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The ongoing attack on charities - Elizabeth May

When I heard that ForestEthics, a group targeted in a Prime Minister's Office (PMO) memorandum as an 'adversary' of the PMO agenda, had decided to split its activities so as to make advocacy a separate arm, I thought 'how brave.'

The fact that PMO senior staff had pressured the group's main funder, Tides Canada, to stop supporting the conservation work of ForestEthics, (verified by the memo obtained through Access to Information), would, in itself, have been a shocking scandal even a decade ago. Now, it barely caused a murmur in a nation seemingly losing our sense of outrage in the face of suppression of dissent–like the proverbial warming frog in a toxic political stew.

It becomes increasingly clear that the 'chill' effect of the bully-boy tactic of threatening all non-government groups and all charities with as yet unspecified 'new sanctions' (promised at p.205 of the 2012 federal budget) will silence critics. Where I would expect a phalanx of executive directors of the country's major national conservation and environmental groups blasting back with one voice at the unravelling of decades of environmental protections, there has been a fairly small roar from only the bravest. This is not intended as any criticism of my former colleagues. When you don't know what the new rules will be, when you have an obligation to your organization to stay in the black, and when money is scarce and threats abundant it is hard to know how to respond.

Then there is ForestEthics. On April 17, Valerie Langer, its Director of BC Forest Campaigns stood up bravely.

In the summer of 1993, Valerie had rallied thousands to the clear-cuts of Clayoquot Sound to halt the logging of the ancient coastal temperate rainforest. At the Kennedy Lake blockade she was chained to a log suspended out into space.

Valerie has been working with ForestEthics for 18 years. Far from the civil disobedience of the early 1990s, she and ForestEthics have pioneered market-based campaigns, tackling catalogue giant Victoria's Secret. ForestEthics has also worked to create economic opportunities, such as the toy-building project with Heiltsuk First Nation. ForestEthics found ways to find consensus with the forest industry at boardroom tables. The group is clearly too effective for the Harper regime.

Social and environmental justice lawyer, Clayton Ruby, has agreed to head up ForestEthics Advocacy, the new organization that will not seek any charitable dollars for its work.

Ruby declared, 'what we need now is more advocacy for the environment, not less advocacy for the environment. We need more speech, not less speech.'

This announcement was barely made before the spin doctors of the Prime Minister's Office issued the following Info Alert by email at 7pm, April 17, with the subject line 'Legitimate Charities':

> 'Canadian law has long restricted the generous tax advantages associated with charitable status to organizations that focus their energies on charitable activities–not politics. Unfortunately, some organizations have been using taxpayers' generosity for their own political purposes.
>
> 'In *Economic Action Plan 2012*, our Government announced that charities would be required to be more transparent and more accountable to Canadians when it comes to their activities.
>
> 'But this was all too much for at least one radical organization who today announced the creation of a stand-alone group devoted entirely to political advocacy.
>
> 'ForestEthics may be the first radical group to admit that their activities, for which they have collected tremendous financial advantages at the expense of Canadian taxpayers, were not charitable at all. After all, legitimate organizations carrying out legitimate charitable activities would have no reason to do anything differently.'

This memo is grossly inappropriate to come from a Prime Minister's Office. It reads like the kind of smear issued from the Conservative Party War Room during an election campaign. Its arguments fall into the same category as the anti-civil liberties argument: 'If you aren't doing anything wrong, you should not mind the police searching your home without warrant—or checking into your email.'

When any conservation group, unsure how to speak in the current climate of harassment where the 10% legal advocacy by charities leads to endless harassment with threats of loss of charitable status, decides to voluntarily relinquish its charitable status, it will stand condemned by the PMO.

This is my country. The actions of this PMO belong in some other country—maybe one described by George Orwell where an 'Info Alert' could be a tool of propaganda and smear.

This PMO spends more on 'information officers' than any previous one. Talk about abuse of taxpayers' dollars; this bunch spends $10 million a year in shadowy political operatives and 'Info Alerts.' This PMO does not belong in Canada.

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