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Silencing dissent



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The Harper regime continues to show Canadians why they are just not fit to govern and are losing their moral authority.

Binders full of enemies? Let's try libraries.

The government has, for all intents and purposes, successfully defunded Canada's advocacy movement — well, those advocates that disagree with them anyway, like women's rights and child-care activists, environmental and scientific researchers. They have eliminated funding for roundtable consensus-building initiatives as well as non-governmental organizations dedicated to promoting human rights and equality for women around the globe.

The list is long and depressing.

The government has used, or rather abused, its power in so many ways that Canadians have perhaps grown immune to the attacks on democracy and civil society.

Even conservative commentators now refer to the Harper Conservatives as the "nasty party."

Only it's so much worse than your regular, garden-variety nastiness.

Its hawkish position on the Middle East is truly heartbreaking for those of us who wish our country was recognized for its promotion of peace and human rights, rather than for its justification of the killing of so many innocent Palestinian civilians, including women and children.

As I write this, our prime minister had not even called for a ceasefire. He has not uttered the word peace. It is a tragic commentary on just how Canada's place in the world has changed with Harper at the helm.

The Harper Conservatives have described their foreign policy as principled, yet it is anything but. Consider their foreign policy positions and the relationship between those positions with the communities they have targeted to boost their election coffers.

It's not about principles. It's about the cash and the means to ruthlessly pursue and maintain power. And yes it's about ideology.

Robert Murray is an adjunct professor of political science at the University of Alberta. He specializes in security and defence policy.

He recently wrote a commentary critical of the Harper government's "strong, sometimes inflammatory, rhetoric" with respect to its foreign policy. The government is ignoring, he noted, the historical successes of Canada's foreign policy. The current government has rejected this "proud tradition ... in favour of an approach that can lead to threats to Canada's national security and/or irrelevance on the international scene."

Murray notes that Canada's middle approach to foreign affairs allowed Canada to project itself politically in areas like human rights and peacekeeping.

Sadly, we have a government that relishes divisions abroad and at home. Divisions create opportunities.

Consider its aggressive attack on anyone and everyone who disagrees with their ideology or policy — charities, unions, feminists, environmentalists, scientists and academics.

And yet when Harper was in opposition, he had an entirely different view of dissent and democracy: "When a government starts trying to cancel dissent or avoid dissent is when it's rapidly losing its moral authority to govern," he said.

That time is now for his government.

It is jaw-dropping how many times this government uses (or, rather, misuses) the word freedom while singularly attacking rights and freedoms and dissent at home.

Using the Canadian Revenue Agency (CRA) as their hammer, the government is attacking, not so coincidentally, a slew of charities that have spoken out against a Conservative policy or position or that have a different view of the world.

This month we learned that the government has increased its inspection of the "political activities" of charities by enlarging the CRA budget for these investigations.

And since everything we do or say can be defined as political, it's pretty easy to conclude that almost every act by a charity can fall into this grey area known as "political activities" or what is really advocacy in an effort to shape public policy.

Gareth Kirkby, a communications consultant, recently studied this "advocacy chill." He found that it "is affecting charitable organizations that advocate on public policy issues, though it varies in intensity and extent from organization to organization. There is evidence in the data that the government is attempting, with some success, to narrow society's important policy conversations."

Charities are finding themselves tied up in auditors' red tape and much more. The audits are costly for charities. These charities are now forced to defend themselves and to produce reams of paper during these endless investigations.

A Canadian Press investigation found that, in some cases, legal bills of up to \$100,000 were constraining the work of charities struggling to meet the "often complex demands from CRA auditors."

According to the article, the CRA is currently conducting 52 "political-activity audits." They include churches, anti-poverty groups, human rights organizations, environmental groups and left-leaning policy think-tanks.

But they are not giving up. Kirkby found that the organizations are building alliances, trying to find ways to do their work. While this is a positive outcome, and certainly not one the Harper government counted on, it does not make the actions of the government acceptable.

To use the CRA in this way, in an attempt to silence one's libraries full of enemies, is a complete and utter abuse of power.

Prime Minister John Diefenbaker once said, "I am Canadian, free to speak without fear ... free to stand

for what I think right, free to oppose what I think wrong.”

That freedom now has a cost and a consequence in Harper’s Canada.

Will we recognize this place by the time Harper is done?

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