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Funding cuts could unshackle Canadian civil society

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Howard Ramos and James Ron

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The 2012 federal budget has put Canada's social justice groups on notice: the era of government-supported good deeds is over.

Over the short term, many state-funded groups will shrink or disappear, while those that survive will lose their autonomy. If you care about critical thinking and social justice, this is bad news.

Over the long term, however, the Conservatives may have done Canada a favour. Deprived of federal funding, independently-minded activists will have to learn new ways of ethically raising money from individuals, communities, and businesses.

By multiplying their revenue sources, social justice groups will reduce their vulnerability to single-source arm-twisting. By going private, they will no longer have to worry



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about offending government ministers.

LOLA LANDEKIC FOR THE TORONTO STAR

This new, American-style approach to promoting social justice could be a good thing. Canadian activists have long relied on federal money, and this has rendered them acutely vulnerable to official pressure.

Early on, the federal government's intentions were pure. In the 1970s, Canada was suffering economically, and politicians hoped to dampen unrest by funding progressive civic groups. Keen to make the world a better place, they also supported organizations engaged in cutting-edge international thinking.

On the home front, these groups included indigenous rights bodies such as the Native Council of Canada (now the [Congress of Aboriginal Peoples](#)), or women's groups such as the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC). To advance justice abroad, they included the [International Development Research Centre](#) (IDRC), an innovative, independently-minded Canadian Crown corporation with a multinational governing board.

Until recently, federal support for these and other groups distinguished Canada from its southern neighbour, where critically oriented social justice is privately funded. Under the old rules, Canadian groups were able to maintain their autonomy while taking federal money.

The generous notion underlying this remarkable approach was that a vociferous Canadian social justice sector was a public good worth supporting, irrespective of policy disagreements.

The problem, of course, was that this system created structural dependency. Canadian social justice groups attracted staff who knew how to secure government aid, but who had little ability to raise money from private individuals, communities and businesses.

This weakness became glaringly apparent when Harper's Conservatives signalled their distaste for the old rules. If his government was going to pay, criticism would not be tolerated.

Harper began by cutting funding to domestic social justice programs such as Status of Women, a federal agency charged with issues of gender equity, and the Court Challenges Program, which had helped aggrieved groups seek legal redress.

Then, the Conservatives began slashing support to internationally oriented groups, such as the [Canadian Council for International Cooperation](#), an independent policy group, and to [KAIROS](#), a faith-based development organization.

More insidiously, officials let it be known that any organization still getting federal money must fall in line. With few safeguards to protect their independence, no state-supported entity was safe.

Understandably, many organizations scrambled to curry favour. At the Ottawa-based IDRC, for example, a jittery board of governors installed a government official as their new director, hoping he would keep the Conservatives happy. That official did his best, slashing programs and projects that might attract Conservative ire, and browbeating his staff into quiescence.

Things worked out similarly at [Rights & Democracy](#), the Montreal-based Crown corporation that supported progressive groups abroad. There, Conservative-installed board members forced the organization's directors to change course.

The same held true at the [North-South Institute](#), an Ottawa-based think tank, where another

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new director has proved reluctant to publish findings critical of Canadian businesses and government.

Some groups are limping along in the new environment, while others have expired. The government has just eliminated Rights & Democracy, for example, while at the IDRC and North-South, staff have resigned, been removed, or are searching for new jobs.

And you have only to try and access the NAC's former website to see how this once proud Canadian women's group has fared; visitors are redirected to another website offering the domain name for sale.

Other restrictive moves are in the offing. The 2012 budget, for example, introduced new penalties for charities devoting more than 10 per cent of their money to "political advocacy," meaning that charities supporting Greenpeace could face legal sanction.

Environmental groups seem to have attracted particular government ire. Natural Resources Minister Joe Oliver, for example, recently attacked Tides Canada, a Vancouver based charity, for its opposition to the Northern Gateway pipeline.

In other cases, officials have labelled civic groups unpatriotic. Citizenship and Immigration Minister Jason Kenney, for example, attacked activists defending migrant workers as "anti-Canadian extremists."

Harper's crackdown has attracted substantial media attention, but few Canadian voters care. After all, many cutbacks were publicized long before the Conservatives' 2011 electoral victory, and 80 per cent of polled Canadians have just voiced support for new restrictions on charities' political activities.

The writing is on the wall for Canadians still interested in independently-minded social justice: develop new, non-federal sources of funding, or face defeat.

Over the past decade, Conservatives have learned much from their colleagues down south. If left-leaning Canadians want their own causes to survive, they must do the same.

The era of public funding for independently conceived good deeds is over. To keep their dreams alive, activists must develop new sources of support, while sympathetic citizens must dig deep into their own pockets.

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