

Summer jobs policy strikes at religious freedom, bishops say

Canada's Catholic bishops say the government's new Canada Summer Jobs policy infringes on freedom of religion and freedom of conscience.

On Jan. 11, Bishop Lionel Gendron, president of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCCB), published a statement decrying the new policy that requires applicants to attest both the job and the organization's "core mandate" support the "right to access to safe and legal abortions," and the governments interpretation of rights pertaining to sexual orientation and gender identity.



Bishop Lionel Gendron

The CCCB said the policy represents an attempt to restrict the voices of faith communities in Canadian democracy and limit their participation in the public square:

"Faith communities consider abortion, sexual orientation, and gender identity or expression as major questions with ethical, moral, social and personal bearing which determine our understanding of human dignity and thus appreciation for the meaning and significance of each and every human life," the CCCB said.

"This new policy conflicts directly with the right to freedom of religion and conscience which too are enshrined in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms as well as in associated case law."

"It seriously undermines the right to religious freedom since the Government of Canada is directly limiting the right of religious traditions to hold, teach and practise their principles and values in public," it said.

"In addition to the obvious and regrettable infringement of freedom of conscience and religion in such matters as are raised by the new policy, there will be unfortunate consequences on the ground: summer camps will be forced to

close; the services of numerous non-profit organizations will be reduced; valuable opportunities for apprenticeship will be lost. These effects, to name but a few, will be felt in Catholic dioceses and organizations as well as in many other faith communities across Canada.”

The CCCB also pointed out how the new policy “runs counter” to recommendations made last March by the Consultation Panel on the Political Activities of Charities.

“These recommendations include that charities be allowed to provide information for the purpose of informing and swaying public opinion, and to advocate to keep or change law or policy, either in Canada (any level of government) or outside of Canada,” the bishops said.

The CCCB has joined the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (EFC), the Canadian Council of Christian Charities (CCCC) and others raising concerns about the policy.

The EFC has issued a call to action to its members, both individuals, churches and institutions to get in touch with their Member of Parliament, either in person or in writing as soon as possible.

“These changes in eligibility could impact a wide range of Christian ministries, organizations and programs,” the EFC says on its website.

“But even more seriously, we believe it is a violation of the guaranteed freedoms of religion, thought, belief, opinion and association offered by Canada’s Charter of Rights and Freedoms, especially the provisions under Section 2.”



Barry Bussey

“Government is required, at law, to be neutral in matters of conscience,” Barry Bussey, director of legal affairs for the CCCC, wrote on the organization’s website: <http://www.cccc.org> .

“However it now appears the government wants to direct our consciences against our will. This is simply wrong.”

“It is unlikely that the Canada Summer Jobs program will be the end of this mindset,” he warned. “The quid pro quo is if you want government ‘benefits’ or ‘licensing’ then you must agree with the government’s ideology.”

The Canada Summer Jobs program gives wage subsidies so employers can create quality summer jobs for students aged 15 to 30 to give them work experience. On the Canada Summer Jobs website, it says faith-based groups, non-profits and small business are welcome to apply for funding.

“The employer attestation for CSJ 2018 is consistent with individual human rights in Canada, Charter rights and case law, and the Government of Canada’s commitment to human rights, which include women’s rights and women’s reproductive rights, and the rights of gender-diverse and transgender Canadians,” the website says.