

Canada: Harper's Methodical Campaign to Silence Democracy

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Since taking power federally in 2006, the Conservative government has undertaken a continuous attack on civil society organizations. One of the government's first actions was to cut support for women's organizations that lobbied or did research on the status of women. Environmental organizations have been accused of acting in the interest of foreign powers. Revenue Canada was given extra money to investigate them.

How did we come to the point where organizations advocating equality and changes to public policy appear to be seen by the government as the enemy of Canadians?

Tom Flanagan, University of Calgary professor and a top advisor to the Conservative leader made much of this very clear in a largely forgotten section of a book he published in 2007.

In *Harpers Team: Behind the Scenes in the Conservative Rise to Power*, Flanagan writes about an episode in the 2006 election when it looked like abortion might become an issue.

He writes:

"The door, however, had been opened for a final wave of attacks. Liberal outsider organizations — feminists, gay-rights activists, law professors, aboriginal leaders, environmentalists — came at us in human waves, claiming that Harper would roll back abortion rights, use the notwithstanding clause to quash gay marriage, and repudiate the Kelowna agreement and the Kyoto Accord. The Conservative Party simply can't compare with the Liberals in the depth and breadth of these external linkages; Real Women and Campaign Life can't compete with EGALE Canada and the National Action Committee on the Status of Women in terms of public funding and media clout. (We did score one minor coup when the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples broke ranks with other aboriginal organizations to support us instead other Liberal.) If the Conservative Party can stay in power for any length of time, it should be a priority to de-fund the support groups that the Liberals have cultivated so long with grants, subsidies and access to government."

'It should agree with the government'

This May Foreign Minister John Baird made it even clearer when challenged in Parliament over the government's elimination of the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy. Baird [said](#): "Why should taxpayers have to pay for more than 10 reports promoting a carbon tax, something that the people of Canada have repeatedly rejected? That is a message the Liberal Party just will not accept. It should agree with Canadians. It should agree with the government."

Flanagan recommended these groups be defunded and denied access to government and that is what happened. After all, these are the people who dared to suggest a Conservative government would repudiate Kyoto and the Kelowna Accord with First Nations.


That is how the current federal government views organizations who do not share their world view; the professors and the gay rights activists, the aboriginal leaders, women and environmentalists. They are just Liberal outriders. They are the enemy.

There is a straight line between Flanagan's musings in his book and the actions of the federal government. It is all about controlling the narrative. It is all about reducing the voices that might speak out against the current government's agenda.

Civil society organizations; groups like charities, unions, women's organizations and others play a critical role in our society. They provide a voice that is not clearly heard at the political level. It is organizations of women who drive the fight for equality. Charities working for prisoners and immigrants made public the dangerous direction new policies on crime and immigration were taking us. Environmental groups and First Nations moved us as British Columbians to oppose the Gateway pipeline. Unions have fought for health and safety protections for immigrant workers.

Sometimes these views are not popular. Sometimes they don't even agree with the government. But sometimes they mobilize us as a society to change the way we think. For our current federal government, that appears to be unacceptable.

But there is an even worse outcome than defunding, closing organizations and attacking others through Revenue Canada. That worst outcome is the chill that comes from the fear government will act against you. Many organizations will simply choose to withdraw from public debates rather than risk making themselves a target.

When a government silences the voices it does not want to hear, or when we silence ourselves out of fear, it is not an attack on individual organizations, it is an attack on democracy. 

Keith Reynolds is a National Research Representative for the Canadian Union of Public Employees. He has done policy work for all three levels of government. Keith maintains a Facebook page in honour of BC cheese. This was first posted on [Policy Note](#).

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