

## **Groups avoid public forum for fear of losing scarce government funding**

Stephanie Levitz, The Canadian Press

OTTAWA - Some community groups are so fearful of losing scarce government money that they decided to avoid a public forum on the issue on Parliament Hill.

Several high-profile aid agencies have faced funding cuts in recent months and say they are being punished for speaking out against government policies.

But what's also happening, advocates say, is that those who still get money fear to speak in support of those who have been cut off.

It's dividing a community that's prided itself on solidarity for decades.

"I tend to be an outspoken public speaker and would never have imagined a time in Canada where I would be reluctant to speak publicly," said one anonymous caller to the Monday forum, organized by Liberal MPs Ken Dryden and Anita Neville.

"The chill is real and this is a new and sad development in Canadian policy."

Dryden said he knew of at least one other group which flat-out refused to be involved with the forum, because it has a funding application before the government.

Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff compared the situation to that of Cuba or Bulgaria.

"We're faced with government that has politicized the very process of free discussion in the country between independent NGOs and the government," he said.

"This is wrong and this has to stop."

While fingers were pointed mostly at the Harper government, groups said there has been a steady erosion of government support for the not-for-profit sector over the last few decades.

One speaker also said aid agencies need to be careful about claiming political punishment, because cuts may just be cuts.

"It seems to me there are two ways to respond to the issue \_ the government is not spending money and they are spending it the wrong way, on fake lakes and all kinds of other things we might not

appreciate," said Joe Gunn, director of Citizens for Public Justice, which receives no government support.

"Or, there may be another agenda; maybe the money is going to other groups in your sector and maybe the money is dividing some of us."

Among those at the forum was Canadian Council for International Co-operation, which is at risk of losing as much as \$1.7 million of its \$2.4 million annual budget.

CCIC is an umbrella group representing 90 other agencies, and among other things, has been critical of the government for not following its own legislation on aid accountability.

It has also spoken out against cuts to Christian aid group KAIROS.

"The council says things that the NGO community wants to have said and now we are seeing a billboard-style message being sent back to the whole sector," said Gerry Barr, president of the CCIC.

"The message is: Be careful what you say, the price you pay will be high."

Everything from a project to help 600 families in Ghana to programs for residential school survivors have come under the axe, as have research projects that often provide the statistical basis for decisions on health and social policy, advocates said.

"There's a danger about knowing less about our social condition in this country than we know about pop culture," said Peggy Taillon, president of the Canadian Council on Social Development, which lost all of its government funding in 2008.

"Lady Gaga may be interesting but people know more and talk more about those issues than they do about poverty in this country."