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Council for Canadian Unity 'not going to roll over and die'

Group's reaction to loss of funding has gone from shock to resolve to fight

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The Council for Canadian Unity says it is not ready to die despite a cut of its funding by the new Conservative government.

At a meeting of the council's board of directors Thursday, members of the council agreed to look at possible alternatives - including private fundraising - to keep the organization afloat.

"One thing that is clear, our governors and supporters across the country don't want to put the key in the door," council spokesperson Peter Cowan said in an interview last night. "They're not going to roll over and die."

Last week, Prime Minister Stephen Harper's cabinet decided unanimously to scrap funding to the Montreal-based agency, set up 42 years ago as a non-partisan organization to promote federalism through research, meetings of academics and student exchanges.

Harper's Quebec lieutenant, Lawrence Cannon, explained the surprise move was due to a change in philosophy on the national unity issue.

The closing was welcomed by Quebec's sovereignty movement because of the links between the council and Option Canada, a group set up by the council that is being investigated by Quebec's chief electoral office for alleged illegal spending in the 1995 referendum.

Taken by surprise, the council had no choice but to close up shop and that includes its research arm, the Centre for Research and Information on Canada. The council has an annual budget of \$16 million, 80 per cent of it furnished by Ottawa, the rest raised privately.

The 80 people employed full and part time across Canada - 21 in Montreal - are to be let go. Ottawa said it would gradually wind down over a year the student exchange programs, Encounters with Canada and Summer Work Student Exchange, operated by the council as well.

But Cowan said the council's attitude has gone from one of shock to resolve to fight. Some students involved in student programs this week started an on-line petition to try to drum up support.

Cowan said the council's 19-member board of directors, which met in person

and by conference call, came up with no specific ideas on how the council could continue its work.

They did, however, ask themselves, "Can we go out and get more (funding)?" Cowan said,

"I think these folks want to look at options," he said, adding they find it rough watching an organization that staged 160 events last year involving 12,400 people go under.

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