

Lone Liberal votes against jobs attestation

Liberal MP Scott Simms defied his party's whip and voted March 19 for the Conservative motion to drop the Canada Summer Jobs attestation requirement for non-advocacy work.

"I thought the attestation was an insensitive measure to those who felt strongly about this, whether they were prolife or prochoice," Simms told CCN after the vote. "I thought it could have been handled better."

The motion put forward by Conservative MP Karen Vecchio failed by a 93 to 207 vote in a packed House of Commons. The vote took place as news reports based on figures from Employment Minister Patty Hadju's department suggesting more than 1400 applications had been rejected by the government for not signing the attestation, compared with only 126 last year.

Simms said "it remains to be seen" if he will face any consequences for his vote.

Though he had received some feedback from his Coast of Bays–Central–Notre Dame riding in Newfoundland, Simms said he made the stand on principle. Describing himself believing in "reproductive rights," Simms said he represented people, both prolife and prochoice, who were "very uncomfortable with this attestation."

Barry Bussey, director of legal affairs for the Canadian Council of Christian Charities watched the vote from the gallery of the House of Commons.

"I couldn't help but be disappointed," Bussey said.

He described the vote as surprisingly "nonchalant."

"Don't they really see the seriousness of this issue?" he asked.



Sherwood Park-Fort Saskatchewan MP Garnett Genuis

Conservative MP Garnett Genuis noted at least one MP from every party voted for the motion: one NDP member, two Bloc Quebecois and the Green Party leader.

“Don’t let anybody tell you they didn’t have a choice,” said Genuis. “They had a choice. Every member of parliament always has a choice, and they chose to vote in favor of the values test, against this motion.”

Genuis, a Catholic, said the vote “shows how far the Liberal Party has gone from its roots” that were anchored in historical support “especially from the Catholic community.” “The Liberal path has made a pretty clear break from that,” he said. “Maybe that has positive political implications for the Conservatives, but it’s still pretty sad to see, but hopefully we’ll be able to set things right after the next election.

In an interview before the vote, Conservative Leader Andrew Scheer said the Liberal government must be stopped from violating the charter in the Canada Summer Jobs attestation or charitable status could be next.

“If Justin Trudeau and the Liberal Party get away with this type of expansion of government – if they get re-elected – who knows where they’ll go,” Scheer said. “We need to send a message now that Canadians will not put up with this kind of attack on our Charter rights.”

“I am very concerned this could be taking us down a very dark path of violating peoples’ rights to hold different views or different beliefs,” he said. “It’s a logical concern to think charitable status in general may be next.”

The Leader of the Official Opposition warned new hires for the public service could also have to “sign an attestation they have the same beliefs as the Liberal Party, eliminating anyone who holds different views from working in the public service.”

“It’s the fundamental principle the state has no place in the conscience of the nation,” he said.

It’s the principle the state has no right “to peer into your mind and make you believe what they believe or force you to violate your conscience.”

“I think anyone that believes in the proper limits of government should be alarmed by this,” he said.

Scheer said the motion was the result of a widespread consultation with the charitable sector, NGOs, and volunteers.

“Now we’re hearing those groups are being either rejected or told their application’s incomplete, that they must stick the box, sign it and send it back.”

While the government could have come up with a policy to not fund political activism, what’s “egregious” about the attestation is it’s being “applied across the board” to First Nations communities wanting to hire a summer student for the band office, for charities welcoming refugees, for rural municipalities that want to hire students to do landscaping work, he said.

“They’re not involved in advocacy of any kind on social issues and yet the government is going to peer into their conscience and say you must align yourself with the views of Justin Trudeau.”

One charity that could not check the box and is waiting for its final reply from the government is Waupoos Farm that offers low income families in the Ottawa area an inexpensive vacation.

Waupoos board treasurer Patrick Brown said they sent a two-page explanation to Service Canada why they could not sign the attestation.

“Chief among these was our inability to attest to a statement that violates our moral and religious beliefs and identity,” said Brown in an email.

“This document also respectfully requested accommodation of Waupoos’ rights under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Canadian Human Rights Act.”

Since 2010, Waupoos Farm has received funding for four summer students, making up 10 to 20 per cent of its budget.

“As a charitable organization that provides vacations to low-income families, summer is our peak season of the year,” Brown said. “Our students play an

indispensable role in taking care of essential programming and logistical needs.”

“If Waupoos’ application for 2018 CSJ funding is denied, our ability to operate and fulfill our mission during this summer will be severely hindered,” he said, noting the board is looking at contingency plans.

The Canada Summer Jobs program provides \$223 million in grants to help pay students for jobs at charities, non-profits and small businesses.

Though applications are up to 42,647 this year from 41,961 in 2017, last year the government rejected only 126 files while 199 were later withdrawn by the employer.

This year, the government rejected 1,561 applications while 55 were withdrawn, leading to the estimate more than 1400 were rejected for failing to tick the attestation box.

These figures do not take into account charities and parishes such as those in the Vancouver and London, Ont. dioceses that did not bother to apply this year because of the attestation.