

BOB PHILLIPS AWARD FOR BEST EDITORIAL (GENERAL)

All of the submitted editorials feature a clear point and a reasonable argument. All aim to improve life in their communities. This is heartening. Too many, unfortunately, also had a predictable lead, weak word choices, run-on sentences and poor paragraphing. Some even had spelling mistakes. Writing a great editorial requires a fresh approach, inspired writing – and several drafts. Readers notice the difference.

JIM BELL Nunatsiq News

This editorial criticizes Nunavut MLAs for making self-serving changes to the territory's Integrity Act. Its tone is well chosen: it is calm yet forceful.

12 LA • MAY 24, 2013

Op-Ed

EDITORIAL

1 Cue the sleaze, please

If you're fortunate enough to win one of the 22 seats up for grabs in Nunavut's Oct. 28 territorial election, you can relax.

From now on, you won't have to worry much about that annoying little Integrity Act. On May 9, Nunavut MLAs ensured the territory's ethics law will get far less use in the future than in the past.

Their changes to the Integrity Act, contained in Bill 67, mean the people most likely to learn of MLA wrongdoing will now be forbidden to do anything about it. They rammed it through the assembly with no debate, giving it first, second and third reading in a single afternoon.

Until now, Nunavut's ethics law said "any person" may ask the Integrity Commissioner for a review of an MLA's conduct.

The new version of the law changes all that. Under it, deputy ministers, assistant deputy ministers, heads and chairs of Crown corporations, executive assistants and pretty much all legislative assembly support workers are barred from going to the integrity commissioner.

When MLAs voted for this, they ignored the advice of Norman Pickell, the current integrity commissioner.

He had this to say in his last annual report: "Sometimes the only person who knows that a member may have breached the Integrity Act is someone within a department."

He also said that if MLAs observe the Integrity Act, they have nothing to fear from senior GN officials: "As long as a member is maintaining a culture of integrity, that member does not need to worry about being scrutinized by anyone, including a government employee."

Pickell's report is dated April 18. The assembly didn't make it public until the day after they voted for Bill 67.

But never mind all that. MLAs, apparently, know more about ethics than their own ethics advisor, who's an officer of the legislative assembly.

In presenting Bill 67, Speaker Hunter Tootoo didn't even try to make a reasoned argument. He said MLAs and senior GN officials have a close working relationship. Therefore, he said, "it is appropriate that such officials not be placed in a position where they may have to submit such requests."

Why? The public doesn't care who discovers evidence of corruption. The public's chief concern is that it be brought to light and investigated.

This amendment may be "appropriate" for MLAs who fear getting caught. But neither Tootoo nor any other MLA explained why this measure is "appropriate" for the public.

Granted, Nunavut's public service, compared with most, still suffers from inexperience and other weaknesses.

But the legislative assembly suffers from even greater weaknesses, including ignorance-based helplessness and willful blindness. Unlike many MLAs, a senior public servant is more likely to recognize an ethical breach when they see one. And unlike many MLAs, senior public servants are more likely to possess the literacy skills required to write a complaint to the integrity commissioner.

Their "close working relationship" with MLAs is not a valid justification for stopping senior officials from bringing ethics complaints to the integrity commissioner. On the contrary, it's the most powerful reason why they should be allowed to do so.

On this issue of course, MLAs aren't motivated by any concern for the public interest. They're motivated by a desire to weaken the application of the Integrity Act.

Tootoo made this clear when he said in the house that Bill 67 arose out of "a number of issues" connected to Pickell's last investigation into the doings of South Baffin MLA Fred Schell.

You may recall the paranoid conspiracy theory that Schell offered this past Nov. 5, after he was found to have breached the act six different ways, including lying under oath. If you believe him, it wasn't his fault at all. It was all the fault of the premier and her shadowy cabal of scheming staff workers and senior civil servants.

But even a brief glance at the integrity commissioner's second report into Schell's conduct, or the first one, issued October 2011, shows that Schell received due process.

During those two integrity act reviews, Schell was represented by lawyers. He was given a chance to present his side of the story. When there was doubt over a specific allegation, Schell received the benefit of that doubt. Schell was treated fairly.

In spite of all that, MLAs accepted most of Schell's rubbish. At the same time, they rejected the integrity commissioner's advice.

So cue the sleaze, MLAs. Unless you're unbearably stupid or blatant, you won't get caught. You've just voted yourselves a licence to corrupt. JB

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Editorial

Real loser in Quebecor's application to CRTC is Canadian democracy

Next week, the radical right-wing news business, SunNews, is making an application to force cable networks to offer their television service on every basic cable package. Owned by Quebecor, this is the same company that still carries a "sunshine girl" photo in their newspaper, a daily act of sexualizing girls and degrading women. Their website headline March 27 read: "Do feminists hate wives?" There was no news about the Cree walkers, except an archived piece. Reading the archived headlines from the week is a good measure of the quality of reporting: it is virtually entirely stories about sexual assault, car crashes, drunkenness and violence. This, during a busy news week as the budget was tabled and the fallout from the budget providing enough national news to fill a year's worth of newspapers, television programs and online blogs.

Here is the problem with this station pretending to be a news agency: they fired some 500 reporters last year and even their "online newsgatherers". The station runs interviews with columnists in place of real news reporting and then presents it as the real deal. During Theresa Spence's hunger strike, this outfit led the smear campaign against Chief Spence alleging fraud and collusion, and went so far as to call the chief's actions a "so-called" hunger strike.

Quebecor is not hiding the economic driver behind their request to have cable include the SunNews television station in the mandatory basic package. The corporation lost over \$17 million last year with SunNews, will lose more or less the same this year, and the losses, in the millions, will continue until 2020, Quebecor says, even with the station being forced into cable packages. The company is willing to ride out the losses predicting a pay-out in the end. However, the real loser in all this isn't Quebecor: it is Canadian democracy.

While I am the first to insist that censorship is intolerable, even worse than censorship is presenting a distorted world view, imposing it in basic packages, and then setting a paid price for it.

Journalism is a very specific world. It is a factual enterprise where sources are checked and due diligence is a matter of course. SunNews dropped their membership with The Canadian Press. In all of Canada, they have two job openings right now in their newsrooms. While this outlet is publishing pages and hours of irrelevant, yet titillating copy, the real news for Canadians is left unreported. The problem is this situation becomes the new normal for readers and viewers who then fail to react or recognize important news when it is before them. This is the failure of democracy and is why Quebecor's application should be denied by the CRTC.

The CRTC is hearing the application on April 23 in Gatineau at 9 am at the Conference Centre, Phase IV at 140 Promenade du Portage.

Lily Ryan

Unreasonable accommodation

We agree on the necessity of impartial treatment by governments of all members of society, be we brown or pink, tall or short, rich or poor, male or female, believers or skeptics, tattooed or pierced, bearded or bald.

But for reasons known only to them, the leaders of the current government of Quebec are fixated on just one of these parameters, the neutrality of public servants with respect to religion. And they seem to think this neutrality will somehow be compromised by public servants wearing traditional garments in observance of their faith. They seem to believe that the absence of such garb will remove suspicion that the public servant on the other side of the counter at the vehicle licencing bureau or the SAQ or the CLSC might treat me unfairly because he or she adheres to a different set of religious beliefs than I do.

This is problematic on so many levels. By this argument, perhaps we should all be concerned about the motives of public servants who appear in any way different than we do. Why limit it to religion? Should we require old people in the public service to try to not look so darn old so the young people will feel more confident of receiving fair treatment? Can we allow public servants to wear sandals if it risks putting the work-boot crowd off? Can that guy in the pin-stripe suit really be trusted? Can we really count on each other to do our jobs properly if we don't all look exactly the same?

The answer is that of course we can. If there is ever any doubt, we have codes of conduct, professional standards and the threat of legal action to back us up and, by the way, they apply to all people regardless of what they're wearing. While it would be nice to be able to count on our governments to nurture an appreciation of the diversity

inherent in our society, they should at least not undermine it. Yet this is exactly what the PQ government seems determined to do, making its branding of this effort as being about 'values' acutely offensive.

Even more deeply disturbing is that we are having this conversation at all.

One of the greatest lessons of history must be the necessity for vigilance at the earliest indication of any tendency on the part of government to see the denial of ethnic or religious diversity as a viable option. When the powerful entertain notions of erasing the evidence of the existence of segments of the population considered as outliers to the mainstream, it's time to ring the alarm bells.

It is testimony to the health of our democracy, despite much abuse of late, that so many across Quebec and Canada have denounced the proposed religious cleansing of our provincial public service. Ironically, among them was Jacques Parizeau, the former PQ premier who several years ago correctly gave credit to so-called ethnic voters for spoiling his separatist project when they spotted its anti-diversity intentions. While saying the proposed charter of Quebec values in its current form goes too far, even for him, he is attempting to save this clumsily handled initiative from almost certain death on the political battlefield that it might live to fight another day.

So the question we must ask is how long will we give such offensive and dangerous nonsense from our politicians any consideration at all? In our view, any further accommodation would be entirely unreasonable.

Charles Dickson

LILY RYAN

The West Quebec Post

A powerful explanation of why the CRTC should reject SunNews' application for wider TV access, this editorial is both brave and bold.

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CHARLES DICKSON

The Equity

A subtle irony pervades this editorial's rejection of the Quebec Charter of Values. This helps the piece come across as sensible, not strident.

Judge: David Swick, Assistant Professor of Journalism, University of King's College, Halifax, NS
• Number of entries in the Bob Phillips Award for Best Editorial (General) category: 18