

Summer jobs attestation faces growing opposition as Parliament resumes

The controversial Canada Summer Jobs (CSJ) attestation remains a hot political issue as the House of Commons resumed sitting Jan. 29 after a winter break.

In Question Period Jan. 29 Employment Minister Patty Hajdu refused to change the pro-abortion attestation or extend the Feb. 2 deadline in response to a question from Conservative MP Karen Vecchio who asked if the Minister would remove the “values test” from the application.



Employment Minister Patty Hajdu

Vecchio, who describes herself as pro-choice, asked if the Minister would remove the “values test” from the application, and told the House she herself would not check off the values test.

“Mr. Speaker, the member opposite has stated that she would not tick the box to attest to the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and a woman’s right to reproductive rights; however, we know that government funding should never go to actively undermine Canadians’ rights,” Hajdu told the House.

Though the Minister clarified the meanings of words in the attestation, such as core mandate, any group that ticks off the box is affirming a so-called “right” to abortion.

In an interview Vecchio said she believed the government had overreached in creating the attestation’s value’s test, but instead of backing down, they are

attacking opponents.

“We’re still receiving calls and emails daily on this topic,” Vecchio said. In her Elgin-Middlesex-London, Ont. riding she has heard from 40 organizations that cannot sign the attestation.

“The government is overstepping,” she said.

Vecchio said the government made a “sweeping change” in the Canada Summer Jobs policy by creating the attestation, and are now “telling 40 per cent of the Canadian population that they’re wrong.”

“Everyone has a right to their beliefs,” Vecchio said, noting she is a member of the United Church.

“I hope we continue to push on this, because the Canada Summer Jobs program is a great program that impacts our youth,” she said, noting the impact of the attestation on children who won’t get summer camps, and soup kitchens that won’t have people to serve meals remains to be seen.



Conservative MP Karen Vecchio

“The Canada Summer Jobs program should not be partisan,” she said. She described the attestation as “discriminating against some of our traditional organizations.”

Despite an attempt by Minister Hajdu Jan. 23 to clarify the meaning of the attestation—defining core mandate as the activities of the organization and job not its core beliefs, Canada’s Catholic bishops and an array of faith leaders, including Jewish and Muslim, remain opposed.

On Jan. 26, Cardinal Thomas Collins, representing the Canadian Conference of

Catholic Bishops (CCCB), joined Bruce Clemenger, the president of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, Imam Refaat Mohamed of the Canadian Council of Imams, and Rabbi Chaim Strauchler, in releasing a statement signed by more than 80 faith leaders.

"The promise of a free and democratic society is that there be no religious or ideological tests or conditions to receiving government benefits or protection," the interfaith statement said. "The changes to the Canada Summer Jobs guidelines and application not only violate the fundamental freedoms of faith-based organizations, they also significantly impact the broader communities served by their programs, often the most vulnerable in Canadian society."

In addition to the interfaith statement, the CCCB's Jan. 11 statement describing the attestation as an "obvious and regrettable infringement of freedom of conscience and religion," individual bishops across Canada are speaking out.

"It's a point of principle and we will not sign the attestation," said Ottawa Archbishop Terrence Prendergast in an interview. "We can't pinch just a little bit of incense to emperor; you're either bowing before him or not."

"What they're asking us to do is lie, 'just check the box, we know you don't really mean it,'" the archbishop said. "We would like reassurances they're giving us spelled out by changing the attestation."

"As Archbishop of Halifax-Yarmouth, I want to express to our Catholic faithful, my view that the Government's policy on this matter is contrary to our rights as equal citizens of this country and no political party can impose its ideology on any one of us," Archbishop Anthony Mancini told his faithful.

This attestation is unacceptable," wrote Edmonton Archbishop Richard Smith in a Jan. 23 letter to members of his diocese. "In effect, it simply excludes any Catholic parish, organization or charity from funding for hiring a summer student."

"Of course, we do support the rights enshrined in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms," he stressed. "These include the right to life, the right to freedom of conscience and religion, and the right to freedom of expression. Clearly, the government is infringing these same rights by imposing and insisting upon the new requirement."

"We are called to uphold the dignity and the life of each human person, made in the image and likeness of God, including the lives of unborn children," said Saskatoon Bishop Mark Hagemoen in a letter to Catholics in his diocese. "We disagree with the government's interpretation of the Charter and the coercion

it is using on those applying for funding.”

The Canadian Council of Christian Charities, one of the signatories of the interfaith letter, also opposes the attestation despite the government attempts to clarify its meaning. “The effect of the required attestation is that not all minority associations will be treated alike,” said CCCC legal counsel Barry Bussey. “Those that hold and maintain lawful beliefs and practices which this government finds offensive may be denied eligibility for CSJ funding. This is not acceptable.”

The Salvation Army, however, has told its units the new requirements “do not pose a barrier,” to applying, said the Salvation Army’s national communications director John McAlister in an email.

“We are interpreting the attestation to say that we respect individual human rights and the values underlying the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms,” McAlister said. “We are not changing our core values and beliefs and we have no intention of doing so.”

McAlister said, however, the Salvation Army remains “deeply concerned” about the attestation’s wording and that it would not be used to exclude religious organizations.

“It is unfortunate that the government has focused on targeting people’s beliefs and values in this attestation statement rather than outlining the type of activities it would deem eligible for funding,” he said.