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Op-ed: Revolutionizing the Canadian social justice sector

iPOLITICS INSIGHT

Posted on Mon, Apr 16, 2012, 5:03 am by Howard Ramos and James Ron

A shorter version of this op-ed was published in yesterday's Toronto Star.

On March 29, the Canadian government released its 2012 federal budget, making it official: Funding for progressive social causes has been cut, and the federal government is **no longer in the business of supporting independently minded public action.**



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

Over the long term, however, the Conservatives may have just done Canadians a favour. Deprived of federal funding, independent activists will now have to learn new ways of ethically raising money from individuals, communities, and businesses.

By multiplying revenue sources, Canada's social justice groups will reduce their vulnerability to single-source arm-twisting. By relying on private funding, they will no longer be concerned about offending



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This new, American-style approach to promoting social justice could be a good thing, returning a measure of self sufficiency and independence to what has become a vulnerable and increasingly cowed community.

Like many in Europe, autonomous Canadian progressives have until now relied heavily on public money. In years past, unspoken agreements ensured that public funding would not be manipulated to enforce official policy.

The Canadian government's original intentions were pure. In the 1970s, the country was suffering economically and politicians hoped to dampen unrest by funding progressive civic groups. Keen to make the world a better place, moreover, they supported a multitude of organizations engaged in cutting-edge international thinking.

On the home front, these public action 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 social justice abroad, the government created the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), an innovative Canadian crown corporation with a multinational governing board.

Like other quasi-state entities, the IDRC received funding from the Canadian government while remaining at "arms length" from officialdom. IDRC staffers were not public servants, and its board, in theory, was largely independent.

Until recently, federal support for these and other groups distinguished Canada from the United States, where independent thinking is often privately funded.

The notion underlying Canada's former approach was that a vociferous social justice sector was a public good worth supporting, irrespective of policy disagreements. Public money was to be used for broad public purposes by state agencies, crown corporations, and private groups alike.

The problem, of course, was that this system created



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dependency. Over time, 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.

More importantly, perhaps, there were no strong laws enforcing the federal government's commitment to not manipulate the funding. When a newly elected Conservative government decided to play by different rules in 2006, Canada's social justice sector was suddenly thrown into crisis.

Harper's government began by **cutting funding to domestic social justice programs such as Status of Women**, a federal agency charged with issues of gender equity, and **to 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**. The list went on, and **has only continued to grow**.

Canadian Conservatives were sending a clear signal. If the government was going to pay the bills, its policies would predominate. Officials let it be known that any organization still getting federal money would have to fall in line, and with few safeguards to protect their independence, no state-supported entity in Canada 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 in 2008 as their new director**, hoping he might keep the Conservatives happy. The **new director did his best**, slashing programs and **projects that might attract Conservative ire**.

At Rights and Democracy, another crown corporation, it was Conservative-installed board members, rather than the director himself, who forced the organization to change course.

At the North-South Institute, a respected Ottawa think-tank, a **former World Bank official was hired** to diversify the group's funding. He 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 and Democracy**, while at other government-supported entities, staff have resigned, been removed, or are searching for new jobs.

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



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

Environmental groups seem to have attracted particular government ire. Natural Resource Minister Joe Oliver, for example, recently attacked Tides Canada, a Vancouver based charity, for its opposition to the Northern Gateway pipeline. Such action has likewise led to long-time and famed environmentalist **David Suzuki leaving the board of the charity** bearing his name to avoid undermining its work in the wake of conservative pressure.

In other cases, officials have labeled civic groups unpatriotic. Citizenship and Immigration minister **Jason Kenney, for example, attacked activists** defending migrant workers as “anti-Canadian extremists.”

Although the Conservative crackdown attracted substantial media attention, few Canadian voters seem to care. Many cutbacks were publicized long before the Conservatives’ 2011 electoral victory, and 80% of polled Canadians **have just voiced support for the new restrictions** on charities’ political activities.

The writing is thus on the wall for those Canadians still interested in independently minded social justice: find private sources of funding, or face defeat.

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

Canada’s golden era of public funding for critical thinking is over, and future governments of any persuasion are unlikely to resurrect the old system. In a competitive electoral environment, few Canadian governments will fund groups whose views are not aligned with their own. To keep their dreams alive, Canadian activists will now have to develop new and private resources. Raising private money poses its own ethical quandaries, but there seem to be few other options on the horizon.

Sympathetic Canadian citizens, for their part, will now have to dig deep into their own pocket to support the causes they hold dear.

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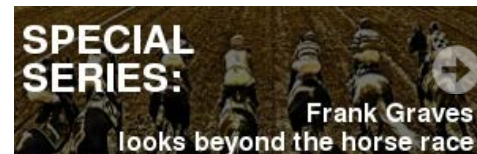
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