



CAW economist decries Harper's 'dog whistle' attack on unions

Jane Taber - Globe and Mail Update

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Unimpressed with a Tory private member's bill demanding unions publicly disclose their financial statements, Jim Stanford is accusing Stephen Harper's government of "dog whistle" politics.

"Blowing a whistle that only the dogs can hear (i.e. the Conservatives' red-meat base) while allowing the leadership to stand back and look statesmanlike," the Canadian Autoworkers Union told The Globe in an email, explaining what he thinks is really behind the bill.

The Canadian Taxpayers Federation, meanwhile, calls the bill "long overdue."

The debate centres on proposed legislation tabled by British Columbia MP Russ Hiebert this week. The bill asks for a change in the Income Tax Act that would [require unions to be transparent](#) with their finances by publicly filing annual revenues, expenses and salaries – much like charities are now required to do.

But Mr. Stanford argues the bill isn't about transparency. Rather, it's simply a vehicle for Mr. Harper to appease his base by taking aim at unions. (Recall, for example, the attack launched on Brian Topp the day he declared his candidacy for the NDP leadership. Harper strategists immediately painted him as a [power-hungry union stooge](#).)

"It's inconceivable that this bill does not reflect a decision by the PMO to [elevate the attack on unions](#) that is already a defining feature of this government," Mr. Stanford says in a blog post this week. "Same is true for the other hot-button issues also being pursued via Conservative private members' bills, including genuinely dangerous ideas like eliminating the laws against hate speech or dismantling the gun registry."

He suggests Mr. Hiebert is a PMO puppet. He even Googled the MP's name and the word "union finances" to unscientifically gauge his interest in the subject. "You get precisely zero hits that predate this week ... suggesting that this is truly a topic that has only recently caught his personal interest."

He says disclosure is already made to elected boards of union directors, locals and to convention delegates. "Annual audited statements must be filed with government labour boards, both provincially and federally," he adds.

Even scarier, Mr. Stanford argues, is what he sees in his crystal ball – an attack on the right to collective bargaining and financial security through an assault on so-called "forced" collection of union dues.

"I suspect that a frontal attack on the right to unionize, period, is their ultimate goal and that the theatrics around this bill are just the opening preview," he writes.

Theatrics? Hardly, the Canadian Taxpayers Federation says. Federal director Gregory Thomas says the bill is a "no-brainer," arguing labour unions do receive taxpayer-funded advantages yet are not subject to public financial disclosures as charities are.

Mr. Thomas notes there has been concern about lack of disclosure. In a statement, released Wednesday morning, he says "some unionized workers have spent thousands of dollars and big chunks of their lives,

battling to get a look at their union books.” It cited a case in B.C. involving the United Food and Commercial Workers Union.

In addition, Mr. Thomas argues the public has a right to know how unions are involved politically. For example, how much money was spent by unions in the Ontario election campaign, “as opposed to representing workers in disputes and bargaining for the next contract.”

“That’s valuable information for the people paying the dues,” he says.



A walk with Sir John A.

Jim Flaherty has sold out.

Not to big corporations through his promised corporate tax cuts, as the NDP alleges. Rather, the Finance Minister recently led a sold-out tour – 50 participants – on a [historic walk](#) of Sir John A. Macdonald’s former haunts in Kingston, Ont.

Like many in his cabinet and government, the minister is a Canadian history buff. In fact, he’s a self-confessed Macdonald-phile. Mr. Flaherty often quotes the country’s first prime minister – whose former Ottawa home was [damaged by fire](#) Tuesday night – in speeches.

And it shows just how much of a Macdonald fan he really is, given that he was able to conduct this tour while trying to save Canada from a recession. (In the last couple of weeks he’s been meeting with Bank of Canada Governor Mark Carney, the Prime Minister, economists and his advisory group of businessmen.)

His walking tour raised almost \$2,000 for the Macdonald Bicentennial Commission. Conservative Senator Hugh Segal, a Kingstonian, couldn’t make it sent along this message to the Finance Minister:

“No one is more suited to lead a Sir John A walk. A people’s treasurer, a finance minister for Main Street and not just Bay Street – Jim reflects the down-home decency and fairness that Sir John A. symbolized. And thank goodness in these challenging times he has a robust sense of humour and is not in any way a teetotaler.”

The group retired to a pub after the tour.