

Whatchdog group wants audit of taxpayer-funded ads ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

An independent government watchdog group has called on Canada's auditor general to review taxpayer-funded spending on government advertising. Democracy Watch has also launched a letter-writing campaign through its website, demanding the office look at what it describes as "questionable" ad initiatives in the past.

The group's co-founder, Duff Conacher, said the federal government is spending public money on ads that mislead or advertise for initiatives that don't exist.

Government ads can be seen on TV, radio, billboards and the Internet and are paid for by taxpayers' dollars. There's currently no oversight to make sure money isn't spent on partisan ads, though in the past, citizens have complained to Advertising Standards Canada about government ads they felt were misleading.

For example, the government's current ad blitz will cost \$13.5 million for April and May, according to a Canadian Press story on Monday.

Those ads highlight measures in the federal budget, which was introduced last week, but hasn't been passed by Parliament.

"The ads are being done, the measures have not been passed, they don't exist. Therefore it's false advertising," Conacher said. "They may never be implemented if the budget bill does not pass before the fall election."

Conacher wants the auditor general to do a quick audit of the current government ad campaign, which promotes its budget plans, such as tax programs for families. Democracy Watch also wants an audit of another government ad campaign from last fall that advertised tax relief measures.

After that, he said, he's calling for a comprehensive audit of all advertising going back to 2006.

Political not informative

He said previous ads campaigns, such as one claiming the government treats military veterans well, and another that caused a scandal in 2013 advertising a training grant program that didn't exist, were political in nature. They did not help to inform Canadians about services available to them.

Democracy Watch is also calling for Prime Minister Stephen Harper to stop the ads now and for government to install a mechanism allowing the auditor general to stop future "dishonest, partisan, wasteful" ads.

"It's extremely important in terms of electoral fairness because it's only the ruling party that can use the public's tax money for advertising," he said. "So it gives them an advantage over opposition parties."

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