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July 15, 2010

Right Hon. Stephen Harper  
Prime Minister of Canada  
House of Commons, Parliament Buildings  
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A6  
Canada

Dear Mr. Harper:

I am writing in support of my colleagues in the Canadian lighthouse preservation community who are protesting the recent action of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) announcing that all Canadian lighthouses that are unstaffed will be listed as surplus. As an Executive Board Member of the World Lighthouse Society, I am extremely disappointed in this announcement and fear that it will undermine the intent of the recently enforced Heritage Lighthouse Protection Act. Canada's lighthouses are an extremely important part of not just Canada's maritime history, but also of the World's maritime history. The members of the World Lighthouse Society are sworn to protect, promote and preserve the world's maritime history and I am astounded that the DFO has put these treasures at risk for abandonment, neglect and destruction.

I spent a several hours researching the facts surrounding this controversy by reading everything I could find relating to it, including information provided by the websites of both the DFO and Parks Canada.

The Heritage Lighthouse Protection Act, which came into force on May 29, 2010, was intended as "a means to protect federally-owned heritage lighthouses by allowing them to be used for other purposes as long as they are maintained in a manner consistent with established conservation practices." Parks Canada states that "under certain circumstances, a heritage lighthouse may be sold or transferred to another order of government, a community group or a person to facilitate an on-going use and purpose for the building.

It is my understanding that petitions may be made to the Minister responsible for Parks Canada to have lighthouses included on the Surplus List designated as Heritage Lighthouses. Individuals, municipalities or community-based non-profit groups have two years from enforcement of the Act to seek heritage designations for the lighthouses. They do not need to assume ownership of the lighthouses in order to petition for Heritage status; however they must provide a written commitment to acquire and protect a Surplus Lighthouse in order for it to be eligible for designation. Parks Canada states that "potential owners must submit a business plan that shows their proposed use of the property will be economically viable over the long term" and that they will be able to manage and maintain the property. That would require an amazing feat in a short amount of time for anyone, considering the current economic climate.

If no commitment is received, the lighthouse will not receive Heritage designation and will remain in the DFO's holdings. Although the regular lighthouse divestiture program remains an option for the acquisition of a Surplus Lighthouse outside of the Heritage Lighthouse Protection Act, there is no formal assurance that such transfers will continue to be made to community-based interests for heritage preservation

purposes as has been the practice in the past. That opens the door for private interests to take over the light stations and turn them into for-profit private property.

Currently, responsibility for the maintenance of the lighthouses falls under the DFO. Many inactive lighthouses are in a serious state of decay and the only maintenance active lighthouses receive are to keep the power on and change the bulbs. The DFO has stated it is not "in the heritage business" and it will not be funding any needed repairs prior to transfer of Surplus lighthouses. However, it may consider applications for minor improvements on a case-by-case basis during the transfer process. Meanwhile, the lighthouses continue to deteriorate.

On the surface it might appear that the DFO's actions would help to facilitate the transfer of the lighthouses to entities more interested in their preservation. However the Act was designed to protect *federally owned* lighthouses and the DFO's actions have effectively shifted protection of these structures entirely on the communities that would propose to own them. Many of these communities don't have the resources to pay for the upkeep and Parks Canada hasn't offered to provide any help in the form of grants or any other reasonable assistance. In addition, there are legitimate concerns regarding contamination at many sites by lead and mercury and who would have to pay for their removal.

The construction of Canada's lighthouses was paid for by the Canadian people, and as a result are public assets that have been held and maintained for the good of the people since the first Canadian lighthouse was built at Louisbourg in Nova Scotia. How ironic that as soon as your people succeed in enforcing an act to preserve an essential part of their maritime heritage, your government decides for them that their lighthouses are no longer assets and need to be divested as soon as possible. Is the timing coincidental? I think not.

I hope that you will use your influence to instruct the Department of Fisheries and Oceans to take a more cooperative and productive approach to the Heritage Lighthouse Protection Act. I look forward to learning that Canadians and citizens of the World will no longer have to fear the loss of these important symbols of a shared maritime history.

Sincerely yours,

Donna Suchomelly  
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WLS Architecture Working Group Joint-Coordinator  
WLS Newsletter Editor  
Chesapeake Chapter of the United States Lighthouse Society, Vice President for Preservation

cc: Hon. Gail Shea, Minister of Fisheries and Oceans  
Hon. Jim Prentice, Minister of the Environment  
Mr. Barry MacDonald, President, Nova Scotia Lighthouse Preservation Society  
Mr. Jürgen Tronicke, President, WLS

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