

VIEW: BC the biggest loser in charity chill

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British Columbians may be the biggest losers in the chill that has descended upon charities that advocate for public policy issues. B.C. charities are among those that are now under threat of, or undergoing, audits of their so-called "political activities."

Let's recall how we got here. Starting in 2012, federal cabinet ministers started a campaign of rhetoric aimed mostly at environmental charities. Former Natural Resources minister Joe Oliver <u>denounced</u> environmental organizations as tools of foreign interests and destroyers of Canadian families.

Then Environment minister Peter Kent chimed in with <u>accusations</u> of money laundering, and Security minister Vic Toews <u>added</u> environmental organizations to the list of potential threats in the country's official antiterrorism strategy.

In March 2012, the federal government <u>allocated</u> \$8 million for Canada Revenue Agency to, among other things, step up audits of the "political activities" of charities. The latest <u>salvo</u> came just before the 2014 budget and some charity leaders expected the government to forbid charities from conducting political activities altogether. It didn't happen — for now.

Under CRA regulations, political activities essentially amount to a charity suggesting its members or the public call their MP and ask them to keep or change a policy. Pretty benign stuff. In contrast, a charity is practicing forbidden "partisan activities," a different category, when it suggests you vote for another party in the next election and that sort of thing.

The findings of my recently completed Master's <u>thesis</u> have been in the news a lot lately. I interviewed 16 charity leaders in five provinces and five charitable sub-sectors, along with five experts on charity issues and civil society. I found

a consensus across all the charity sectors that environmental charities were the primary target, which was already widely suspected, along with international development and human rights organizations, and charities receiving significant funding from labour unions.

The environmental charities were those working on energy issues: climate change, expansion of the oilsands and gas extraction, pipeline and rail transportation, shipping bitumen through B.C. waters, and protection of land and water habitats and rare animals that will be affected by petroleum-related industrial processes.

I found the charities are distracted by the audits and muzzling themselves. To varying degrees, depending on the charity, they're altering their content, tone, frequency, or channel of communication — what, how, where, and how often they speak out. The government audit threats have narrowed the public conversation at a time when our nation faces many intense policy issues requiring vigorous discussion and inclusive debate.

This particularly affects us in B.C. Here, we have an impending showdown over the Northern Gateway pipeline proposal and seemingly over the Kinder Morgan project, too. We have increasing concerns about fracking and the impact of increased gas extraction on our carbon reduction targets. We have contentious mining proposals. And we have First Nations claims that need good–faith negotiations.

We have a generation of highly educated youth and over-50 professionals unable to find reasonable work, increasing income gaps, and economic turmoil in resource areas.

These issues need the participation of the expert voices and representation that charities bring to the table. Instead, the government has portrayed environmental organizations, for example, as "radical ideological" groups, and treated charities with deep suspicion. The issues don't disappear if diverse voices are frightened into silence. How are we to choose among policies when the organizations with research and policy experience are shut out of public consultations and otherwise muffled and distracted?

Gareth Kirkby is a former journalist turned communications guy. You can read his blog and find an electronic version of his thesis at garethkirkby.ca and follow tweets @GarethKirkby.

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