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From: Lindsay Lee [REDACTED]
Sent: March 17, 2025 11:53 AM
To: Office of the Legislative Counsel
Subject: Submission on Bill 1 for the Public Bills Committee

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Dear Members of the Public Bills Committee,

I am deeply troubled by Bill 1, the lack of consultation with stakeholders and the public, and the negative implications that these clauses will have on transparency and accountability, both of which are central to our democracy.

I urge the government to withdraw Bill 1 and engage in meaningful consultation with the public, civil servants, and the Privacy Commissioner's Office. Either this government is ignorant of the consequences these clauses will have, or worse, this is part of a larger and intentional pattern to hide important information from the public and the press.

To illustrate what that would look like, I would like to share an example with the Committee.

I was one of the grassroots leaders of the Save Owls Head campaign, in which we spent over 2 years of our lives fighting for fairness, good governance, and the environment. I had never participated in, let alone led, a campaign before. But the secretive and undemocratic actions of the McNeil government were a line in the sand, and not just for me. Ten thousand Nova Scotians came together to fight for what we felt was right, and we were successful in saving Owls Head Provincial Park from being destroyed for private profit.

Despite the recent government narrative around "professional protestors" and "special interests," we volunteered our time, seven days a week, often sacrificing opportunities for paid work and time with friends & family.

In response to the sweeping bills this government has introduced, someone recently said to me, "And we thought Owl's Head was bad!" I want to be very clear. Owl's Head WAS bad. It was an egregious betrayal for the McNeil government to prioritize the interests of an American billionaire over everything else, including its own citizens.

That government intentionally hid what was happening from the people of this province for over 3 years. It would have been even longer—if not for a government whistleblower, Freedom of Information requests, and an investigative reporter.

But as awful as it was, it could have been even worse. I shudder to think what would have happened to Owls Head Provincial Park if the civil servant who contacted the media could have been fired without cause (which Bill 1 will allow if it's passed as tabled) or silenced by the implied threat that clause 9 presents.

The Save Owls Head campaign wouldn't have had the chance to even get off the ground if the government had refused Michael Gorman's Freedom of Information requests as "excessively broad, unduly repetitive, trivial, systematic, frivolous or vexatious" (which Bill 1 will allow, if passed as tabled).

At least then, the governing party wasn't soliciting donations to help them "bypass the media." At least then, the government was spending taxpayer money to plaster its agenda on the front of the Chronicle Herald. At least then, we weren't constantly misrepresented as "special interests." People fought in the public interest then—and we will continue to do so.

The Owl's Head debacle was awful. But it could have been so much worse. Premier Houston has repeatedly boasted that his government did the right thing about Owls Head Provincial Park, but this government has now tabled a number of concerning bills that will encourage the type of secrecy, government overreach, and unfairness that thousands of Nova Scotians united to fight.

No matter what we care about, whether it's the environment, education, healthy communities, affordable housing, public transit, clean water, or good governance, the changes this government has tabled will make it a whole lot harder to learn, engage, and make an impact on the causes that we care about and I can't help but think that's the point.

Around the world, democracy is under attack. But I don't think any of us expected a slew of anti-democratic actions and bills here at home in Nova Scotia. Bill 1 is regressive and unwelcome. This bill would shield this and future governments from scrutiny. It would replace thoughtful sharing of information with arbitrary or political decisions.

Bill 1 will erode any trust the public has in this government at a time when we need thoughtful, measured, and forward-thinking leadership.

Premier Houston has indicated that changes to the Freedom of Information section of this bill are likely. This is welcome news. However, it is a challenge to offer effective and informative feedback when we still do not know what these changes will be.

It is clear, however, that any clauses that grant the government the authority to avoid scrutiny, limit transparency, and politicize information are not in the public interest and must be removed.

Sincerely,

Lindsay Lee, Concerned Citizen