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*Sunday August 3, 2014*

## **The writing on the wall for charities**

By Jim Taylor

In retrospect, the writing appeared on the wall November 9, 2009. On that day, Bev Oda, then Canada's Minister for International Cooperation, signed an order rejecting government funding for the ecumenical justice organization Kairos.

CIDA, the Canadian International Development Agency, had in fact recommended the exact opposite -- that Kairos receive increased funding. CIDA had worked with Kairos for 35 years. Almost 40 per cent of Kairos' operating funds came from CIDA.

One would think that such a long-term relationship meant that Kairos was operating within CIDA's goals, wouldn't one?

Apparently not. Because someone inserted a handwritten "not" into the official recommendation: "That you...approve a contribution of \$7,098,768 over four years for the above programs."

The infamous "not" was not there when two senior departmental officials signed their approval on September 25. If it was there when Oda signed on November 9, then she overruled her own senior staff. If it wasn't there when Oda signed, then some anonymous person took the liberty of deliberately reversing a departmental decision.

Regardless, the "not" stood. Oda did not restore funding. Jason Kenney, at the time minister for immigration, backed up his cabinet colleague by asserting that Kairos lost its funding because the government was dismantling its relationships with organizations that support banned terrorist organizations like Hamas and Hezbollah and "deny the Jewish people's right to a homeland."

### **"Politically active" charities targetted**

Unfortunately, we couldn't read the writing on the wall.

That term comes from the biblical book of Daniel, in which Babylonian king Belshazzar throws a drunken revel for a thousand nobles. At the height of the festivities, a disembodied hand writes on a wall: "*Mene, mene, tekel, upharsin*". None of the king's courtiers could decrypt the meaning. But the Hebrew slave Daniel, summoned to the king's presence, declared that the four words meant, "God has numbered the days of your rule; You have been weighed on the scales and you don't weigh much; Even now, your empire is being divided up and handed over to the Medes and Persians."

If Daniel's handwritten message was a warning to the king, Oda's was a message from the king, directed at dissenters.

As we're realizing now, it was not just about Kairos. For two years now, the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) has been systematically auditing charitable organizations that dare criticize the king. Sorry -- the prime minister.

Canadian Press revealed that 52 such organizations are being audited. They include Amnesty International, Oxfam, the David Suzuki Foundation, and the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

Also the United Church of Canada, which administers funding for Kairos on behalf of a coalition of 11 Catholic and Protestant faith groups -- the Anglican, Evangelical Lutheran, and Presbyterian Churches, the United

Church itself, the Quakers, the Mennonite Central Committee, and several Roman Catholic bodies including the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops.

## **Alleviate, but don't prevent**

The CRA doesn't release its reasons for conducting an audit. But Erik Mathiesen, the United Church's chief financial officer, noted that virtually all of the auditors' questions related to political activity, focused on Kairos.

The larger meaning of "not" now seems clear: Don't rock the ruler's boat!

Charities now must declare whether they participated in political activities such as petitions, boycotts, or letter-writing campaigns.

Canada Revenue Agency did offer an explanation for one of its audits.

Oxfam's routine application for non-profit status included this purpose: "To prevent and relieve poverty, vulnerability, and suffering by improving the conditions of individuals whose lives, livelihood, security or well-being are at risk."

According to Canadian Press, CRA officials informed Oxfam that "preventing poverty" was not an acceptable goal. "Relieving poverty is charitable, but preventing it is not."

The CRA's Philippe Brideau e-mailed, "Purposes that relieve poverty are charitable because they provide relief only to eligible beneficiaries, those in need. However, the courts have not found the risk of poverty as being equivalent to actually being in need. Therefore...an organization cannot be registered with the explicit purpose of preventing poverty."

I'm sure it's only coincidence that Oxfam signed a joint letter to Prime Minister Stephen Harper, last year. And that Jason Kenney criticized Oxfam this year by for opposing Israeli settlements in the West Bank.

## **Advocacy chill**

PEN Canada, a small charity that advocates freedom of speech, joined the ranks of the audited last week. In the past, PEN has objected to the government's muzzling of scientists on the public payroll.

PEN's total annual budget is less than \$250,000. The CRA has budgeted \$13 million to crack down on charities who cross an invisible line.

Charities have said the CRA campaign drains their cash and resources, creating a so-called "advocacy chill" as they self-censor to avoid aggravating auditors or attracting fresh audits.

Ottawa blogger James Russell commented wryly, "Charities are limited by law in what they can spend on overtly political activity. I am not aware of any limits on the CRA."

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## **YOUR TURN**

Several of you wrote to ask if something had gone wrong with the computer mailing program, because you didn't get a column last Sunday. No, the program is (I think) still working fine. But last week, I was off on my annual hiking trip into the back country of Banff National Park, totally disconnected from electronic transmissions of any kind. So I couldn't write, or send, a column.

That also means that today's mail responses go back to the previous week's column, about humans as an invasive species.

James West agreed with the column, but added, "My only lament is that had the article been published last week or earlier it would have gotten worked into several sermons, since for many the gospel reading was on the wheat and the weeds."

Fran Ota had her own recollections of dealing with invasive species: "Years ago, I spent several days on Ward Island here in Toronto, digging purple loosestrife -- as it threatened the tiny native orchids and other rare plants which grew in wetland areas. Just about the only way to control it was to dig it out. Ontario has several species of orchids, both native and non-native. I have non-native helleborine growing in my back yard, non-invasive.

"I wish we could say the same about human beings, sometimes. There is a part of me which feels like we need to dig out the tares to save the wheat. Today's Gospel reading addresses that. In fact, Jesus used this analogy on purpose, as he so often did. The tares look almost identical to the wheat and manage to bind the roots so that removing one brings the other with it, destroying the crop as well.

"In human terms, the continued conflict between Israel and Gaza -- related peoples, genetically and linguistically -- comes to mind."

Josef Obermeyer wrote, "Never have truer words have been written. Too bad nobody cares until it is too late."

Gill Jackson from New Zealand shared Josef's opinion: "Absolutely brilliant piece of writing -- thank you! You sum up my thoughts/feelings beautifully.

"This is a subject very dear to my heart as I do bird rescue for our area and I get so fed up with people judging whether a bird should be saved if it is not 'endemic'. To my mind, a bird is a bird is a bird..... and if it needs help and care, I don't give a darn where that bird comes from."

Cliff Boldt picked up on the idea that an invasive species will never think of itself as invasive: "Constant denial -- that could be the motto of British Columbians from the lowliest voter to the premier. It's always them, never me or us."

Isabel Gibson wondered if I had given too much credit to non-invasive species: "Other species don't recognize limits to their territory so much as they live with them, having not much option. Most plants and animals adapted to one environment are unable to compete effectively with species adapted to a different environment. As a result, they spread -- if spread they do -- only slowly. Some species, however, are superb generalists, flowing seemingly effortlessly into almost every ecological niche. Rats, cockroaches, and coyotes come to mind. Humans are, indeed, in a class by ourselves, not so much adapting to the environment as shaping it to suit ourselves, at least in the short term.

"You call for humility. I'm for that. Maybe we could trade it for the self-revulsion that permeates some commentary. Growth is a natural impulse of the drive to survive. The skunks in the copse beside my completely urban home know nothing of family planning and sustainable living, happily producing litters every spring that greatly exceed the carrying capacity of the wee stand of trees in which they live, without regard for the predators they're subject to (or not subject to) in that place.

"Can we do better than skunks? I think so. It will be easier if we can act out of self-awareness and self-acceptance (and the humility those almost necessarily engender), not self-revulsion."

Lloyd Lovatt thoughtfully connected us to the biblical plagues: "Have you heard the suggestion that a present phase of the human might similar to the locust and the grasshopper? Locusts and grasshoppers are the same species, evidently. It just has something to do with stress, legs rubbing together, over-reproduction, and stressed-out swarms landing somewhere and consuming everything in sight, leading, therefore, to starvation. Perhaps the corporation is the human community in the locust phase? Perhaps the dominant economy is a swarm of locust-humans?"

"It's interesting that the grasshopper is edible, though, because of some toxin produced in the transformation, the locust is not.

"Do you think it is the number of human beings, alone? Or is it the connected behaviour of significant numbers of them?

"There's a song by Eliza Gilkyson called '2153.' You can YouTube it: 'By 2153 they disappeared; Oh, they waited for their god in vain, Yeah they waited for their god in vain....' Makes you wonder whether swarming locusts say, 'Save us!' ('Hosanna!') while they chomp everything in sight to pieces, and wait for their locust god to save them. Maybe their god is incarnated as a grasshopper, but they re-write their mythology to make their god into a locust. Prosperity gospel, I guess."

John Shaffer had some similar thoughts related to the forest fires ravaging his Washington State: "We insist in planting trees or leaving trees right next to human construction, usually of wood, and then wonder why homes burn. I have a beautiful Sequoia right next to my home. Fortunately, we are not surrounded by forest, so our risk is minimal.

"People flood out regularly along the Mississippi and they go right back and rebuild because they love it there. We are burning less coal in the United States, but what do we do? We ship it to China. Coal trains pass my house daily enroute to Vancouver BC and any criticism is ignored by those who scream 'JOBS JOBS JOBS! End of discussion. Not really.'"

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#### TECHNICAL STUFF

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to [softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca](mailto:softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca)

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#### PROMOTION STUFF...

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Other sources worth pursuing:

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslieGod" page, [www.seemsliegod.org](http://www.seemsliegod.org);
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- [reynoldsrap@shaw.ca](mailto:reynoldsrap@shaw.ca)
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, [www.traditionaliconoclast.com](http://www.traditionaliconoclast.com)
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write [alvawood@gmail.com](mailto:alvawood@gmail.com) to get onto her mailing list.

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