

Senator defends Harper Tories' attack on the charitable sector, as green leaders deconstruct it

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"It looks like this Conservative senator [Plett] and Conservative MPs – and the Prime Minister himself – don't seem to want to discuss the actual issue. Which is whether the Northern Gateway is in the best interests of Canadians. They'd rather throw red herrings all over the place in order to distract folks from what's at stake," Swanson said.

"He can smear oil tanker opponents all he wants. We're not going to back down, and we're going to continue to fight for our coast."

An "antagonistic" approach to environmentalists

While Senator Plett may view the discussion around Martians and Al Qaeda as "silly", environmentalists with other organizations say this week's remarks are no laughing matter.

"This would be funny as a Rick Mercer satirical skit, but as a public statement from a Senator this kind of crude attempt to smear those who disagree with him is alarming," said Keith Stewart, climate and energy campaign coordinator at Greenpeace Canada.

"Greenpeace depends on the generosity of individuals to support us in this work, as we don't take money from governments, corporations, or political parties in order to ensure our independence from precisely these kinds of threats."

Representing another organization targeted by the Senators, Tides Canada spokesperson Alison Henning expressed similar concerns with the government's tone and tactics.

"The role of government is to take a balanced position and to work with all voices to find solutions that work for Canadians. Throughout history, some of our greatest achievements are the result of government and the environmental conservation community working together," Henning said in an email.

"It is disappointing to see this increasingly antagonistic approach. This is an attempt to silence voices that are speaking out for our clean air, safe drinking water and healthy communities," she said.

Anti-environmentalist rhetoric in the Senate

Liberal senator Grant Mitchell, the Senate's environment critic, took issue with the "anti-environmentalist rhetoric" being thrown around in the inquiry.

"Senator Plett's comments speak to the Government's agenda to demonize environmental groups. All legitimate interests on these major energy projects have a right to be heard, and this is a smear campaign to denigrate legitimate perspectives as anti-Canadian," Senator Mitchell said.

"Holding and reconciling different opinions is the hallmark of what it means to participate in Canadian democracy."

In the Senate chamber on Wednesday, Senator Mitchell challenged the Conservatives, noting a "fundamental shift" in the government's position on environmental issues and climate change.

"What kind of government would suggest that absolutely legitimate charitable groups like the Suzuki Foundation, like the Sierra Club Foundation, are meddling in public policy debate in this country, when they exclude groups like the Fraser Institute, which clearly takes international money, which clearly is a charity and which clearly meddles and muddles in public policy debate in this country every waking moment of their existence?," he asked during Wednesday's session.

The David Suzuki Foundation's Peter Robinson, meanwhile, said that foreign funding has always been a part of how North American charities operate.

"There's a century-long tradition of philanthropic money flowing back and forth across the borders for everything from libraries to healthcare and education, to environmental projects in both countries," he said.

"To suddenly say that this is wrong goes against this long tradition of organizations in both countries supporting work of good value in both countries. I found that really quite absurd."

A double standard?

One argument consistently raised in this 'foreign funding' debate is whether there is a double standard being used against environmental organizations, since foreign investors and lobbies are also bringing money and influence to domestic policy issues.

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