

TRENDING

[Adam Yauch](#) | [Rob Ford](#) | [Conrad Black](#) | [The Avengers](#) | [Blatchford](#) | [NHL playoffs](#) | [Quebec tuition protests](#) | [Coyne](#)

National Post

FULLCOMMENT

Andrew Coyne: Harper move to defund political charities might be partisan, but it's also right

Andrew Coyne May 4, 2012 – 6:59 PM ET | Last Updated: May 4, 2012 10:34 PM ET



REUTERS/Chris Wattie

It is a given that virtually everything the Harper government does is for reasons of partisan advantage. It is also a given that in the pursuit of its own partisan advantage it often seeks to deny the same to its opponents. It does not follow that it is always wrong to do so.

Were the government to ban opposition parties or censor the press, it would be in clear violation of constitutionally guaranteed liberties, not to say basic norms of liberal democracy: it is hard to think of any circumstances that would justify such draconian measures, and if there were, it would be the circumstances, not the motive — it would not be sufficient that the government “meant well.”

Related

[The politics of charity: When is a tax-exempt organization too political?](#)

[David Suzuki resigns to save foundation from 'bully' charitable status threats](#)

[David Suzuki charity questioned for alleged partisan politics](#)

So, too, its refusal to provide Parliament with the information it demands, whether in the matter of the Afghan prisoners or the F-35s, cannot be defended, and would not be redeemed by honourable motives. Ditto its abuse of the power of prorogation, or its habitual invocation of time allocation to shut down debate, or the vast omnibus budget bill now before the House, among a very long list.

But there are also things it has done that, while clearly in its narrow partisan interest, also happen to be right in principle. The addition of 30 Commons seats mostly from Ontario and the West is one example: whatever it means to the Tories' electoral chances, there is no denying these regions were severely under-represented in the House. A more arguable example would be the abolition of the per-vote subsidy to political parties.

Very well. What are we to make, then, of the Tories' latest moves to defund their critics: not parties this time, but advocacy groups. Some of these, like the National Roundtable on the Environment and the Economy or the National Council of Welfare, are creatures of the federal government, and dependent on it for funding. Others, like the many environmental and charitable groups that, notwithstanding their charitable tax status, engage in "political activity," are outside government, but dependent on it nevertheless for favourable tax treatment. Was it improper for the recent budget to have shut down several examples of the former, and cracked down on the latter? Is this yet another case of dissent being stifled?

Well yes, but no, I don't see anything improper about it. No doubt the Harper government found little to agree with in the work of either the NRRE or the NCW. But it is not constitutionally obliged to fund its critics. These are not officers of Parliament, like the Auditor-General, part of the formal apparatus by which government is held to account. They're lobby groups. While they may have a valid point of view, they perform no particular service that could not be obtained by other means. If a future government wants to revive them, it can.

The same applies to charitable groups. Nothing the government is proposing would forbid any of them from taking any position they like, political or otherwise, and shouting it from the rooftops if they choose. The only question is whether they should be able to do so and still claim charitable tax status.

Under current law, charities are forbidden from overtly partisan advocacy of any kind. They are, however, permitted to devote up to 10% (as a general rule: there are higher limits for smaller charities) of their resources, financial or otherwise, to more broadly defined "political activities" — for example, advocating that a particular law should be "retained, opposed, or changed," or some other equally explicit "call to political action."

It's a safe bet that a good many of the more well-known advocacy groups in the country, including the various think tanks of the left and right, are operating in excess of this standard, and have been for years. As long as it's even-handed about it, I see nothing wrong with simply enforcing the law, as the government proposes. Indeed, I'd go further. Why should any charity be permitted to spend any money on advocacy of any kind?

Preferential tax exemptions are a form of public spending (among wonks they're known as "tax expenditures") in as much as they confer a particular benefit on the recipient that must be made up out of the taxes everyone else pays. Only whereas most decisions on public spending are made collectively, by and through Parliament, the tax exemption essentially privatizes the decision.

That might be okay where the cause in question is universally agreed to be advancing the public good. But the very nature of advocacy implies the opposite. You're entering into an argument, and if you're a registered charity, you're doing so on my dime.

Indeed, a charity's whole purpose, whether or not it engages in advocacy, may be repugnant to one corner of opinion or the other. In which case, why should they be forced to fund it? If it's wrong to conscript all taxpayers to fund political parties (and it is wrong, whether via explicit subsidy or the extraordinarily generous tax credit on political contributions), it is no less wrong to conscript them in support of the 85,000 charities (and counting) on the Canada Revenue Agency's list.

Let each, in short, contribute to his own causes, out of his own funds, rather than invoking his magnanimity to help himself to others.' Charity is a wonderful thing. But virtue is supposed to be its own reward.

Posted in: [Canada](#), [Full Comment](#) Tags: [Canada Revenue Agency](#), [Parliament Of Canada](#), [Stephen Harper](#)



ANDREW COYNE

Andrew Coyne: Bill C-38 shows us how far Parliament has fallen

Andrew Coyne: The idea we can't debate abortion is unworthy of a democratic country

Andrew Coyne: Why I'm no longer making election predictions after Alberta

Andrew Coyne: Students should pay for the entire cost of education — later

Andrew Coyne: Liberals fail to grasp direness of their situation, nearly a year after collapse

MORE FROM ANDREW COYNE »

What do you think?

Opinions expressed in comments that appear on our site are expressly those of the comment writer and not the National Post. Offensive language, personal attacks and unsubstantiated allegations are not allowed and may result in your account being banned. Comments containing links are not permitted. Comment threads are closed after 48 hours. For more information, read our full [Terms and Conditions](#). If you see a typo or error in this story, feel free to [report it to us](#).

New to the site?

To leave a comment, you need to [Sign Up](#).

Already a member?

To comment, please [Sign In](#).

Showing 20 of 134 comments

Real-time updating is **paused**. ([Resume](#)) [Sort by newest first](#) ▾

 **Thylacine**

Next, the CPC should stop providing subsidies to the print media.

3 minutes ago

[Like](#)

 **thinkforamoment**

The government is very well funded, out of taxpayer dollars, to state its point of view.

33 minutes ago

[Like](#)

 **Shar**

Today I listened to the nut job from the Sierra Club on CBC. I am so mad I couldn't get the name right before. 'Of course, the US should not endorse the Keystone Pipeline, bla,bla bla.' He basically said we don't need oil, the oil sands should be shut down. He went on to say, 'too bad for Alberta'. Not a word of concern for the thousands of Canadians who work at the oilsands, the families who rely on the incomes to pay mortgages and feed their families; not a word of concern for the economy that is fueled by the paychecks of these workers, and creates other jobs ; not a word for the loss of tax revenue for provincial and federal coffers (a loss that would affect all of us). Just stop development, stop industry, stop jobs. We need to STOP the Sierra Club, STOP Suzuki, STOP May, STOP the NDP. If they have their way, all of Canada will be as broke as Ontario. We will lose our jobs, our homes, our pension funds. Yes, we need environmental reviews, yes we need to improve how things are...

[show more](#)

39 minutes ago 2 Likes

[Like](#)

 **citizenkain**

I get the impression you support the mad rush to export raw bitumen?
you see no problem with exporting 60% of the value of that bitumen to America?

23 minutes ago in reply to Shar 1 Like

[Like](#)

 **Shar**

If the private sector thought they could refine the product here and safely export it, I'm sure they would. What I am against is the anti- development, anti-industry, unrealistic rush to stop everything that creates jobs and wealth, with no consideration for the average Canadians who are going to be affected big time.

11 minutes ago in reply to citizenkain

Like



Y

Did that nut job transfer over from Ducks Unlimited ?

30 minutes ago in reply to Shar

Like



safetynet2razorwire

That political agencies share the same exemptions as actual charities galls me. That such agencies receive direct funding more so. Selective funding would take the cake. Discretionary defunding would ice it.

Personally, I'd prefer that any tax-exempt charitable agency accepting government funds be prohibited from political action. Charities are exempt because they aid us in fulfilling our community responsibilities - political action needs no such subsidy - especially in an emergent digital direct democracy.

So, if Mr. Harper's Government defunds all charities actively lobbying before parliament and people, fine and dandy. So long as a rigorous review process is maintained - with committees mandated to make determinations and ultimate appeal to the courts (both provincial and federal) able to weigh-in.

[More or less the opposite of what appears the case under the changes in law included in the 2012 Conservative 'budget' as applied, for example, to issues arising vis a vis the environment.]

Also vital to the constitutionality [and morality] of this process is a defunding of any agency pursuing the furtherance of an ideological agenda. Churches for example. If they accept money from the public purse (including tax-exemption) they shouldn't be proselytizing - 'spreading the word'.

That term...

show more

1 hour ago

Like



Mr.DD

After carefully reading over key decisions since 2005, I believe the sum of Harper's changes are not going to build a better country. It will be meaner, greedier and the gap between rich and poor will widen.

The Canada I know will no longer be a force of good in the world, just another country in a cold world that cares about nothing more than its own narrow self-interest.

1 hour ago 9 Likes

Like



Shar

And who are you? At least people might have jobs that are not dependent on government subsidies which only last until the government runs out of money -- just watch Ontario over the next few years. No I'm not a paid poster. I'm mad at the Eco terrorists who just want to stop development period. Do you think they care if you have a job? Do you think they care if you have food on your table?

34 minutes ago in reply to Mr.DD

Like



WCF

And I thought Chretien had the market cornered on narrow self interest. Thanks for clearing all this up for me.

51 minutes ago in reply to Mr.DD 2 Likes

Like



Mr.DD

Liberals have always taken a internationalist, global minded position, for example Paul Martin played a key role in shaping the G20. WCF, I know very well what your views are toward Chretien. Fair enough, you are allowed to have them.

38 minutes ago in reply to WCF 2 Likes

Like



smurf777

Y shows an inclination of why evolution may prove to be just a theory. There are those that simply do not evolve and wish to remain in the mud.

55 minutes ago in reply to Mr.DD

Like



Y

OMG!!! They just don't stop.

- Meaner
- greedier
- widening gap ?
- 'force of Good'
- cold world
- narrow self-interest

Honestly---- ya got any more?

1 hour ago in reply to Mr.DD 2 Likes

Like



Mr.DD

How long did it take you to set up this account.....3 seconds.

I hit like by accident.

45 minutes ago in reply to Y 1 Like

Like



Wayne59

What you mean, Andrew, is you AGREE with Harper's decision to stop funding partisan charities. To say it is RIGHT is a matter of opinion, as you know.

1 hour ago 4 Likes

Like



Open Season

It's a slippery slope when you to begin censoring your critics through the cancellation of charitable status. There will be a day when the freedom of religion will be challenged in the same way. Any charity is at risk of being censored, controlled and manipulated through these tactics. The ultimate goal is to silence critics. Hitler did the same and eventually he just shot any dissenters.

1 hour ago 6 Likes

Like



Shar

Not one REAL charity will be affected. The Sahara Club and the Suzuki Foundation are NOT charities. They are political organizations with political agendas. Their end game is to destroy the Canada we love.

53 minutes ago in reply to Open Season

Like



Shar

No.

9 minutes ago in reply to Shar

Like



mcl now from Surrey

Are you saying the Manning Centre isn't political?

24 minutes ago in reply to Shar

Like



Mr.DD

Facist regime.

Cut of your opposition just as you pass the ugly stuff through parliament.

1 hour ago in reply to Open Season 6 Likes

Like

[Subscribe by email](#) [RSS](#)

Load more comments

Reactions



blog comments powered by DISQUS