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THE GLOBE AND MAIL 

Seeking to blunt Conservative attacks, Suzuki quits board of environmental foundation

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OTTAWA AND TORONTO— From Friday's Globe and Mail

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Canada's most famous environmentalist, David Suzuki, says he left the board of his charitable foundation to avoid being a lightning rod for criticism and government attacks that would undermine its work.

Still, Peter Robinson, who is the head of the David Suzuki Foundation, said the group is facing a "chill" that is leading it to pull back from important environmental debates lest it be accused by the federal government of exceeding its charitable mandate.

Green groups are responding to the Conservative government's aggressive attacks on "radical" and "foreign funded" organizations, which culminated in \$8-million in new spending in last month's budget for the Canada Revenue Agency to step up "education and compliance" oversight of the charities, including more audits.

"We're seeing a very difficult period of time in terms of the rhetoric and the tone of what's coming out from the government," Mr. Robinson, the Suzuki Foundation's chief executive, told The Globe and Mail's editorial board on Thursday.

"And why we find this alarming is that environmental groups and organizations, we think, provide a really valuable input into discussions in our society, things that Canadians value."

The Suzuki Foundation, which had revenues of \$8.7-million last year, is one of a number of green groups that have been targeted by supporters of the oil industry and the proposal to build a pipeline called the Northern Gateway to bring oil sands bitumen to the West Coast. Mr. Robinson said the group has not taken a position on the proposal and remains well within the law, with its work primarily focused on scientific research.

Dr. Suzuki said he had to leave the board and distance himself from the organization because the foundation was being targeted because of his personal views and actions. The 76-year-old environmentalist said he had felt he needed more freedom to speak his mind.

“Every time I shot off my mouth, the foundation got blamed for my remarks as an individual and I thought, ‘I can’t stand being a liability,’” Dr. Suzuki said. “I’m at an age now where ... I can say things without, I think, being accused of having an ulterior agenda or a desire for money or fame or whatever.”

In the March 30 budget, Ottawa declared that non-profit groups will have to provide the government with more information “on their political activities, including the extent to which these are funded by foreign sources.” The government also signalled a compliance crackdown to ensure charities follow the rule that no more than 10 per cent of funds can be spent on advocacy.

A recent Angus Reid poll suggested 80 per cent of Canadians approved the budget measures. But Mr. Robinson said that extra scrutiny of charities has made them pull back on serious issues, particularly if a strong statement might blur the lines of advocacy.

Earlier this year, Natural Resources Minister Joe Oliver launched an attack on what he called radical, foreign-funded environmental groups.

His denunciation came after a 2011 campaign by EthicalOil.org, a pro-industry lobby group that has close Conservative ties, including founding member Alykhan Velshi, who now works in the Prime Minister’s Office. The lobby group noted that several U.S. and European foundations had made large donations to Canadian environmental charities, in some cases with the express purpose of opposing oil-sands development and the Northern Gateway pipeline.

EthicalOil spokesman Jordan Graham said environmental groups that are operating within the current charities law “should have no reason to step back.”

“Revenue Canada is crystal clear on what is acceptable and what isn’t if you’re a charity. This is about enforcing the rules, not coming up with new ones,” Mr. Graham said.

But he insisted that some groups “masquerade” as charities to pursue blatant political work. For evidence, he pointed to Dr. Suzuki’s endorsement of the Ontario Liberal Party’s green plan before the provincial election last year.

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