

Canada Revenue Agency charity audits – Due process or dangerous for democracy?

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Without the right to dissent, democracy is made impossible.

Commentary by Larry Brown, President of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives

Ottawa (22 Sept. 2014) — Canadians have reason to be deeply concerned about whether the wave of political activity audits of Canadian charities by the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) is, as claimed, just a standard procedure, or a serious undermining of democracy in this country.

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Is the government of Canada using the Canada Revenue Agency as a tool to try to silence dissent, to weaken the ability of organizations to stand up to this government?

There is a definite pattern in the political activity audits being simultaneously conducted on many charities. It seems all of those being newly audited have been critical of government policies or actions.

And there is more to this than the charity audits. Consider that environmental groups have been lumped in with terrorists and demonized for taking money from foreign radicals who apparently want to subvert Canada's national interests, while groups that follow the government's line get major funding from the right-wing American Koch brothers, notorious for supporting climate change denial causes and with nary a whisper of complaint.

This government has eliminated funding for a number of think tanks whose work has at times been at odds with Conservative policies; the most recent victim of these cuts being the internationally respected North-South Institute.

It is possible, although it would be a remarkable coincidence, that it's only by chance that almost every environmental group, almost every international development group and so many organizations of any kind that have ever criticized the government from the left, are being audited for political activity by the CRA. This all while groups on the right, including the very conservative Fraser Institute, whose work is closely aligned with this government's priorities, are not — it appears — being audited as part of this new drive.

Could the free pass for the Fraser Institute and its conservative cousins be linked to Mr. Harper's past statements that he is "a disciple" of the Fraser Institute, and a fan of the McDonald-Laurier Institute and of the Atlantic Institute of Market Studies?

It certainly seems plausible that these political activity audits are not genuine efforts to review the activities of random groups, but are targeted at the Conservative government's "enemies list."

From that perspective, the amount of time, effort and expense that the audited groups are forced to expend on the audits could be seen as one of the objectives. Audited groups are forced to become less effective at doing their real work, because their staff and resources are diverted into this paper chase.

It is reasonable to expect that groups facing political activity audits will be tempted to hunker down and

become much less critical of the government for fear of reprisals. Could that be an objective?

There is also a wider context for these concerns. The record of the current government is rather checkered, enough to suggest a pattern of behaviour.

Without the right to dissent, democracy is made impossible. Without access to the facts, people in a democracy cannot make informed judgments. This government is infamous for their gag orders on Canada's public service — public service workers simply are not allowed to inform Canadians. Respected senior public sector officials have been fired and demonized, because they did insist on the need for the public to know the truth.

There is one other important aspect of democracy: one can't have real democracy without some element of transparency and openness. We all deserve transparency about this campaign of political activity audits of charities that have in some way run afoul of the Harper government. The public deserves to know what's really going on.

What is the real purpose of these audits? Who chose the target list? Who chose not to audit right-wing groups? What were the criteria for determining "bias" or "one-sidedness"? How is "political activity" defined (or redefined)?

The public, and the groups under scrutiny, deserve a full accounting for what looks on the face of it like a Conservative government misuse of governmental authority to cause harm to organizations that don't toe the party line.

Larry Brown is the President of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, and the NUPGE National Secretary-Treasurer.

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