

Trudeau: Religious groups must be free to 'shape the world around them'

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau signalled his support for faith groups in Canada, even though many are locked in a battle with his government over its controversial new Canada Summer Jobs attestation.

"We need to make sure that, whether it's religious organizations or charitable organizations, that they are free to impact and shape the world around them as so many have done," Trudeau told a packed forum Feb. 1 at MacEwan University in Edmonton.

"If someone is an anti-poverty activist or a charity, they shouldn't be accused of doing politics simply just because they're saying there should be less poor kids in our schools showing up without breakfast."

Faith leaders have vowed to continue fight the new requirement that they attest to government values all the way to the Supreme Court. Applicants for grants under the jobs program must attest that both the job and their organization's "core mandate" support values that include the "right to access to safe and legal abortions," as well as the Trudeau government's interpretation of sexual orientation and gender identity.



Brynna Robinson

Canada's Catholic bishops, as well as Muslim, Protestant, and Jewish leaders, say the requirement is the equivalent of an "ideology test" that infringes on religious freedom.

Employment Minister Patty Hajdu has clarified the meanings of words in the

attestation, such as “core mandate,” but any group that ticks off the box is affirming a so-called “right” to abortion. She has refused to change the attestation or extend the Feb. 2 deadline for funding.

“They (government) shouldn’t be trying to push their agenda on people,” said Brynna Robinson, a second-year communications student at MacEwan University, who identifies as Catholic.

“If you don’t believe in that, you shouldn’t have to check it off. It should be optional. That’s your religion. Especially abortion. People don’t believe in that ... they don’t believe in killing babies.”

Even those who support abortion rights are panning what they describe as government overreach.



Ralf Lemire

“Why push something like that? There are other issues. Again, you’re discriminating against a whole community that feels quite strongly about that,” said Ralf Lemire, who says he’s not even a particularly religious person. “I think it’s a mistake, but I don’t think they’re trying to pick a fight.”

Sarah Shulist supports abortion rights, but doesn’t agree that faith groups should be denied funding under the Canada Summer Jobs program because they can’t sign an attestation they don’t believe in.

“I believe government funding should be allocated with human rights in mind, and I consider abortion to a human right,” said Shulist; however “if it were a Catholic charity that is feeding the poor, and has nothing to do with abortion in the work they are doing, I do believe that requiring them to sign something that says ‘I support abortion’ is not OK.”



Debby Martin

Debby Martin, who is Catholic, said the Trudeau government is simply obeying the law, and the larger question is Canada's abortion law, which was struck down 30 years ago and never replaced.

"It doesn't have a choice. Are they saying you must support the government's view of abortion or are they saying that Canada, through the courts, has determined that abortion is legal and the government is enforcing that court ruling?" asked Martin, a member of St. Charles Parish who says she's pro-life.

"If we really want to change things, then we have to change the law."

Martin said her advice to faith groups is to let the government know that when they complete their application – including the attestation section.

"I would check off and say that 'I'm doing it under duress' beside it."



Eric Yuson

Erik Yuson, a Catholic who supports abortion rights, said he can see both sides of the Canada Summer Jobs attestation argument but he notes that controversy points to Canada's changing social fabric.

"I'd like for religious groups and organizations to remain autonomous, but at the same time in today's kind of culture, with how Canada is progressing really liberally, eventually certain groups are going to have understand that," said Yuson, a third-year social work student at MacEwan University.

“With religion, it’s always a tough question, because it’s so important to many people. It’s the backbone of their beliefs.”

The federal government’s position was bolstered by a Jan. 28 statement supporting the attestation from 80 groups such as Planned Parenthood and abortion rights groups, the Canadian Union of Public Employees, Oxfam Canada, legal rights groups, and women’s shelters.