

Bill to force union disclosure of spending is hypocritical

By David Coles, Vancouver Sun - October 2, 2012

The Conservatives have refused the Parliamentary Budget Officer's request to disclose what effect \$5 billion in spending cuts will have on public services but they want every labour union in the country to publicly disclose their photocopy contracts.

Sponsored by Conservative MP Russ Hiebert, An Act to amend the Income Tax Act (Labour Organizations) is set for a third and final reading in the House of Commons this fall. Bill C-377 would require every trade union and labour trust (pension plan, training fund as well as health and welfare funds) to file a public information return with the Canada Revenue Agency on all expenditures over \$5,000. Incredibly, under the proposed legislation, labour-associated pension and benefit plans will be required to publicly disclose "the name and address" and a "description" of benefits paid to individuals greater than \$5,000. This could include personal medical information.

While the opposition parties have opposed the bill, almost all Conservative MPs have supported the private member's bill, which they claim will improve union transparency.

The Conservative Party's hypocrisy knows no bounds. By all accounts the Conservatives have the most extreme message control of any recent Canadian government. The Prime Minister's Office maintains a tight grip over statements by ministers, MPs and bureaucrats. It's difficult for journalists to interview government officials (or scientists) without the PMO's clearance.

Since the Conservatives generally refuse to relinquish it voluntarily, those searching for government information have been forced to file Access to Information requests, which has overwhelmed the system. Canadian Journalists for Free Expression reports that it takes longer than ever to access information and the information released is less complete. Similarly, in January 2011 the international journal Government Information Quarterly ranked Canada lowest in a study of freedom-of-information laws in Australia, Ireland, New Zealand and the United Kingdom.

At times, the Conservatives' secrecy has been extreme. After the second highest ranked Canadian diplomat in Afghanistan from 2006 to 2007, Richard Colvin, told a parliamentary committee that individuals Canadian troops handed over to Afghan security forces were regularly tortured, the opposition parties, which were then in the majority, passed a motion requiring the government to release all un-redacted documents concerning Afghan detainees to the committee hearing the issue. The Conservative minority government refused, which may have violated the Constitution and put it in contempt of Parliament.

In 2012, Parliamentary Budget Officer Kevin Page asked 82 federal departments and agencies to explain how they planned to achieve \$5.2 billion in cost savings as part of the 2012 budget. He sent a letter asking the various departments how services and federal employment would be affected by the budget reductions. Just eight departments replied. The PBO tried again a month later and a handful more came forward. Still, 64 departments refused and Privy Council Clerk Wayne Wouters, who heads the prime minister's department,

wrote to say that government departments should not comply with the Page's request. In response, Page published a legal opinion stating the Harper government broke its own law by withholding these budget details.

If the Conservatives want to improve transparency they should begin by following the established rules. But C-377 has little to do with transparency as most provincial labour codes already require unions to provide standard financial reporting to their members. Rather the bill is designed to divert union resources to make work, give anti-union employers further leverage over workers' organizations and weaken a political opponent.

Now if the Conservatives were only open about C-377's real intent.

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