Liberals face backlash over policy to trace journalists' sources before publication

By MARIE WOOLF
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OTTAWA - The Liberals faced a backlash Monday over a policy the party approved at its national convention that critics said could force journalists to reveal confidential sources.

The policy calls on the government to "explore options" for forcing online information services to publish material based only on named sources. Conservative MPs said this would amount to a form of censorship, and the Canadian Civil Liberties Association warned it would chill the freedom of the press.

The policy was contained in a resolution drawn up by British Columbia Liberals and put on the convention's agenda. It was voted on by party members on Saturday, and its approval makes it Liberal Party policy. But that does not mean it is the policy of the Liberal government.

Liberal MPs sought to distance themselves from the policy on Monday, with several saying it would not become law.

"A Liberal government would never implement a policy that would limit freedom of the press or dictate how journalists would do their work," said Laura Scaffidi, a spokesperson for Heritage Minister Pablo Rodriguez.

The resolution calls on the government to hold online news and information services accountable for the truth of material published on their platforms. It requests that the government "limit publication only to material whose sources can be traced."

News organizations often source information from people whose identities are known to reporters and their editors, but who can't be named publicly. Frequently this is because the sources are not authorized to speak, or fear retaliation for doing so.

Critics said they feared government intervention could disrupt this practice.

"While combatting disinformation is a worthy public policy objective, that particular proposal makes no sense whatsoever," said Paul Deegan, president and chief executive of News Media Canada, which represents Canada's news sector.

Michael Geist, the University of Ottawa's Canada Research Chair in internet law, also criticized the resolution. "You can't celebrate World Press Freedom Day on Wednesday and then pass a resolution that undermines the freedom of the press on Saturday," he said.

"This is a very dangerous motion that would undermine freedom of the press in Canada and could lead to widespread censorship on social media."

Cara Faith Zwibel, a spokesperson for the Canadian Civil Liberties Association, said the policy, if implemented, "would represent a fundamental shift in Canadian communications."

"It would seriously chill freedom of the press in particular and expressive freedom more broadly," she said.

Conservative MP Kevin Waugh, a former journalist who sits on the Commons heritage committee, said the policy is a "slippery slope" that would threaten journalistic freedom and the ability of the press to expose wrongdoing.

Conservative heritage critic Rachael Thomas raised the new Liberal Party policy in the Commons heritage committee on Monday, calling it "a form of censorship" designed to "regulate news sources."
But Chris Bittle, parliamentary secretary to Mr. Rodriguez, noted in the committee that the motion being Liberal policy does not make it government policy.

Liberal MP Lisa Hepfner, a former journalist who sits on the committee, told The Globe and Mail that the policy would never become law. "We would never implement a policy that would limit freedom of the press or dictate how journalists do their work - and that includes the protection of anonymous sources," she said.

Ms. Thomas said in an interview that political parties "look to their policy manuals to determine a legislative direction."

"It's a first step for the government potentially drafting legislation to make this law. That's a really dangerous space to occupy."

She said journalism such as The Globe's stories about foreign interference in Canadian politics would not be possible if sources had to be revealed to the government before publication.

The Liberal policy also requests that the government provide more public funds to support advertisement-free "news and information reporting" by Canadian media "through an arm's length non-partisan mechanism".

Liberal party spokesperson Parker Lund said the resolution followed "the most open grassroots policy development process in Canadian politics, seeing more than 4,000 grassroots Liberals participate and more than 300 proposed policy resolutions being drafted."

But he said "an official Party policy does not automatically become part of the Party's next election platform." "The Liberal Party of Canada always has - and always will - stand up for freedom of the press, and always respects the independence of the media and how journalists source their information," he said.