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Senator defends partisan mail outs

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OTTAWA — Canada's senators have been bombarded with complaints from outraged citizens after QMI Agency reported the upper chamber is allowing partisan mailings to continue despite the House of Commons banning the multi-million-dollar practice.

David Tkachuk, chair of the committee on internal economy, budgets and administration, said he sees nothing wrong with partisan newsletters but his committee will revisit the issue later this month or next.

"My newsletters in the 90s that I used to put out were way more partisan than anything that has been out there," the Tory senator said Tuesday, after receiving more than 100 e-mails.

In his 17 years in office, Tkachuk said, he has never received complaints before about senators' mailings and believes those who are up in arms are fretting over nothing.

"I don't know what partisan means other than a disagreement with another point of view," he said.

"What colours are we going to use? The Senate colours which are red? That's the Liberal party's colours. We used our colours and we are proud of our colours," he said.

Senators agreed in December they could send partisan mailings with their own party's colours attacking other MPs or political parties, as long as they refrain from insulting other senators.

The issue exploded last fall when Conservative senators Bob Runciman and Don Plett sent newsletters to Liberal ridings attacking the party for being soft on crime.

Runciman said the Conservative party didn't force him to send mailings but suggested templates he could use for his newsletter.

Rules prevent senators from using party letterhead or party logos in their mailings as well as using them to solicit party memberships or monetary contributions.

Senators can send as many newsletters as they want, anywhere in the country, but are restricted to sending 3,000 copies at once.

Liberal Sen. Jim Munson said he believes the Senate should not be allowing parliamentarians to do something that Members of Parliament have banned.

But Tkachuk believes MPs erred in disallowed the practice of sending mailings to ridings that they don't represent.

"Many senators send nothing," he added, suggesting the practice in the Senate isn't being abused.

The Canadian Taxpayers Federation is calling on the Senate to end the partisan mailings outright.

"Tax dollars should not be used for politics. If politicians want to run TV ads and send junk mail attacking each other they should do it with their own money," the Federation said in a newsletter.

The latest available figures suggest the Senate's overall printing budget mushroomed from \$280,500 budget to \$734,183 in 2008-2009.

More recent data have not been released.

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