

News Item

Ottawa Shouldn't Muzzle Charities

The Trudeau government is off base in its effort to muzzle voluntary organizations that campaign for a better deal for the physically handicapped, native peoples, needy citizens and other groups.

Yet such a heavy-handed effort to curb campaigning efforts of such groups has come down from National Revenue, with a reminder in new guidelines that they could lose their tax-exempt status if they campaign in public for social reform.

This is outrageous. It's based on National Revenue's interpretation of a body of law that goes back to Britain 300 years ago and which takes the narrow view that while charities can directly aid the needy, for example, they can't advocate changes in public policy that might benefit the needy. This is considered political activity.

According to guidelines just issued by Revenue Canada, political activity includes writing letters to politicians and newspapers, organizing demonstrations against government or mounting any sort of program to promote recommendations the charity has made in a brief to government.

It's okay, apparently, to present a brief to government as long as you don't go around talking about it afterward, or try to persuade any federal, provincial or municipal politician to support it.

Yet even here there is irony. While Ottawa proposes to crack down on voluntary organizations that advocate reform of public policy, it uses taxpayers' money to pay advisory bodies to do just that. The National Council of Welfare, a citizens' advisory group to Welfare Minister Monique Begin, is a good example. It is constantly publishing reports advocating changes in welfare and tax legislation.

If the government can use tax money to get advice on changes in public policy, there seems no reason for it not to give tax breaks to citizens who support voluntary community groups that do the same thing.

And to tell members of those groups they can't write to the newspapers or to their elected representatives is a dangerous intrusion into the democratic right of free speech.

The late Leslie Frost, when he was premier of Ontario, once said, "Never prepare legislation until the public asks for it." Since individual members of the public rarely ask for legislation, it's surely an appropriate activity for voluntary public institutions—churches and charities, in short—to do the asking.

An amendment to the *Income Tax Act*, clearly defining a charity and its activities in terms of what it does today—and that certainly goes beyond

distributing food baskets to the poor and includes advocating change in public policy—is in order.

Meanwhile, let's put those new guidelines where they belong—in the paper shredder.

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