

TIMES COLONIST

Comment: Tory audit tactics on charities worrisome

Murray Rankin / Times Colonist

August 21, 2014 04:03 PM

I found the commentary by Joanne Cave published Aug. 19 (“Silencing charities just the tip of the iceberg”) very disturbing. Her account of the aggressive audits faced by certain charities that do not share the Conservative government’s agenda should concern us all, whether or not we happen to share the views of the charities under scrutiny.

Amnesty International, the David Suzuki Foundation, Environmental Defence and the United Church of Canada’s Kairos are just a few of dozens of groups that have raised serious concerns. Rather than doing their important work, they are spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on accountants and lawyers. They are often afraid to speak out, for fear that they will face even more scrutiny.

Despite this, some public interest groups have spoken out bravely against this troubling trend. The Canadian Council of Churches voiced its concerns directly to Prime Minister Stephen Harper. Lawyers’ Rights Watch Canada has appealed to the UN Human Rights Council.

No one disputes that all charities that have the ability to give tax receipts should be accountable. That includes being subject to audits from time to time. There are rules on how much political activity a particular charity can undertake; the Canada Revenue Agency has every right to ensure that these rules are being followed.

But if those charities working on environmental issues, international development and human rights are being subject to a disproportionate burden merely because their positions are opposed by the Conservative government, most Canadians would consider that unfair. And if it is true that the government is targeting these charities yet not going after those charities that are more aligned with the government’s interests, this would be very disturbing indeed. Political interference is simply unacceptable in our tax system.

I am the National Revenue critic for the Official Opposition. I have tried to get to the bottom of this controversy.

If the allegations of political interference are groundless, then I expected the Conservatives would welcome the opportunity to clear the air.

So I first asked the minister to set up a hearing into the allegations. She refused. I then wrote the chairman of the finance committee, asking him to convene a meeting so the committee could summon the minister and representative charities to attend and tell their side of the story. He did not reply. So on Aug. 18, I compelled that committee to meet in Ottawa. But the Conservative MPs on the committee used their majority to decide that no review will be conducted.

At a time of massive cutbacks to the CRA's budget, the Conservatives managed to find \$13.4 million in "special funding" for the CRA to audit the political activities of certain charities. These initial audits followed complaints by Ethical Oil, a group with close ties to the Conservatives, and came in the midst of the government's extraordinary attacks on those opposed to the Northern Gateway pipeline.

The current finance minister, for example, labelled certain environmental groups as dangerous "radicals" that were "laundering" funds from abroad.

Time and time again, we have seen the Conservatives try to silence those who disagree with them. They have muzzled scientists who dare speak about climate change, kept a detailed "enemies list" used to brief new ministers, and have sent a chill through the charitable sector.

Public interest groups must be able to pursue advocacy work free from the threat of political interference. Above all, it is vital that Canadians can have faith in the integrity of our tax system. Groups working to protect the air we breathe, who speak out for human rights, fight poverty or ease the suffering of civilians in war zones should not fear reprisals.

I will continue to fight for accountability and transparency in the tax system. The current situation is untenable — tarnishing the reputations both of the CRA and the charities under the Conservatives' shadow. It's time to clear the air.

Murray Rankin is the member of Parliament for Victoria, and Official Opposition critic for National Revenue and Pensions.

© Copyright Times Colonist