by Special Rapporteurs, those concerns can and should be addressed in appropriate ways. In all circumstances, concerns and disagreement should be expressed in a manner that makes it clear that Canada recognizes the UN has the authority and the responsibility to examine and uphold universal human rights in all countries, including Canada.

Prime Minister, Canada deserves more and so does the United Nations. We hope you will ensure that UN representatives and human rights experts coming to Canada in the future will be treated with respect. We urge you to apologize to Olivier De Schutter and James Anaya for the unjustified attacks that they were subjected to and to provide assurances to the United Nations Human Rights Council that Canada will cooperate fully with its mechanisms. We expect our government to fully engage with the UN human rights system, recognizing its application to Canada and welcoming the international scrutiny that our signature on human rights treaties rightfully entails.

Sincerely,

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The Very Rev. the Hon. Lois Wilson, Former Senator, Former President World Council of Churches

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CC: Leona Aglukkaq, Minister of Health and Minister of the Northern Economic Development Agency

John Baird, Minister of Foreign Affairs

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Gerry Ritz, Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food

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Bob Rae, leader of the Liberal Party

Daniel Paillé, leader of the Bloc Québécois

Elizabeth May, leader of the Green Party