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*...from the  
director's chair*

# The power of the pen

## A brief, well-written letter – on old fashioned paper – is the most effective way to communicate with elected officials

“What are those nitwits smoking?” I hear that a lot from truckers who are all wound up about the latest action – or inaction – of their elected representatives, and have just fired off an e-mail or letter to tell them so. Passion is a good thing, and I'd like to see more people steamed up enough to do something but the sad part is, unless the communication is directed and delivered properly, it could fall on deaf – or at least unresponsive – ears.

Politicians are greatly influenced by public opinion, and keep close tabs on the issues their constituents raise in letters. After all, your opinion ultimately translates into a vote – either for or against them – so they want to know what you're thinking. We all know what they say about opinions, but there are ways to make sure yours gets heard – and taken seriously.

The most effective way to communicate with elected officials is to write a letter – and send it by good old fashioned snail mail. While e-mail is quick and easy, there's a down-side. Provided it's not caught in a spam filter, your e-mail is sharing the Inbox with hundreds of others on any given day. It won't be totally ignored, but the sheer volume of e-mail any politician receives can be overwhelming.

Your letter, on the other hand, will be put into “the system” to be dealt with. Ministers have sophisticated tracking systems and a separate correspondence unit to handle the mail, while in a backbencher's office the job may fall to a multi-tasking staffer, but at some point, that letter will end up in someone's hands.

But hundreds of letters never make it past the letter-opener. To be sure, there's a record of every one of them, and every letter-writer – if the name and ad-

dress is legible – will get a response, but all responses are not created equal.

Here are a few tips to make sure your letter gets response A (thanks for our opinion, I'll remember that when I'm looking for your vote) rather than response B (thanks for writing, your comments are important to me) or worse yet, response C (I share your concern, but that's not my department).

First of all, get it to the right person. The one most directly interested in your opinion – and your vote – is your elected official, the MP or MPP in whose constituency you reside.

The idea is to get that person working for you – speaking out in his or her caucus on your behalf, so make sure the people they can influence have the power to actually do something. In other words, write to your federal member on issues the feds have jurisdiction over (like meal tax allowance) or your provincial member if the province has jurisdiction (like speed-limiters).

In some cases, it's more appropriate to write to the Minister of the appropriate department, and copy your member, other times, it makes sense to do it the other way around, but make sure they both know your position. Send copies to as many people you want, but it's always good idea to address your letter to a single person. This way, everyone is informed, but there's no question of who's on the hook to reply.

Identify yourself. Give your full name and address – make sure they know you're a voter in their riding – and include your phone number and e-mail address.

State your reason for writing in the first paragraph, then stick to the point. If you start to ramble and rant,

guess how much time someone looking at a six-inch stack of letters is going to spend reading it?

Use a straightforward, factual approach. Be courteous, and don't bother with sarcasm or irony, they won't be amused. You don't need a long, detailed letter; a one-pager, has the best chance of being read and getting your point to stick.

It's okay to state your position briefly, and attach an article or short summary of a study that makes your point, but be absolutely certain your source is accurate and credible.

Request action as well as expressing a concern, and be specific about what you want the politician to do. Ask for a commitment.

You don't have to be an “expert.” Provide information from your own experience, or use examples to support your position, but don't quote facts and stats you can't back up.

And believe it or not, if your letter looks good, it will get taken more seriously. Make sure it's typewritten, even if you pay the kid down the block to do it. Use plain, white paper, and don't sit your coffee mug on it. Check, and double-check, for spelling errors and typos.

And don't underestimate the impact of your letter. Every meal tax postcard Jim Flaherty's staff held in their hands represented, to them, the opinions of more than a 1,000 others. That's the power of the pen. So write a letter, change the world.

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