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# An uncharitable chill

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**TAGS: COMMUNICATION AND CULTURE RESEARCH**

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Journalist Gareth Kirkby has been making news himself lately.

The **Master of Arts in Professional Communication** student sparked a national conversation with his Royal Roads thesis, which examined how changes in federal policy have affected advocacy-oriented charities.

**Kirkby**, who interviewed leaders at 16 charitable organizations, as well as academics, lawyers and former government staff, found federal audits of charities' political activities had created an "advocacy chill."

***The Globe and Mail***, Canadian Press, **CBC** and numerous other publications have covered and continue to dig deeper into an issue that Kirkby says has ramifications for democracy in Canada.

"I come at it naturally as someone who as a career journalist has an interest in freedom of speech and the importance of a wide variety of discussions in society to make policy decisions," he says.

"I didn't know what I would find when I started researching. I didn't know if it could be done because of the sensitive nature of the topic."

Kirkby, who graduates in November, says his interest in the issue was tweaked in 2012. At the time, the federal government announced it would increase the Canada Revenue Agency's (CRA) budget by \$8 million partly to enforce regulations governing charities' political activities. Natural Resources Minister Joe Oliver months earlier had published an open letter denouncing "environmental and other radical groups" who "threaten to hijack our regulatory system to achieve their radical agenda."



Kirkby decided to examine the rhetoric to find out how charities were affected. The answer: significantly. His research found more than 30 “chilling effects” around how charities communicated with the public and their supporters, including altering the content, tone and frequency of communications. Two charities he interviewed had stopped communicating entirely out of fear of drawing the CRA’s attention.

The research findings disturbed Kirkby.

“Of course, these chilling effects are happening at a time when society is facing seriously contentious issues that need full participation and different voices in society,” he says. “It’s not good for the charities, but it’s even worse for society.”

Kirkby says he found evidence the government is attempting, with some success, to narrow society’s policy conversations. Three sectors - environmental, development and human rights, as well as charities receiving donations from labour unions - were over-represented in CRA audits, he says.

“The charities that are being audited disproportionately are in the fields where they would have different policy suggestions and ideas than those currently favoured by the federal government,” he says.

“The government is treating civil society organization made up of citizens as enemies, enemies of the state, and enemies of the government, rather than citizen groups.”

Kirkby credits his research success to guaranteeing anonymity for the charities, a condition which he says gave him insights that journalists were not privy to. He also thanked Royal Roads faculty for their support during his thesis.

School of Communication and Culture Associate Prof. **David Black** says Kirkby’s thesis resonated deeply with the public and media.

“Gareth Kirkby’s research exemplifies the best of the Royal Roads research mandate,” Black says.

“His work is both intellectual and practical, interested in the finer points of theory, history and law, and yet rigorously applied to a problem of concern to all Canadians. Moreover, it also demonstrates a mid-career student who, in combining his expertise as a veteran journalist with the academic focus and resources a graduate degree provides, models the kind of learner RRU was itself made to encourage -- the ‘critical professional.’”

Kirkby, meanwhile, hopes the conversation will continue.

“I wanted to see a national discussion about the appropriate limits of government focusing the attention and resources of the state against citizen groups,” he says. “My research has got a life of its own now.”

Read **Kirkby’s thesis**, *An Uncharitable Chill: a Critical Exploration of How Changes in Federal Policy and Political Climate are Affecting Advocacy-Oriented Charities*.

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