

# FREEZING OUT CIVIL SOCIETY

**IS THE CANADIAN GOVERNMENT DELIBERATELY WITHHOLDING FUNDS FROM DISSENTING CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS? MAYBE, MAYBE NOT. BUT EVEN THE PERCEPTION PLACES A CHILL ON FREE EXPRESSION** By Grant Buckler

**T**he story broke on Jan. 24, 2012: A former employee of ForestEthics, an organization opposed to the Enbridge Northern Gateway oil pipeline from Alberta's oilsands to the British Columbia coast, said the federal government had threatened Tides Canada with loss of funding if it continued supporting ForestEthics.

Andrew Frank, who said he was told about the threats by his supervisor at ForestEthics and by Tides Canada's energy initiative director, also said ForestEthics had fired him the previous day (Jan. 23), when he announced his intention to take the story public.

The accusations might have had less impact if not for comments by Joe Oliver, natural resources minister, in an open letter released by his department two weeks earlier. Referring to environmental groups opposing the pipeline as "radical," Oliver attacked them for receiving some of their funding from international special interest groups, and said the environmentalists "threaten to hijack our regulatory system to achieve their radical ideological agenda." Oliver went on to suggest that the environmental review process for the pipeline might need to be shortened and changed.

Did the federal government really threaten Tides Canada with repercussions if it continued to fund ForestEthics? We don't know. But this is by no means the first episode that suggests that disagreeing publicly with this government's agenda can cost civil society organizations dearly.

Late in 2009, the federal government cut off funding to Kairos: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives (also called

Kairos Canada and Kairos), a coalition of churches and religious organizations that had received money from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) for 35 years. The clumsy way the deed was done ensured it received more media attention than it might have otherwise: Bev Oda, minister of international co-operation, inserted the word "not" into a recommendation that Kairos' funding be continued—but she did so after Margaret Biggs, president of CIDA, and other senior CIDA officials, had signed a positive recommendation. Then, Jason Kenney, minister of citizenship, immigration and multiculturalism, accused Kairos of anti-Semitism in a speech at the Global Forum for Combating Anti-Semitism. "We have articulated and implemented a zero-tolerance approach to anti-Semitism," he said. "What does this mean? It means that we eliminated the government funding relationship with organizations... who promote hatred, in particular anti-Semitism. We have defunded organizations, most recently like Kairos."

Toronto-based Kairos is backed by 11 respected religious groups. Though the organization has criticized the Israeli government's treatment of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, it has also explicitly stated that it does not support a general boycott or economic sanctions against Israel, and favours a two-state solution in the Middle East.

John Lewis, Kairos' program coordinator for international human rights and Middle East partnerships, says he doesn't know why Kairos lost its funding, only that CIDA's evaluation of Kairos' funding proposal was positive.

In March 2009, the federal government named University of Toronto professor Aurel Braun chair of the board of Rights & Democracy, a human rights agency set up in 1988 by the Brian Mulroney government. Braun and other directors, all appointed around the same time, soon came into conflict with Rémy Beauregard, named president of Rights & Democracy in 2008. Tensions mounted over grants to B'Tselem, an Israeli human rights group, and partner organizations Al Haq and Al Mezan. Braun accused the three organizations of being linked to extremists; Beauregard disagreed.

The conflict led to allegations of mismanagement, and a negative performance review of Beauregard that was sent to government officials without Beauregard being allowed to see it. After an acrimonious board meeting in January 2010, Beauregard died of a heart attack. Soon after, Rights & Democracy staff demanded the three directors' resignations. An audit of the organization by consulting firm Deloitte did not support allegations of mismanagement.

Nonetheless, in early April 2012 the government announced it would shut

down Rights & Democracy. Though it was founded as an arms-length organization, its functions will be moved into the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade.

In June 2010, the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development wrote a report on the situation, stating that: “It is abundantly clear to the Committee that a significant factor underlying the dispute between certain members of the Board and Mr. Beauregard and the organization were differing views on the current dispute in the Middle East.”

The Canadian Council for International Co-operation (CCIC), an umbrella group for Canadian NGOs, received CIDA funding for 40 years until the summer of 2010. The loss of CIDA funding eliminated 70 per cent of CCIC’s budget and forced it to lay off 17 of its 25 employees.

The federal government has not said why CIDA declined to continue CCIC’s funding. The group, however, had spoken

that opposed the war in Afghanistan and the Israeli blockade of Gaza, lost its CIDA funding in 2009. In 2010, the New Brunswick Coalition for Pay Equity lost its funding from Status of Women Canada, the budget of which had been cut by the federal government in tandem with a change in funding criteria that excluded advocacy groups. In 2009, Canadian Policy Research Networks, a 15-year-old non-profit socio-economic policy research group, closed after losing its federal funding.

Voices-Voix, a non-partisan coalition of organizations founded in 2010, documents these and other cases on its website, [voices-voix.ca](http://voices-voix.ca).

In a February 2012 report on the new competitive funding mechanism that CIDA introduced in 2010, CCIC warned of a “chill on advocacy activities as a result of the widely shared perception that CIDA looks unfavourably on organizations that do policy and advocacy work, especially in areas that are controversial for the current government or when advocacy efforts are

particular government or party,” he says.

Roch Tassé, co-ordinator of the International Civil Liberties Monitoring Group in Ottawa, sees a marked difference between this government and past ones. “I’ve been working in the NGO world for most of my career,” he says. “This is unprecedented.”

Some might argue that when you accept funding from any source, you open the door to their influence on your activities. This is why some organizations, like Amnesty International, avoid government funding.

Is Ottawa merely focusing its dollars on causes the government believes Canadians support? If so, perhaps the government has too narrow a view of what Canadians believe in.

Withholding public funds from civil society organizations at odds with government positions is not the exact equivalent of imprisoning dissidents or closing down newspapers, but it certainly doesn’t suggest a belief in the value of free and open discussion.

“There’s a direct correlation between freedom of expression and democracy,” Shore says. Organizations afraid of losing funding aren’t likely to say publicly what they know the government doesn’t want to hear. You may or may not call that censorship, but can you call it healthy?

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out against a government plan to freeze foreign aid spending after 2010, and against Kairos’ defunding. Gerry Barr, then president of CCIC, was quoted in a Canwest News Service report as saying: “It really is hard not to see the prospect of defunding as anything other than an example of efforts at political chill.”

CCIC also focuses on policy and advocacy, notes Julia Sanchez, now its president and CEO, and “this government has been very clear about its total lack of interest in funding policy advocacy-oriented organizations.” The government wants civil society to stick to delivering services, she says.

There are other examples. Alternatives, a Quebec-based social justice group

critical of current policies.”

In the latest federal budget, the government allocated \$8 million to the Canada Revenue Agency to tighten the rules governing political activity by organizations with charitable status and to step up enforcement. The budget also hints at restrictions on international funding for Canadian charities.

Has the Canadian government moved into a new era of using funding to pressure civil society groups that disagree with its positions? Many people think so. “I know for a fact there is a chill,” says Darren Shore, communications co-ordinator at Voices-Voix. But Shore doesn’t put all the blame on the present government. “This issue is not about any

