



OPINION EDITORIAL

Charities must stay out of politics

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If you run a charity in Canada, the rules are pretty simple.

In order to enjoy tax-exempt status and give out tax-deductible receipts for donations -- which all Canadians subsidize -- you're not supposed to be politically partisan.

You're not supposed to tell people, directly or indirectly, to vote for a particular politician or party, or not to vote for another politician or party.

You're not supposed to engage in partisan activities using money funneled to you from foreign foundations.

You can spend up to 10% of your budget on political activities -- for example, informing the public about environmental issues -- but not on a partisan basis.

That's why Federal Finance Minister Jim Flaherty, as he prepares the federal budget, is warning environmental charities, for the second year in a row, that: "If I were an

environmental charity using charitable money, tax-receipted money, for political purposes, I would be cautious."

Darn straight. And good advice for charities that don't want to have their charitable status revoked.

Whenever the government raises this issue, environmental groups like the David Suzuki Foundation, Tides Canada and the Sierra Club portray it as an attack on their right to free speech, to oppose things like the oilsands and pipeline projects.

Nonsense. Everyone has the right to criticize the government and to try to persuade others to their point of view.

But if they're going to be given the privilege of charitable status, there are rules they have to follow, including that they have to be non-partisan.

Despite that, Suzuki, for example, appeared in a campaign video endorsing former Ontario Liberal premier Dalton McGuinty in the 2011 election, while publicly attacking Tory leader Tim Hudak and the Conservatives.

In the 2008 federal election, he endorsed then-Liberal leader Stephane Dion, while attacking Prime Minister Stephen Harper and the late NDP leader Jack Layton on environmental issues.

This is non-partisan?

Suzuki's response is that he says these things as an individual, not as a representative of his charity, the David Suzuki Foundation, whose board of directors he resigned from last year to make the distinction clear.

Wonderful. But that doesn't change the fact charities should have to follow the rules of the Canada Revenue Agency, just as all Canadians do.