

## Never mind unions -- let's cast a little light on the darkest corporate corners!

By [David J. Climenhaga](#) - October 18, 2011

All the usual suspects clamouring for unions to be required by law to publicly reveal their financial accounts ought to be careful what they wish for. They may someday get their wish!

After all, the same logic being applied to unions by this alliance of far-right "think tanks," online and journalistic bloviators, neo-Con Members of Parliament, anti-union private corporations and business combines, and AstroTurf "taxpayer" and "small business" federations applies to most of *their* activities as well.

So maybe the bright light of a freshly charged forensic accountant's flashlight would be just the thing to shine on the books of private corporations who benefit from tax breaks and subsidies. This goes double for "think tanks" like the Fraser Institute and the Frontier Centre (neither of which are anything more than market-fundamentalist PR agencies) and AstroTurf groups like the Canadian Taxpayers Federation (which does not represent the interests of taxpayers) and the Canadian Federation of Independent Business (which does not represent the interests of independent businesses).

The largely false claim unions gain benefits from taxes is the basis, after all, that drives the arguments of the anti-union coalition cooked up in the Prime Minister's Office to push B.C. Conservative MP [Russ Hiebert](#)'s private member's bill. The bill's principal aim is to require unions to publicly disclose their financial statements in expensive and intrusive detail far beyond the requirements faced by public corporations.

But what is *not* true of unions, most certainly *is* true of most of the usual suspects noted above.

It goes without saying that this bill and the campaign to treat it as if it were government legislation while allowing our sneaky prime minister to keep his distance is a small piece of a much broader campaign to weaken the trade union movement. The ultimate target, of course, is the ability of unions to promote such values as fairness in the workplace and society, working people's rights and the levelling of Canada's grossly tilted economic playing field.

Here in Alberta the campaign is being pursued as vigorously by [a coalition](#) of anti-union construction companies, as well as corporations that work with the so-called [Christian Labour Association of Canada](#), regarded [in labour circles](#) as a "company union" prepared to sign weak contracts to get voluntary recognitions from corporations that would rather not deal with the nuisance of a traditional union.

This group recently demanded, and got from former employment minister Thomas Lukaszuk, a review of the provincial Labour Code that will consider proposals that would make it illegal for a union to hold a Labour Day picnic, let alone lobby the government in its members' interests.

Set up during the Alberta Conservative leadership campaign, this one-sided "review" appears to be continuing with the supposedly progressive Premier Alison Redford at the tiller and the minister who launched it reassigned to another portfolio.

Meanwhile, however, the people behind the Alberta portion of the effort to unconstitutionally emasculate unions are leaving nothing to chance, even including the opposition in their sweep. Just yesterday morning, for example, CLAC President [Dick Heinen](#) met with Alberta Liberal Leader Raj Sherman and his caucus.

More meetings between the Alberta Liberals and members of this coalition are said to be in the offing -- something for genuinely progressive voters to think about when they ponder where the Raj Sherman party really sits in the Alberta political spectrum.

Getting back to Hiebert's bill, Canadian Auto Workers economist [Jim Stanford](#) has written [as good an explanation](#) as you will find on the faults with this particular legislation and the PMO's use of "dog-whistle politics" to advance the anti-union agenda.

But while the details of Hiebert's bill are clearly intrusive and designed to harass, unions have little to fear from more modest reporting requirements similar to those faced by public companies. After all, as Stanford correctly points out, most unions disclose their audited financial statements to an elected board of directors anyway, whence they are distributed to local executives, and upon request to members.

Of course, not all unions do things that way. Many publish their complete audited financial results, in spite of the fact this is not required by law, and distribute them to 100 per cent of their membership. Any member of the public, of course, may access that information. Such [complete openness](#) seems to do them no harm.

On the other hand, right-wing think tankers, secretive AstroTurf "federations" and companies that hide behind the fact their shares are not traded publicly have plenty to fear, especially from the extreme level of reporting that would be required by the union-hating plotters in the PMO.

Well, maybe it's time that they be required to behave in an open fashion too? If so, Hiebert's rules would be an excellent place to start.

Indeed, wide open corporate and propaganda institute reporting would be a worthwhile demand for the young people who are this week protesting against the depredations of the 1 per cent who own and manipulate everything around the world.

Requiring these groups and corporations -- all of whom in the words of Hiebert received "hundreds of millions of dollars of benefits" from the Canadian government and the provinces -- to publicly report their financial results, including assets and the sources of their revenue, would be a worthwhile act of good faith by those parties in our society who are constantly haranguing us about the profound beauty of our Canadian democracy.

Got retirement funds invested? Need to buy essential services from corporate monopolies? Don't you deserve to know which right-wing causes and parties they're contributing to with your money? Talk about forced contributions!

Of course, our Conservative federal government's commitment to democracy will come to a screeching halt when the secrecy of its supporters and contributors is threatened.

In this regard, Conservative Party principles are much like their enthusiasm for the rights of union members -- they don't extend to rank-and-file members actually voting on tentative agreements if they're not prepared to vote the way Harper wants them to.

Surely it's time to start talking about shining a little light into these dark corners of the corporate world.

*This post also appears on David CLimenhaga's blog, [Alberta Diary](#).*