

Opinion / Editorials

Is Ottawa using the tax man to chill criticism?: Editorial

PEN Canada is the latest charity to be audited by the Canada Revenue Agency.



MARK BLINCH / THE CANADIAN PRESS

Foundation led by David Suzuki is one of several environmental charities to come under the auditor's microscope.

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Now that PEN Canada, the free expression advocacy charity, [is being audited by the Canada Revenue Agency](#), it's getting much more difficult to buy the federal Conservative government's position that it is not attempting to silence its critics.

How else to explain the selection for long, costly audits of so many well-respected charities – ones that, by amazing coincidence, have criticized the government's position on the environment, free speech and foreign affairs? Over all their heads looms the threat that if the CRA doesn't like what it sees, they could lose their charitable status, and thus their ability to raise tax-deductible donations.

Critics, quite rightly, fear a chill on freedom of speech.

When the government set aside \$8 million in 2012 to increase audits of charitable organizations to ensure they were not spending more than the permitted 10 per cent of their budgets on political activity or advocacy, there was concern.

The late finance minister Jim Flaherty warned charities to "be cautious" about using charitable tax-receipted money for political purposes — though how the government would define that among groups whose very *raison d'être* is advocacy was unknown.

Meanwhile, Natural Resources Minister Joe Oliver famously complained about "environmental and other radical groups" undermining the national interest (scary, if that is how the government perceives legitimate debate).

Suddenly, some of the most highly respected and active environmental charities in the country were under the microscope. Organizations such as the David Suzuki Foundation, Tides Canada, Environmental Defence, the Pembina Foundation, Equiterre and the Ecology Action Centre were among them. Several believed they were being audited because of their anti-oilsands position.

This week [PEN Canada](#), which has long advocated for the freedom of expression across the political spectrum — including that of scientists whom the government has silenced (environmental researchers among them) — announced it is being audited.

Targeting groups whose views the government doesn't like is one thing. Targeting the organization that defends their — and all of our — rights to speak out, is upping the ante considerably, as the government did when it went after the venerable human rights organization Amnesty International as well.

Who's next for the knock on the door? Well, not surprisingly, two other charities that have been critical of government positions.

The church-based advocacy group Kairos, which already lost federal funding in 2009 for its foreign-aid-related work over its position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict after 35 years of working with Ottawa is among the 52 charities being audited.

Meanwhile, Oxfam, the respected relief agency that was singled out by Employment Minister Jason Kenney over its opposition to Israeli settlements in the West Bank, is undergoing a different kind of tussle with the CRA. In a move that can only be described as 1984-style Newspeak, it has been told its mandate can no longer be to try and “prevent” poverty around the world, but only to “alleviate” it. “Relieving poverty is charitable, but preventing it is not,” the group was warned.

Democracy works only when people can freely express their views. Our government should be protecting that right — which included the right of charities to carry out the advocacy work their donors expect of them — not sabotaging it.

Hopefully, in this case PEN will prove mightier than the government's sword. Otherwise we will be living in an Orwellian world where alternative views are considered “thoughtcrimes” — if they aren't, in some corners of Ottawa, already.