



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

Standing Committee on Public Accounts

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 077

PUBLIC PART ONLY - PARTIE PUBLIQUE SEULEMENT

Tuesday, October 17, 2023

Chair: Mr. John Williamson



Standing Committee on Public Accounts

Tuesday, October 17, 2023

• (1105)

[Translation]

The Chair (Mr. John Williamson (New Brunswick South-west, CPC)): I now call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 77 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Accounts.

The committee is meeting today to discuss its future business.

[English]

Ms. Lantsman, you have the floor.

Ms. Melissa Lantsman (Thornhill, CPC): Thanks, Mr. Chair.

I want to bring this to the committee amidst the chaos, shock and horror that so many Canadians experienced over the course of the week with regard to the terror attack last Saturday in Israel.

A memo from the CBC was quietly circulated, but not so quietly, because it became public. It was telling a journalist to avoid the word “terrorist” when referring to Hamas fighters in their publication.

For those on the committee—and I think most Canadians know this by now—Hamas has been a recognized terrorist organization in this country for over 20 years.

The memo that was leaked reads as follows: “Do not refer to militants, soldiers or anyone else as ‘terrorists.’” The words “do not” were emphasized in bold letters.

There's more in that memo. It reads: “The notion of terrorism remains heavily politicized and is part of the story. Even when quoting/clipping a government or a source referring to fighters as ‘terrorists’, we should add context to ensure the audience understands that this is opinion, not fact. That includes statements from the Canadian government and Canadian politicians.”

The question really is, Mr. Chair, if the Canadian government recognizes Hamas as a terrorist organization, as it rightfully should.... If you've read what the Canadian government says about that organization, you would quite understand why it was so definitively listed as a terrorist organization. If you further look at the Hamas covenant or the revised charter from 1988, Hamas has been clear on its genocidal intentions.

The memo was circulated by a gentleman named George Achi. He is the director of journalistic standards at the CBC, which of course gets a fair share of Canadian tax dollars. We would simply like to know why that direction of opinion was put forward by the

CBC. It is, after all, a news organization that Canadians pay for, so we would expect that it would get news.

I move:

Given that Hamas has been declared a terrorist organization by the Government of Canada since 2002; that the horrific Hamas terrorist attacks against Israel left thousands of innocent people dead and injured; that an email directive sent from the director of journalistic standards of CBC News, Mr. George Achi, to all employees of CBC News, directed them to downplay coverage of the horrific, sadistic violence perpetrated by Hamas against innocent people in Israel by not referring to the attackers as terrorists, and to falsely claim that Gaza continued to be under occupation after Israel had pulled out in 2005; and [given] that the CBC receives \$1.4 billion in public funding through taxpayer dollars annually and that this committee has a mandate to review government expenditures,

that the committee:

(a) denounce Mr. Achi's comments and report this to the House;

(b) summon the president of the CBC, Catherine Tait, to appear for two hours by herself within seven days of the motion being adopted;

(c) summon the CBC's director of journalistic standards, Mr. George Achi; and

(d) invite the CBC ombudsman, Mr. Jack Nagler, to appear for a minimum of two hours to address the CBC's position on journalistic standards and practices.

That is the motion that I'd like to put forward to the committee, Mr. Chair.

With that, I will turn it back to you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Lantsman.

I have a speaking list going already. For those who would like to be on it, I have first Mrs. Thomas, Mrs. Shanahan and Madame Sinclair-Desgagné, and after that is Ms. Khalid.

Mrs. Thomas, you have the floor, please.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas (Lethbridge, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Here's why this is so important. The CBC is a public broadcaster that is given \$1.2 billion from taxpayer money. The CBC is failing. It is failing the Jewish community; it is failing the innocent whose lives have been lost, and it is failing Canadians.

There is a leaked memo from the director of journalistic standards, who instructed journalists to refrain from using the term “terrorist” in their reference to Hamas fighters.

Hamas, as mentioned, has been listed on Canada's official list of terrorists for more than 20 years, so this isn't a point for debate. This isn't a matter of opinion; rather, this is fact.

To justify its decision, however, the CBC came out and said that it just didn't want its journalists to take sides, and if they use the term "terrorist", they will be taking a side. To that I would say that no doubt, of course you're taking a side. You're taking a side against terrorists. What other side would you want to take?

When you have 1,400 people massacred in an evening; when you have women and girls who are raped and murdered and then paraded through the city; when you have 40 babies beheaded, whose side are you on—as if there would be some other side to take? Of course you should be against Hamas, which is a terrorist organization functioning in a sadistic manner. It is pure evil, and to suggest otherwise is alarming.

Given that this is a public broadcaster that is held up by Canadian taxpayer dollars, it is incumbent upon this committee to hear from CBC leadership as to why this decision was made, because Canadians deserve better. Accountability is absolutely needed with regard to this matter.

If this committee were to take any stance other than that, I would have to question the motives of those at this table, because we should all be advocating for justice. We should all be advocating for the story to be told as it stands, which is that Hamas is, in fact, a terrorist organization acting against innocent people.

I would ask this committee to give full consideration to the motion that is being moved today. I will read it into the record just for further clarity. The motion is:

Given that Hamas has been declared a terrorist organization by the Government of Canada since 2002; that the horrific Hamas terrorist attacks against Israel left thousands of innocent people dead and injured; that an email directive sent from the director of journalistic standards of CBC News, Mr. George Achi, to all employees of CBC News, directed them to downplay coverage of the horrific, sadistic violence perpetrated by Hamas against innocent people in Israel by not referring to the attackers as terrorists, and to falsely claim that Gaza continued to be under occupation after Israel had pulled out in 2005,

that the committee:

- (a) denounce Mr. Achi's comments and report this to the House;
- (b) summon the president of the CBC, Catherine Tait, to appear for two hours by herself within seven days of the motion being adopted;
- (c) summon the CBC's director of journalistic standards, Mr. George Achi; and
- (d) invite the CBC ombudsman, Mr. Jack Nagler, to appear for a minimum of two hours to address the CBC's position on journalistic standards and practices.

This is the motion that Conservatives are bringing forward for discussion today. We're hoping that the NDP and the Liberals will see the need for this, that a full discussion will be had, and that an understanding will be generated in terms of the, I guess, demands that the CBC placed on its journalists, and as to why it made that decision.

• (1110)

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Thomas.

We turn now to Ms. Shanahan, who is joining us virtually.

You have the floor, please.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan (Châteauguay—Lacolle, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

First of all, I'd like to offer my condolences to all those people in Israel and the territories for the loss of loved ones. This is something that touches my fellow citizens. We feel very sorry for everyone who is suffering at this time.

That being said, as you know very well, Mr. Chair, I've already defended our committee and made it clear that our job or mandate is to study the Auditor General's reports and work with departments, deputy ministers and others to examine the work done by the government.

I recognize the serious nature of the motion before us. However, I fail to see how our committee could discuss such a motion.

• (1115)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Shanahan.

According to the list of speakers, it's Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné's turn.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné (Terrebonne, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to speak briefly on the motion, which has several elements or layers. Indeed, this motion is like an onion. It also reveals some of the Conservative Party's ideals on the funding of the Société Radio-Canada and the CBC.

First of all, I think it's relevant for people who follow our work to offer the Bloc Québécois' condolences to the families of the innocent victims of the conflict. The need to condemn what Hamas is doing is obvious. But the conflict didn't start on October 7; it's been going on for decades. There are innocent victims on both sides. We'll have to be careful over the coming weeks and months. Obviously, we want to see peace restored in the Middle East.

The motion condemns the idea that the CBC gave a journalistic directive to its employees on the use of the word "terrorist."

First, I don't think the Standing Committee on Public Accounts is the appropriate committee to assess whether Parliament should comment on a press guideline. I think the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage, which incidentally is the committee that oversees CBC/Radio-Canada, is more appropriate if Parliament feels there has been serious abuse.

Secondly, I'd like to remind all committee members of the important nuance between a public channel and a state channel. A public channel is funded by the government. However, it is not a state channel, since the government and Parliament have no say in what this channel does. It's very important to remember this nuance. Whatever the colour of the government, red or blue, public television is not a state channel and must remain neutral. Parliament therefore doesn't necessarily have a say in what is or isn't said on it.

Thirdly, the motion refers to the funding of the Société Radio-Canada and the CBC. That's why it was tabled with the Standing Committee on Public Accounts. I'd like to take this opportunity to reiterate that the Bloc Québécois is in no way in favour of budget cuts to a public broadcaster. On the contrary, we believe in the importance of an independent public channel to do the journalistic work it is asked to do.

If Parliament deems it appropriate to examine the media guideline regarding the use of the word “terrorist”, I also invite it to consider the fact that the CBC is not the only channel to have done so. Agence France-Presse, Reuters, the BBC have all done the same, and there's surely a reason for that.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné.

[English]

Madame Khalid, you have the floor, please.

Ms. Iqra Khalid (Mississauga—Erin Mills, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I am sure that for many of our colleagues around this table, the past week has not been an easy one as we navigate through what was a terror attack on innocent Israeli civilians by Hamas, and by what has been an evacuation proceeding of Canadians who not only lost their lives but also were put in a very precarious situation in Israel and Gaza. Over the past week, we've also seen innocent lives lost in Gaza—the majority of them being children and innocent civilians—based on a complete and utter disregard for human life on both sides of this.

Canada's role, I think, feeds into that of the international community. Right now, Mr. Chair, it is so important for us as parliamentarians to provide support and a platform for communities that are hurt. In my riding, I've been in touch with our local synagogue, Palestinian organizations and local mosques. People are very scared. This issue seems to have sparked a fire. We've worked way too hard, through our multiculturalism policy and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, to ensure that Canadians not only feel safe but also are safe. When constituents come to me and tell me they don't feel comfortable sending their kids to school or voicing their opinions for fear of violence or backlash.... When I look at my own social media, Mr. Chair, I'm appalled at how many times I deal with a lot of racist commentary, and I know many of my colleagues across all parties are dealing with the same. This is a very polarizing issue.

A lot of information has flooded our airwaves over the past week. There's been a lot of misinformation, bullying and trying to suppress voices. I think, as Canadians, we owe everyone in Canada the ability to speak their minds as long as they respect our Charter of Rights and Freedoms. I think the media have a critical role to play in this day and age, not only to ensure they are giving an objective and fair voice to what is happening in the Middle East—and across the world, as issues arise—but also to make sure they are not politicizing or inflaming any issues that create further harm and hurt to communities here in Canada.

In my riding, Mr. Chair, 43 different languages are spoken. We are a very diverse riding. Over these past eight years, we've ensured that in Mississauga—Erin Mills we are building bridges, not break-

ing them or dividing each other based on our political standpoints. I think, first and foremost, as parliamentarians, that we have an obligation to ensure that Canadians have the safety and security to maintain themselves—their health, sanity and safety—within our communities.

When I see a motion here that wants to bring a news publication before a committee to question it on whatever it has been posting, I automatically see flags. I question whether it is our right as a committee to do that. The media are our watchdogs. They will post and say what needs to be said.

● (1120)

We, as Parliament, whether we agree with it or don't agree with it, should not have a say in what they're reporting on, because that defeats the purpose of the media as watchdogs of our government and of parliamentarians.

Mr. Chair, I think that we need to lower the temperature—and not just here in Parliament—on this very sensitive issue, with so many people who are hurt and hurting. I think we need to take a breather and to perhaps, at a later time, come back to this issue.

At this time, I move that we adjourn debate.

The Chair: There's a motion on the floor to adjourn the debate. It will, unfortunately, interrupt the speaking list that I have.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 6; nays 4)

● (1125)

The Chair: Okay, so, this issue has been dealt with. I recognize that there are a few people who wanted to speak to this. I'm at your discretion. We can adjourn this and go back in camera.

Mr. Blois, I know that you, in particular, wanted to say a word or two.

I'm inclined to indulge him, unless there is any opposition. However, this issue has been adjourned. We are no longer dealing with this motion.

Mr. Kelly McCauley (Edmonton West, CPC): Mr. Chair, what is Mr. Blois speaking on?

The Chair: We're still in committee business, so I was going to recognize him. I don't know what he's going to speak on.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Okay. Well, unless it's a motion or introducing a motion, I'm not sure that we can allow—

The Chair: Yes, he just can't speak to this motion. However, we're still in committee business.

Mr. Nater, again, it can't be on the motion. No? Okay.

I see two hands up, but I think they have been dealt with.

Ms. Shanahan, is there anything you want to say?

I think everyone's good.

In that case, I'm looking for agreement to suspend this meeting and go in camera. Do I have agreement to do that?

An hon. member: Agreed.

The Chair: This meeting is suspended. We'll be back in five minutes.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais (Edmonton Griesbach, NDP): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

For the in camera meeting—I know this is a technical question—technically there's a new link that will be sent. Is that correct?

The Chair: Yes. It's in the email that has been sent, but yes, you are correct.

I suspend the meeting.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

Published under the authority of the Speaker of
the House of Commons

SPEAKER'S PERMISSION

The proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees are hereby made available to provide greater public access. The parliamentary privilege of the House of Commons to control the publication and broadcast of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees is nonetheless reserved. All copyrights therein are also reserved.

Reproduction of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees, in whole or in part and in any medium, is hereby permitted provided that the reproduction is accurate and is not presented as official. This permission does not extend to reproduction, distribution or use for commercial purpose of financial gain. Reproduction or use outside this permission or without authorization may be treated as copyright infringement in accordance with the Copyright Act. Authorization may be obtained on written application to the Office of the Speaker of the House of Commons.

Reproduction in accordance with this permission does not constitute publication under the authority of the House of Commons. The absolute privilege that applies to the proceedings of the House of Commons does not extend to these permitted reproductions. Where a reproduction includes briefs to a committee of the House of Commons, authorization for reproduction may be required from the authors in accordance with the Copyright Act.

Nothing in this permission abrogates or derogates from the privileges, powers, immunities and rights of the House of Commons and its committees. For greater certainty, this permission does not affect the prohibition against impeaching or questioning the proceedings of the House of Commons in courts or otherwise. The House of Commons retains the right and privilege to find users in contempt of Parliament if a reproduction or use is not in accordance with this permission.

Also available on the House of Commons website at the following address: <https://www.ourcommons.ca>

Publié en conformité de l'autorité
du Président de la Chambre des communes

PERMISSION DU PRÉSIDENT

Les délibérations de la Chambre des communes et de ses comités sont mises à la disposition du public pour mieux le renseigner. La Chambre conserve néanmoins son privilège parlementaire de contrôler la publication et la diffusion des délibérations et elle possède tous les droits d'auteur sur celles-ci.

Il est permis de reproduire les délibérations de la Chambre et de ses comités, en tout ou en partie, sur n'importe quel support, pourvu que la reproduction soit exacte et qu'elle ne soit pas présentée comme version officielle. Il n'est toutefois pas permis de reproduire, de distribuer ou d'utiliser les délibérations à des fins commerciales visant la réalisation d'un profit financier. Toute reproduction ou utilisation non permise ou non formellement autorisée peut être considérée comme une violation du droit d'auteur aux termes de la Loi sur le droit d'auteur. Une autorisation formelle peut être obtenue sur présentation d'une demande écrite au Bureau du Président de la Chambre des communes.

La reproduction conforme à la présente permission ne constitue pas une publication sous l'autorité de la Chambre. Le privilège absolu qui s'applique aux délibérations de la Chambre ne s'étend pas aux reproductions permises. Lorsqu'une reproduction comprend des mémoires présentés à un comité de la Chambre, il peut être nécessaire d'obtenir de leurs auteurs l'autorisation de les reproduire, conformément à la Loi sur le droit d'auteur.

La présente permission ne porte pas atteinte aux privilèges, pouvoirs, immunités et droits de la Chambre et de ses comités. Il est entendu que cette permission ne touche pas l'interdiction de contester ou de mettre en cause les délibérations de la Chambre devant les tribunaux ou autrement. La Chambre conserve le droit et le privilège de déclarer l'utilisateur coupable d'outrage au Parlement lorsque la reproduction ou l'utilisation n'est pas conforme à la présente permission.

Aussi disponible sur le site Web de la Chambre des communes à l'adresse suivante :
<https://www.noscommunes.ca>