

How Tories Bully Charities and Abuse Power

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Canadian charities are experiencing an "advocacy chill" and changing the way they go about their work as a result of what they say is "bullying" by the Harper Conservative government. My just completed Master's thesis research finds that the denunciatory rhetoric of government ministers against charities, followed by stepped up audits is having its toll not only on charity operations, but also on the strength of Canada's public discussions and thus on the vigor of democracy itself.

For my thesis, I interviewed 16 charity leaders and five experts including lawyers, academics, and former government administrators, who were guaranteed anonymity in exchange for an openness that they would not provide publicly. What I learned was that the government has, by design or by accumulation of tactical actions with unintended consequences, damaged Canada's civil society, including charities, and hence the likelihood that Canadians choose the best routes to our future.

It started even before the Conservatives came to power in 2006. For decades, government had been cutting back on funding to organizations that represented the less powerful -- women, First Nations, immigrants -- and brought their voices to public decision-making. In 2006 this accelerated with deep cuts to organizations that resulted in whole sectors -- including women's health and child-care organizations -- shuttering organizations. This was followed by a virtual end to organizations being invited to share their policy ideas with federal politicians and bureaucratic decision-makers.

Then, soon after forming majority government, the Conservative government launched an attack on charities, starting with environmentalists. Natural Resource Minister Joe Oliver's open letter published in the *Globe and Mail* slammed opponents of the government's key policy of stepped up resource exploitation and goal of becoming, as Prime Minister Harper said, "an energy superpower." Oliver's letter framed environmental organizations as un-Canadian, radical ideological groups trying to take away jobs and hurt families.

Foreshadowing the massive cuts to national environmental laws and public consultation processes and laying off government scientists starting in the 2012 budget, Oliver advocated quicker environmental reviews to speed up job creation. Three other cabinet ministers have since conflated charities with money launderers, criminal organizations and terrorist organizations.

The appearance of Oliver's letter "was when we knew the war was on," said one of 16 charity leaders that I interviewed. Though not unprecedented, such "ludicrous, insanely untrue, bizarre allegations" as another participant worded it, are out of the normal stream of Canadian political discussion, especially when applied to citizens rather than enemy states or political opposition parties. The government then added environmentalists to the list of potential terrorist threats.

And it accompanied the over-the-top rhetoric with action, using state resources in the form of the Canada Revenue Agency to perform audits of charities that advocate on policy issues. The audits largely focus on "political activities," which must not exceed 10 percent of the group's resources. Some 60 political activity audits will be conducted between 2012 and 2015, in addition to the 800 or so random audits that are normally conducted annually. My research found that the new audits are targeting charities working on petroleum and pipeline issues, international development and human rights, and those with significant funding from labour unions.

The combination of rhetoric and the threat or experience of audits are affecting the operations of charities, in particular their external communications. In short, to varying extents, their content, tone, frequency, or channels have changed. Said one leader, "some are more cautious than others but all of us are more cautious than is healthy." They are also diverting their attention to varying degrees to administrative issues related to preparing for an audit. The result, say many leaders, is a "muffling" of the voice of charities and the threat of "diversion" from their Mission.

The government does not have to take away the charitable status of charities -- and its attendant benefits related to tax deductions for donors -- in order to achieve what one lawyer sees as its major objective: diverting charities from their missions, reducing their effectiveness long enough to push through contentious petroleum and resource projects at the heart of government strategy.

Ultimately, this is not about the charities. When government stops consulting widely on options, uses the power and machinery of the state to muffle voices and distract citizen groups, treats civil society as political enemies to be destroyed, has a too-close relationship with one economic sector, the result is an abuse of power. And our democratic vigor is diminished as the national conversation narrows and our road forward is obtained through bullying rather than open debate.

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