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private member's bill

MP Peter Braid wants charitable giving tax deadline pushed back

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Kitchener-Waterloo Conservative MP Peter Braid, left, at a Waterloo seniors' residence on Friday, wants the tax deadline for charitable giving moved to the last day in February – like that for RRSP contributions. (Glenn Lowson for The Globe and Mail)

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Peter Braid wants to give RRSP season some competition.

Thanks to the yearly flood of mid-winter bank ads, most Canadians are well aware that the end of February is the tax deadline for Registered Retirement Savings Plan contributions. Mr. Braid, the Conservative MP for Kitchener-Waterloo, wants charities to get in on the action.

After running the idea by Finance Minister Jim Flaherty, Mr. Braid introduced a private member's bill this week that would move the tax deadline for charitable giving from Dec. 31 – when many Canadians are cash-strapped – to the last day in February. It would also declare the last seven days of February as National Charities Week in Canada.

Private member's bills rarely become law in Ottawa, but there's reason to keep an eye on this one. Over his two terms as a backbench MP, Mr. Braid has carved out a niche of expertise and influence on the charities file. In 2010, he moved a motion calling for the Commons finance committee to study the tax treatment of charities. A few months later, the idea became government policy and was included in Mr. Flaherty's 2011 budget. That study is now wrapping up and recommendations to the government are expected later this month.

It was during the committee's work that Mr. Braid first heard Ottawa tax lawyer Adam Aptowitz propose the simple change that has the potential to shake Canadians from their charitable giving rut. Although Canadians give more than \$10-billion a year to charity, that amount hasn't grown in recent years.

In an interview Friday, Mr. Braid expressed hope that Mr. Flaherty will once again poach one of his ideas for charity reform.

"If this becomes an element of a federal budget, I would be equally as satisfied and gratified with that outcome," he said, noting the early response from charitable groups has been "overwhelmingly positive."

A spokesperson for Mr. Flaherty declined comment on the budget, but heaped praise on Mr. Braid's work on the charities file and said the government is reviewing the idea.

Mr. Braid keeps a low profile in the House of Commons. He's not among the many Conservative MPs who use their one-minute "members' statements" before Question Period to launch partisan attacks on the NDP. Mr. Braid's last such statement was on Waterloo's Oktoberfest.

His interest in charitable work came early through his Presbyterian church, which supported his decision to take a year off of high school at age 18 to spend time in Northwestern Ontario working with aboriginal communities. Religious organizations are major beneficiaries of charitable donations, so the issue of tax credits and religion are closely linked.

But Mr. Braid, 48, is not among the social conservatives in caucus. When fellow Kitchener Conservative MP Stephen Woodworth forced a vote on an abortion-related issue that would have launched a study on the definition of a human being, Mr. Braid voted against it.

NDP MP Hoang Mai, a member of the finance committee studying the charity rules, says he has a lot of respect for Mr. Braid, even though it's too early for the NDP to say whether it will support his bill. Still, Mr. Mai said the Conservatives are sending a "mixed message" to charities by simultaneously promising help and threatening a crackdown on political activities.

"There is a kind of fear," he said. "They're less and less inclined to come out and talk against the government – even though they're allowed to – just because they feel they're going to be audited."

Michelle Gauthier, a vice-president with Imagine Canada, an umbrella organization representing Canadian charities, said she's been impressed by Mr. Braid's willingness to consult with charities on ideas.

"Mr. Braid has been and continues to be a real champion for the charitable sector," she said. "He demonstrates a sound understanding of the issues we're facing."

Imagine wants Ottawa to approve a "stretch credit" that would give Canadians a bigger tax-break reward if they give more than the year before. Ms. Gauthier said Imagine hopes the government will approve both the stretch credit and Mr. Braid's bill and would be disappointed if the government only acts on the latter.



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