

National Affairs by Claire Hoy ? Nothing to do about free speech



Here's a question: since when did free speech depend upon taxpayer's subsidies?

It never has, of course. But to judge by the absolutely hysterical media coverage of the current campaign by the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) to audit several well-known Canadian charities, you'd think the end of the world as we know it is nigh.

And the bad guy ? as usual ? is Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

Just look at the letters page in the Saturday Star ? a newspaper which has yet to see a Tory it can't accuse of foul deeds ? and of the 15 angry letters on the subject just one ? that's ONE ? thinks it's actually not a bad idea to ask charities to spend their tax-subsidized dollars according to the rules.

The rest essentially see Harper as the Machiavellian master of a plot to destroy all that we Canadians hold near and dear, particularly the concept of free speech.

In fact, auditing a charity ? even if it loses its charitable status as a result ? does not stop it from saying what it wants to say. The free speech thing is a complete canard first floated by many of the decidedly left-wing groups who loathe Harper and the Tories as much as the Star does.

Much of the recent focus was sparked by the CRA audit of PEN Canada, clearly an outrage since it directly involves a gang of left-leaning journalists and writers who, apparently, should be able to spend tax dollars with absolute impunity.

The overwhelming theme of the coverage is that Harper ? the nasty, nasty person that he is ? has ordered the CRA to crack down on left-wing groups which have been critical of him.

People ask why right-wing groups are not subjected to audits as well? Good question. The answer is, they are. The decidedly right-of-centre Fraser Institute, for example, has been audited three times.

What's more, beyond making the easy accusations, there isn't a shred of evidence that has been produced to indicate that the CRA ? a rather stridently independent bureaucracy ? is under direct orders to go after left-wing groups. That's the charge. But, as the old commercial used to say, ?Where's the beef??

There's also the small matter ? which, as far as I know, has been ignored by all media except for the National Post ? of a column written by former PEN Canada treasurer Hank Bulmash who argues that ?charitable status is a privilege and not a right? and it is perfectly reasonable for the government to audit their activities to make sure they focus on charity and don't go beyond the sensible 10 per cent spending limit on direct political activities.

He points out that despite all the hype over the government's decision to add \$8 million to the CRA's auditing budget, only one charity ? Physicians for Global Survival (Canada) ? has lost its charitable status registration. Even here, it was under review by the CRA for six years before the decision was made.

As for the audit of PEN which has sparked so many of the usual suspects to scream (once again) that the sky is truly falling, the former PEN treasurer says PEN ?has little to worry about.

But we should be wary.

?The crucial message of the current government's campaign has nothing to do with this government alone. It is a reminder that our charitable status is a privilege and not a right. It is a privilege granted by CRA, an arm of the government, and as such we and other charitable organizations will always exist subject to the scrutiny of those in power in Ottawa.

?This is not unjust, at least not in principle. It's the way the world works.?

It is, in fact, the way the world should work as well.

Do these people who are whining about the current CRA audits really believe that the thousands and thousands of charities in this country enjoying hundreds of millions of your tax dollars for their works somehow should be allowed to spend your money any way they wish without the slightest accountability to the government which sends them the cheques?

Get past the hysteria, past the usual left-wing moaning and the built-in belief in their own privilege, and the fact of the matter is the government wouldn't be doing its job if it didn't continually audit these groups.

If they don't like it, they can always de-register themselves and collect their own money without feeding off the government teat.

Failing that, if they are going to accept the money they have to accept the conditions that go with it.

And again, none of it has a thing to do with free speech. Nada.