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## Over 400 Academics Request End to CRA Audit of Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives



A group of 421 academics are requesting the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) end its audit of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives [1] (CCPA), a group that describes itself as “an independent, non-partisan research institute concerned with issues of social, economic and environmental justice.”

As the Canadian Press recently reported, an internal CRA document stated the audit was the result of the CCPA being

“biased” and “one-sided.”

In a letter to revenue minister Kerry-Lynne Findlay the group states it is “perplexed at CRA’s decision to perform the audit...on the groups that [the CCPA] allegedly engages in politically partisan, biased and one-sided research activity.”

“The CCPA is an internationally-recognized and respected research centre, built on a solid tradition of critical analysis,” the letter states. “Indeed, the CCPA plays a vital role by supplying much needed reflection on a number of policies, which it has always done in a fair and unbiased way, and which respects the fundamental tools of sound research.”

The group also criticizes the CRA, suggesting that by undertaking the audit, the CRA “fails to understand the nature of what academic research is all about.”

Read the full text of the letter below.

The request comes at a time when public criticism of what is being called the “politically-motivated [2]” audit of Canada’s environmental charities and groups critical of the Harper government is reaching a new level.

At least 52 charities are undergoing or will undergo audit from the CRA. The federal government committed \$13.4 million to the investigation and audit of charities [3] engaged in political activities or who receive funding from foreign sources.

Mario Seccareccia from the University of Ottawa told the National Post [4] the academic community is frustrated with the current government’s hostility towards academic research.

“It’s an environment that has been rather stifling when it comes to intellectual work,” he said. “There’s a real malaise... They’ve been irritating a lot of people.”

The group of academics is requesting the government halt all political activity audits of think-tanks until a neutral and transparent process for selection is put in place.

Minister Findlay maintains the audits are conducted in a manner independent from political interference or ministerial oversight.

Louis-Philippe Rochon, economist at Laurentian University in Sudbury and organizer of the open letter told the National Post there was ample support for the letter.

“This was a powder keg waiting to happen,” he said, adding signees were eager to add their name to the letter.

“Mostly from the social sciences and humanities, but some from the sciences. We have Canada Research Chairs, heads of departments, younger faculty, more established faculty, and from almost every university in Canada,” he said.

“It hit a raw nerve amongst academics,” he said. “The idea that if we reach a conclusion other than the official doctrine of the government, our research is somehow biased and political.”

Recently researcher Gareth Kirkby, a former journalist and graduate student in the public communications program at Royal Roads University, found the CRA’s audits appear to target charities that lean in a different direction than the current federal government [5], especially those that work on issues related to the petroleum industry.

Kirkby told DeSmog Canada the CRA document listing the CCPA as “biased” and “one-sided” fits in line with his

graduate research [5]. “The government has created a ‘funnel’ that pushes CRA to audit certain kinds of charities,” he said.

“And those charities are overwhelmingly on the ‘progressive’ side of the political divide, with policy preferences that differ from those of the cabinet: environmental organizations working on energy issues, international development and human rights groups, and charities receiving significant funding from labour unions.”

Kirkby noted it was “strange” that some charities have passed multiple audits in the past, but are now being told they are “breaking the political activity rules or that their official ‘purposes’ are suddenly unacceptable.”

“The Fraser Institute [6], the Macdonald-Laurier Institute [7], and the C.D. Howe Institute [8] are the right-leaning equivalent of the CCPA, with policy preferences pretty much lined up with the current government,” Kirkby added, “and they are not being audited for their political activities.”

“Any fair observer can see that all four of these think-tanks have world-views that influence their research choices without meaning that the result is partisan and biased,” he said.

#### **Text of the open letter:**

Dear Minister Findlay,

Recently, we were informed through reports in a number of newspapers that the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) has undertaken an audit of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) on the grounds that it allegedly engages in politically partisan, biased and one-sided research activity.

While we understand the need to prevent abuses of the charitable status, we are rather perplexed at CRA’s decision to perform the audit on this basis. The CCPA is an internationally-recognized and respected research centre, built on a solid tradition of critical analysis. Indeed, the CCPA plays a vital role by supplying much needed reflection on a number of policies, which it has always done in a fair and unbiased way, and which respects the fundamental tools of sound research. They have produced much-needed research on many disparate topics, such as on income and wealth distribution, the hidden government support of the Canadian banking sector during the financial crisis, and an analysis of alternative federal fiscal policy implementation annually. Since these various research studies are academically all of very high quality, you can therefore imagine how this news took us by surprise.

By undertaking this audit, we feel that CRA fails to understand the nature of what academic research is all about. Research begins from a series of questions and observations, and, from there, it proceeds, following a set of guidelines, to infer possible answers. In this sense, it contests. All research in fact is critical, by its very definition: it tests hypotheses, seeks answers, and must be allowed to find these answers wherever it can.

But critical policy analysis does not equate with political activism, nor is it “biased” or “one-sided”, as CRA has claimed. Researchers explore specific questions of interest, and then present the results of their research. Reaching a conclusion is not the same as bias. To illustrate, a CCPA researcher explored the issue of what would be the appropriate exchange rate regime for Canada and then concluded that a floating exchange rate was desirable to alternative types of exchange rate mechanisms

because the former allowed the public authorities to conduct independent macroeconomic policies. The fact that this conclusion turned out to be similar to the policy view of the Bank of Canada does not make the CCPA researcher any more political than if the researcher would have produced that same research independently within his/her respective university.

The CCPA is not a political organization, nor does it engage in political or partisan activities. The fact that it has criticized government policy on a number of issues does not make it a partisan organization promoting a narrow agenda. Rather, it is engaging in serious, unbiased academic research. It may reach a different set of conclusions from those of the government, but then, this is allowed in a free-thinking, democratic country. On the contrary, we would argue, that such dissent should be encouraged and not stifled by such actions of the CRA.

Indeed, if there is bias, the bias seems to be mostly in the CRA's decision to audit the CCPA and apparently no other think tanks, whose policy conclusions are friendlier toward current government policies. We are not aware of any audits being launched regarding "bias" at conservative think tanks like the Fraser Institute; some have publicly confirmed that they are not being audited (including the Macdonald-Laurier Institute and the C.D. Howe Institute). We are therefore left with the conclusion that the decision to audit the CCPA is politically motivated to intimidate and silence its criticism of your government's policies.

We therefore strongly urge the CRA to put a moratorium on its audits of think tanks, until such time as a truly neutral criteria and auditing process are implemented to ensure neutrality and fairness, and to ensure that the audit process does not silence dissenting voices. Periodic audit should be conducted in a fair, transparent, and even-handed fashion across all the various think-tanks that claim charitable status in Canada, with a focus on financial management and integrity (not on the content of the research being conducted). Why single out only one such research centre that happens to be more critical of government policy? Instead of trying to muzzle and impede sound and legitimate research, it is now time for you to try to promote more effectively the public good in the form of sound critical research for which Canadian researchers are respected internationally.

*Image Credit: [UK in Italy](#) [9] via Flickr*

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Read more: Over 400 Academics Request End to CRA Audit of Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives <sup>[24]</sup>

**Source URL:** <http://www.desmog.ca/2014/09/16/over-400-academics-request-end-cra-audit-canadian-centre-policy-alternatives>

**Links:**

[1] <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/>

[2] <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/cra-audits-charitable-status-of-tides-canada-amid-tory-attack/article4105719/>

[3] <http://www.desmog.ca/2014/02/16/13-4m-allocated-carry-audit-canadian-charities-beyond-2017-documents-show>

[4] <http://news.nationalpost.com/2014/09/14/its-an-environment-that-has-been-rather-stifling-when-it-comes-to-intellectual-work/>

[5] <http://www.desmog.ca/2014/07/21/charities-bullied-muting-their-messages-researcher>

[6] <http://www.fraserinstitute.org/>

[7] <http://www.macdonaldlaurier.ca/>

[8] <http://C.D. Howe Institute>

[9] <https://www.flickr.com/photos/ukinitaly/3937257473/in/photolist-6ZVttX-dnf1dp-711q6o-6ZZov7-7vLHPH-7vGSYr-7vGRWp-7vLEmJ-7vGRRi-7vGRdv-7vLDxY-6Zy3az-6SqaMo-5G6iEX-6ZEbxs-hNtu64-fh8dAq-fh8dAU-9d8NnY-7vGTaP-6Zy3Ce-6ZzYqi-6ZCKzd-6ZE635-hNsSiq-6ZWoQH-6ZA6At-6ZDThJ-7116HU-6ZVsJD-6ZA5ZP-hNtuKv-6ZyQFZ-6ZWDgz-6ZWGne-6Zz1jZ-d5VER-6ZWvSV-fh9peW-6ZD5t9-bcaExF-6fkvc7-6fgkkg-8degYm-6fkxDd-6fkuB1-6fghHZ-6fkzpY-6fkt4h-6fky5C>

[10] <http://www.desmog.ca/directory/vocabulary/13916>

[11] <http://www.desmog.ca/directory/vocabulary/6967>

[12] <http://www.desmog.ca/directory/vocabulary/17329>

[13] <http://www.desmog.ca/directory/vocabulary/17327>

[14] <http://www.desmog.ca/directory/vocabulary/10927>

[15] <http://www.desmog.ca/directory/vocabulary/17328>

[16] <http://www.desmog.ca/directory/vocabulary/8056>

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[19] <http://www.desmog.ca/directory/vocabulary/18030>

[20] <http://www.desmog.ca/directory/vocabulary/13444>

[21] <http://www.desmog.ca/directory/vocabulary/18031>

[22] <http://www.desmog.ca/directory/vocabulary/7828>

[23] <http://www.desmog.ca/directory/vocabulary/18032>

[24] <http://www.desmog.ca/2014/09/16/over-400-academics-request-end-cra-audit-canadian-centre-policy-alternatives>