

Green Scene: Who is watching the bird-watchers...and why?

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Why is the government watching the bird-watchers? Elaine Golds wants to know. *Bruce Brandhorst photo*

Like many people, I was surprised to learn last week the Canadian Revenue Agency (CRA) had decided to audit a small non-profit, volunteer-run birding group in Ontario with charitable income status to determine if any of its activities were prohibited and illegal.

The Kitchener-Waterloo Field Naturalists are, after all, a small, 100% volunteer-run group not unlike the local Burke Mountain Naturalists, to which I belong. What on Earth could its members have done to attract the attention of CRA? For the past 80 years, its activities have mostly included offering hikes and bird-watching outings to appreciate nature and promote the protection of wildlife habitat.

It appears to have passed its audit with a stern warning letter from CRA but none of the elected board members is willing to speak to the press about it. A chill has descended over the group.

Anyone belonging to a non-governmental organization with charitable income status is probably reasonably familiar with the rules laid down by CRA. Such societies must be non-partisan in their activities and spend no more than 10% of their resources on politically-related actions.

It's important to note that participating in government-invited opportunities to comment on policies is not considered to be a politically-related action, nor is writing a letter to an elected official to provide input on the potential success or failure of specific policies. After all, we live in a democratic state where freedom of expression is a right. I would argue that expressing views is not only a right but is also a civic responsibility. Democracy works best when citizens participate fully and when there is discourse and dialog between the governing and the governed.

Casting aspersions on the activities of environmental organizations began in 2012 when the Conservative federal government announced the political activities of some these groups would be investigated by CRA. To help CRA achieve this goal, the federal budget allocated CRA \$8 million to the task.

The then-minister of natural resources, Joe Oliver, claimed some environmental organizations were using funding from foreign special interest groups to undermine Canada's national economic interests. He went on to say these groups were threatening to hijack our regulatory system to achieve their radical ideological agenda. Oliver was, of course, referring to the review being conducted at that time by Joint Panel Review regarding the proposed Northern Gateway pipeline from Alberta to Kitimat.

Some environmental groups had reasons to think this project was not in the best interests of Canada and, in addition, had specific concerns about deleterious impacts on the habitat of wildlife such as caribou and whales. The regulatory review process simply provided a mechanism whereby such concerns could be brought forward for consideration. Nonetheless, CRA audits were initiated starting with some of the larger environmental organizations, such as the David Suzuki Foundation, Tides Canada, West Coast Environmental Law, the Pembina Foundation and Environmental Defence.

The groups that were audited found the process onerous and time-consuming. Despite spending millions of dollars and auditing an undisclosed number of groups, CRA, to date, has found only one group that spent more money than allowed on political activities — and this was a group of physicians that was spending 26% of its budget on a letter-writing campaign to urge government to support an international treaty to ban nuclear weapons. While it did not follow the rules, one could hardly argue with its good intentions. Could a ban on nuclear weapons undermine Canada economic interests?

After the first — and, apparently, mostly futile — round of investigations, the federal government has apparently decided to dig a little deeper and cast its nets wider for inappropriate activities among other well-intentioned non-profit organizations. Thus, the government allocated another \$5 million in taxpayers' money to support additional CRA investigations.

Meanwhile, some of the original investigations have continued, without conclusion, for three years. This has created a great strain on the organizations involved, not to mention a drain on limited financial resources to allocate staff time to continually deal with auditors.

In the second round of investigations, CRA has expanded its scope and is examining the political activities of groups involved with fighting poverty and for human rights, such as Oxfam and Amnesty International. Oxfam was told preventing poverty was not a valid goal for tax purposes. CoDev, a non-profit group

working to help the poor in Latin America, has been told it must translate all its documents, including even bus tickets, from Spanish into English or French. This task is now consuming much of its staff time. Because these investigations are confidential, CRA cannot reveal if it is also investigating groups with more of a right-wing approach, such as the Fraser Institute.

I find it very hard to see these investigations as little more than the persecution of groups the Canadian government under the leadership of Prime Minister Stephen Harper seems to find objectionable. It appears to be an inappropriate bullying tactic that, in some cases, is clearly intimidating the groups under investigation.

There must be dozens of more worthy projects on which our government could be more wisely spending \$13 million of our money instead of harassing non-profit groups with good intentions.

It's hard for me to believe this apparent witch hunt is happening in the country I love. What about you?