

Anti-budget protest will see websites go dark

Environmental groups lead online protest against Bill C-38

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A coalition of Canada's top environmental groups says close to 18,000 Canadians and over 400 organizations have committed to blacking out their websites on Monday — a symbolic gesture in protest of what they see is the government's effort to "silence" environmental voices across the country.

In an interview with CBC News on Sunday, Gideon Forman, the executive director for the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment — one of a dozen environmental groups leading this online campaign — said "the Conservative government's attack on democracy and the environment is unprecedented."

The 'Black Out, Speak Out' campaign calls on Canadians to raise their voices against proposed changes to environmental laws included in Bill C-38, the government's budget implementation bill. Environmental groups say the changes will weaken environmental laws.



This is an example of the images being used in the 'Black Out, Speak Out' campaign against the Conservative's budget implementation bill. (CBC)

"We are of the opinion that in order to protect the environment there has to be a very robust public debate in energy projects and other controversial projects with big environmental impact, and the Conservative government is trying to kill that public participation and that's very worrisome," said Forman, whose group represents over 5,000 doctors and concerned citizens.

"It's worrisome for the environment, it's also terribly worrisome for our democracy."

In an interview with CBC News on Sunday, Conservative MP James Rajotte — chair of the House finance committee which is tasked with examining the government's budget bill — said this is "the longest" time in memory that a committee has spent looking at a budget bill.

Rajotte said "it's a very public process" and noted the Conservatives agreed to send the part of the budget bill that deals with changes to the environment, natural resources and fisheries (Part 3 of Bill C-38) to a finance sub-committee for closer scrutiny.

'It was disgraceful'

But Meagan Leslie, NDP environment critic and deputy House leader, told CBC News that that section of the bill should have been sent to the environment committee. Given that Bill C-38 consists of over 400 pages, the time allotted for examining the bill overall is "hardly adequate," she said.

According to Leslie, the study of Part 3 of the budget bill was "rammed through" the sub-committee, where witnesses were "rushed" and "attacked" by Conservative members.

"It was disgraceful. This was absolutely not democracy."

Rajotte said that on Monday the finance committee will look at the sub-committee's report on Part 3 of the budget bill and then deal with all of Bill C-38 clause by clause.

The New Democrat said the proposed changes are, "too much. It's too radical a change to our existing environmental legislation."

"I think it's fair to say that very likely the Opposition will have a dissenting report," Leslie said.

Speaking from a Liberal Party convention in Montreal on Sunday, interim Liberal Leader Bob Rae said his party will also join in the online campaign to protest what they see as the federal government's attempt to "shut down discussion and people's ability to advocate for better public policy."

"This government isn't just trying to attack the Opposition, but they're attacking every institution that is there to protect the individual rights of Canadians and they're attacking charitable organizations which are trying to participate in the development of good policy for Canada," said Rae.

The Green Party and its leader Elizabeth May will also black out their websites in support of the online campaign, as will the Bloc Québécois .

According to Rajotte, "it comes down to whether political parties and members of Parliament support these changes or not. It's a valid political debate but I suspect that in terms of resource development and sustainability these will be lively political issues for the length of this entire Parliament."

While the websites go dark, Natural Resources Minister Joe Oliver and nine other cabinet ministers will fan out across the country to promote the government's plan for 'Responsible Resource Development' — one of the various measures proposed in Bill C-38.