



DESMOG CANADA

CLEARING THE PR POLLUTION THAT CLOUDS THE PUBLIC SQUARE

Published on *DeSmog Canada* (<http://www.desmog.ca>)

[Home](#) > Charities Bullied Into Muting Their Messages: Researcher

Mon, 2014-07-21 11:26Carol Linnitt



Charities Bullied Into Muting Their Messages: Researcher



Canada's charitable sector — the second largest charitable sector in the world [1], after the Netherlands — has come under threat from federal policies that hinder advocacy groups from doing their work, according to new research.

As DeSmog Canada and other outlets have reported, numerous charities — ranging from development organizations to women's rights groups — have lost their funding from the federal government during the last several years.

Most recently, in June of 2012, the federal government announced \$8 million would be devoted to investigating and auditing charities to ensure their activities comply with Canada Revenue Agency rules. (DeSmog Canada recently revealed through *Access to Information* legislation that, in fact, more than \$13 million has been dedicated to these audits [2]).

Several individuals [3] and organizations [4] have criticized the audits as politically-motivated [5].

So far, we haven't heard much from the charities themselves under audit, because, with resources already stretched thin and sometimes multiple federal auditors scrutinizing their work, speaking out has been seen as too much of a risk.

But what charities haven't been able to say for themselves is now outlined in a new analysis by former journalist and graduate student Gareth Kirkby [6]. His research on the 'chill effect' that resulted from the ongoing audits was brought together in his thesis (attached below), recently submitted to faculty in the public communications department at Royal Roads University.

According to Kirkby, who guaranteed 16 charities under audit anonymity in his research, groups have drastically changed their behaviour since the wave of audits, limiting their capability to carry out their mandates, which involve advocating for progressive changes that will benefit often under-represented communities, individuals and the environment.

According to Kirkby's research, charities that work on advocacy issues face the toughest scrutiny from the federal government. Environmental organizations dealing with issues related to the petroleum industry, Kirkby said, "seem to be the most heavily targeted."

The audits have "amounted to a change in the discourse emanating from these organizations," Kirkby told DeSmog Canada in a recent interview. And this is happening at a time, he said, when we need these groups more engaged.

"We have some complicated and challenging issues in our society right now that we really need to talk about. And we need to talk about these issues openly, vigorously and without intimidation from the government."

The transition in Canada

Changes to the charitable sector were dramatically accelerated under the leadership of the Harper government [7], especially after the Conservatives won a majority in 2011, Kirkby's research found.

By 2006, Kirkby said, it was clear what the incoming government's priorities were, and what they were not.

"It was very clear right off the bat with the first budget in 2006," Kirkby said. "There were major cuts in funding to organizations [8] that had received [previous funding] from the federal government."

These included funding cuts to groups that, in some cases, had been operating on for half a century — charities like the Court Challenges Program, the Canadian Council on International Co-operation, MATCH International, the Rights and Democracy Agency and the church group KAIROS. (A detailed analysis of funding cuts to charities between 2006 and 2011 can be found in the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives report: Silencing Dissent: The Conservative Record [8]).

Then, Kirkby said, the charitable sector lost its invitation to speak up for the citizens they represented. And this, according to Kirkby, happened to charitable groups from all across the sector — from development organizations to women's rights groups.

But by 2012 a new pattern emerged, one that clearly demonstrated a more narrow focus on environmental charities.

At the time, when asked about environment critics receiving federal funding, Prime Minister Stephen Harper, said [7], “If it’s the case that we’re spending on organizations that are doing things contrary to government policy, I think that is an inappropriate use of taxpayer’s money and we’ll look to eliminate it.”

According to Kirkby, that new trajectory was most publicly marked by former Natural Resources Minister Joe Oliver’s open letter [9], published in the Globe and Mail in January 2012, that accused environmental groups of being ‘foreign funded radicals’ intent on ‘hijacking the regulatory process’ regarding oil pipelines.

That letter was quickly bolstered by three cabinet ministers who “compared charities to criminal organizations [10], terrorist organizations, [and] money launderers,” Kirkby said.

“Then [former Minister of Public Safety] Vic Towes put environmental organizations on the list of potential security threats in the government’s terrorism strategy [11]. All of that happened in pretty rapid succession and that created a climate of vilification, of demonization of environmental groups but also a great deal of confusion in the public mind.”

The accusations were eventually topped off with an announcement that the federal government would spend the next several years — and millions of taxpayer dollars — investigating charities (many environmental), their funding and the nature of their ‘political activity.’

Silenced

What followed was a major chill in the charity world, according to Kirkby’s research. Charities clammed up and hunkered down, trying to survive the strain of sometimes back-to-back audits and looming fears over the possible backlash of any activity seen as unfavourable by the federal government.

Kirkby said in his overview of many of these charities, he found them to be generally “moderate.” He said this was in large part due to Canadians being a “moderate people” and the restrictions already in place on charities: only 10 per cent of their activity can be political in nature (no partisan activity is allowed).

Dressed in the language of ministers like Oliver, Kirkby said, the federal government “framed [political activity] very effectively as if political activities were a bad thing and had to be stopped — had to be audited and stopped.”

“But, you know,” Kirkby added, “political activities are basically something as simple as asking people call their MP about an issue they care about.”

The issue had become so contentious, however, and charities so heavily scrutinized by government, and a small but very vocal sector of society, that a lot of internal damage to groups had been done.

That created an “inward turn” according to Kirkby’s research. He found most under audit were “distracted” by the presence and pressure of auditors and began “altering the tone, content and frequency or channel of communication” with their audiences and government.

A general sense of “what are they coming for next?” diverted the majority of groups under audit from their mission, Kirkby found.

“There was a silencing,” he said. “Not a silencing, but a muzzling that occurred, as environmental and other charities wondered what was next.”

The sum of the parts

This isn’t some grand conspiracy, Kirkby noted, just the culmination of years of decision-making that

advances the private sector and hurts the “third sector,” the collective of non-profits and charities serving civil society.

But intentional or not, the outcome affects democracy all the same, Kirkby concluded.

“I don’t think that there’s necessarily... some blueprint that is being followed but the accumulation of these various tactical actions results very much in damage to the vigour of our democracy,” he said.

What is clear is that the current federal government appears to “have very close ties to one sector,” Kirkby said, adding, “that’s not unprecedented in this country.” He recounted former Liberal government’s support of companies like Bombardier and Boeing.

The situation, however, has scaled up with the Harper government’s support of the oil and gas sector, Kirkby said. “So we see this really close alignment of whatever benefits the petroleum industry, benefits government, and the government seems to believe that what seems good for the petroleum industry is what is good for Canada.”

Whoever contradicts that conviction is being “bullied into muting their messages,” Kirkby said.

With these forces acting in concert, Kirkby said, “what you have is a government that is too close to a sector. It first of all seems to be using the levers of power that are available to a government – like the tax authority – to fight its policy battles.”

“When you add that up what you have is a narrowing of debate and a polarizing of viewpoints, rather than a discussion.”

About “more than just charities”

For Kirkby this issue has everything and nothing to do with charities:

“I say this isn’t about charities — and yes, it is a little about charities because they are an important part of civil society, a very important contributor to conversation — but what we’re doing, this is a problem for all of us,” he said.

“If we’re not hearing all the options on policy, if we’re not having a vigorous discussion on the way forward, we risk choosing wrong options. There has been a muzzling and silencing of particularly environmental charities, but not only environmental charities, development charities as well, at a key moment when these issues need a thorough airing.”

These issues, Kirkby said, cover everything from wealth inequality to climate change and all deserve more enriched public conversations.

“We’re at a time when we’re seeing a reduction of the middle class, and polarization around income that is very much on people’s minds; concerns about quantity and quality of jobs; we’re seeing human rights issues in Canada and internationally; we’re seeing Canadians are becoming aware that many of our mining companies are quite controversial in many of the developing countries in which they are operating.”

But at the forefront of Canada’s concerns are issues of the environment and how our natural resources are managed.

“On the environmental front we’re at a critical time when we’re considering a massive expansion of the oilsands; we’re considering multiple pipelines to take bitumen to various coasts of the United States and shipping them through inner waters, or transporting them by train and we’ve got organizations that are looking at... the impact of all these things on land-based and sea-based ecosystems and individual species, including species at risk.”

The good old days

Throughout his research, Kirkby noted a continuing trend — far outdating the current federal government — to limit the involvement and capacity of the charitable sector in policy discussions [12].

But this wasn't always the case.

There was a time in Canada when citizen groups were invited to the policy table, at the highest federal level, and asked for their ideas on new programs and legislation. In the mid-twentieth century, providing federal funds to charitable groups that defended civil society, even if they were critical of government, was seen as a democratic good. That era marked the beginning of a flourishing sector of non-governmental organizations.

Not only were these groups shown early drafts of new policies — they were often invited to help craft them, giving advice and input at the earliest developmental stages.

“They used to be invited in to speak to cabinet ministers and senior bureaucrats about ideas for policies and to comment on policies as they came to light,” Kirkby said. “They largely got shut out of that way of communicating and that included environmental organizations and development organizations that had developed a strong reputation as authoritative representatives on policies.”

“It's well-documented by researchers [13] and academics [12] that for 30 years there has been a gradual reduction in reach of non-profit sector and of civil society organizations,” Kirkby said. By the 1980s and thereafter, “there was less recognition of the representative nature of the organizations and more seeing them as service delivery vehicles on contract to the government.”

Eventually funding cuts and the establishment of new ‘priorities’ for the charitable and non-profit sector forced many of these groups out of the government's inner circle. Given time, the charitable sector was increasingly seen as an outsider to government, even an obstacle to certain government agendas.

“There was a tendency to pull back and say that the only legitimate representation to the government were elected officials,” Kirkby explained. “The rest were special interest groups.”

“And though they may have some good ideas, the government felt it could pick and choose when and how and if it would listen to them. We've seen a corresponding loss of access to comment on government policies that were in formulation including in really early idea formulation of what public policy should be.”

And that access is just what is needed to ensure Canadians are getting the kind of policies they deserve.

As Allan Northcott, vice president of the Calgary-based Max Bell Foundation, recently wrote for The Philanthropist [14], charities have brought Canadians some of the most basic policies we get to take for granted every day.

Laws against drunk driving, regulating tobacco, protecting baby products from bisphenol-A, mental health services, the Boreal Forest Agreement — these are just some of the benefits society gains from the hard work of nonprofits and charities.


“But, of course,” Northcott writes, “our collective safety and security, well-being, and prosperity do not appear out of thin air.”

With charities under increased scrutiny, for better or for worse Canadians are becoming increasingly aware of that.

Attachment

Size

Attachment**Size**

 [G-Kirkby UncharitableChill ThesisPublicV.pdf](#) [15] 415.46 KB

Tags:

[canada](#) [16]
[Federal government](#) [17]
[Harper Government](#) [18]
[muzzling](#) [19]
[audits](#) [20]
[charities](#) [21]
[Canadian charitable sector](#) [22]
[silencing](#) [23]
[Intimidation](#) [24]
[Canada Revenue Agency](#) [25]
[foreign funded radicals](#) [26]
[Royal Roads University](#) [27]
 Read more: [Charities Bullied Into Muting Their Messages: Researcher](#) [28]

Source URL: <http://www.desmog.ca/2014/07/21/charities-bullied-muting-their-messages-researcher>

Links:

[1] <http://www.imaginecanada.ca/resources-and-tools/research-and-facts/key-facts-about-canada%E2%80%99s-charities>
 [2] <http://desmog.ca/2014/02/16/13-4m-allocated-carry-audit-canadian-charities-beyond-2017-documents-show>
 [3] <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/news-video/video-david-suzuki-says-ottawa-is-targeting-environmental-groups/article4100003/?from=4105719>
 [4] <http://www.pressprogress.ca/en/post/cra-hunting-down-charities-while-millionaires-screw-around-caymans>
 [5] <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/cra-audits-charitable-status-of-tides-canada-amid-tory-attack/article4105719/>
 [6] <http://garethkirkby.ca/>
 [7] <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/second-reading/stephen-harper-and-the-tyranny-of-majority-government/article4268008/>
 [8] <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/commentary/silencing-dissent-conservative-record>
 [9] <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/an-open-letter-from-natural-resources-minister-joe-oliver/article4085663/>
 [10] <http://o.canada.com/news/politics-and-the-nation/social-policy-and-environment/senators-call-foundations-anti-canadian-question-if-environmental-groups-would-take-money-from-terrorists>
 [11] <http://desmog.ca/2013/02/06/surveillance-environmental-movement-when-counter-terrorism-becomes-political-policing>
 [12] <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/capa.12016/abstract>
 [13] <http://voices-voix.ca/en/document/voices-campaign-against-advocacy-and-dissent-deepens>
 [14] <https://www.google.ca/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CBwQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.thephilanthropist.ca%2Findex.php%2Fphil%2Farticle%2Fdownload%2F985%2F840&ei=YkbNU9SKImJjAK96IDIAQ&usg=AFQjCNE67gH7I-8UjKc1vzwQ9p0W13qA&sig2=ppkCcRnVsntmINK4aAs6JQ>
 [15] http://www.desmog.ca/sites/beta.desmogblog.com/files/G-Kirkby_UncharitableChill_ThesisPublicV.pdf
 [16] <http://www.desmog.ca/tags/canada>
 [17] <http://www.desmog.ca/directory/vocabulary/9104>
 [18] <http://www.desmog.ca/directory/vocabulary/8119>
 [19] <http://www.desmog.ca/directory/vocabulary/10927>
 [20] <http://www.desmog.ca/directory/vocabulary/14393>
 [21] <http://www.desmog.ca/directory/vocabulary/9249>
 [22] <http://www.desmog.ca/directory/vocabulary/17317>
 [23] <http://www.desmog.ca/directory/vocabulary/12054>
 [24] <http://www.desmog.ca/directory/vocabulary/10421>
 [25] <http://www.desmog.ca/directory/vocabulary/9247>
 [26] <http://www.desmog.ca/directory/vocabulary/9379>
 [27] <http://www.desmog.ca/directory/vocabulary/17318>
 [28] <http://www.desmog.ca/2014/07/21/charities-bullied-muting-their-messages-researcher>