

An opportunity for mainstream media to redeem themselves

The web-site Blazing Cat Fur, 9 June 2008

<http://blazingcatfur.blogspot.com/2008/06/blazingcatfur-exclusive-dr-mark-mercet.html>

Mark Mercer
Department of Philosophy
Saint Mary's University
Halifax, NS B3H 3C3
(902) 420-5825
mark.mercer@smu.ca

Maclean's magazine is in the dock at the British Columbia Human Rights Tribunal. It was brought there after two people complained that at least one article published in *Maclean's*, as well as the cover of the issue in which that article appeared, exposed Muslims in British Columbia to hatred and contempt. Exposing a resident of British Columbia to hatred or contempt through vilifying a religious group to which she or he belongs contravenes section 7 of the British Columbia Human Rights Act.

Hearings concluded Friday. The verdict will, with any luck, be announced sometime soon.

With only a couple exceptions, coverage of the hearings by newspapers and other mainstream news outlets has been spotty and superficial, despite the importance of the matter to the question what sort of country Canada is and what sort of country we want it to be. Yet, happily, neither newspapers nor broadcasters have been shy about quoting sections of the offending article or reproducing the offending cover. That is as it should be. Those who pick up a newspaper or turn on a public affairs programme want to know what's at issue. By and large, the mainstream media take seriously their duty to inform them.

Ezra Levant, the former publisher of *The Western Standard*, will soon be in the dock in Alberta, before the Alberta Human Rights Tribunal, in response to a complaint that in reprinting the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons, Mr Levant exposed Muslims in Alberta to hatred and contempt. Will mainstream news organizations be inclined to cover this event properly? We have strong grounds to fear that in this case, unlike in the *Maclean's* case, they will shirk their duty.

To cover it properly, newspapers and television news programmes will have to reprint the cartoons. The cartoons are to the Levant hearings as the offending passages are to the *Maclean's* hearings.

Mainstream news organizations have already had a few opportunities to cover stories involving these cartoons properly, and they failed to do so. The cartoons, recall, provoked riots and violence in some Muslim nations early in 2006, some months after they were originally published in Denmark. Word of the cartoons angered many Canadians (word only, as few of those angered had actually seen them), though here in Canada, as in almost all other democratic countries, that anger was not expressed in violence. Canadian mainstream news outlets reported and commented on the violence and the anger without letting readers or viewers examine the cartoons themselves.

These first events are not the only events involving the cartoons that mainstream news outlets in Canada have reported. The President of the University of Prince Edward Island confiscated the UPEI student paper in which the cartoons appeared, and this was widely reported, as was the first incident in which the Academic Vice President of Saint Mary's University removed the cartoons from a professor's office door. Recently, CBC's *Sunday Night* ran an item on Mr Levant's troubles in Alberta. In none of these cases have stories in the mainstream press been accompanied by the cartoons.

Why are mainstream news organizations in Canada shirking their duty to present the news fully and honestly? For one or another of four reasons, I think. The first is concern for the feelings of Canadian Muslims. This can't really be their reason, though, as concern for the feelings of others requires that we do not patronize them.

The second is fear of provoking violence. This might have been a valid reason in early days, when mob violence overseas could have been taken as grounds for fearing mob violence here. But we now know, as, of course, many knew all along, that Canadian Muslims do not react with violence. Indeed, no Canadians even protested peaceably the presence of the cartoons on their supermarket newsstand, when *Harper's* magazine reprinted them.

What about a single enraged individual? That's a threat for security and the police to diffuse. Let us not hold the news, let alone a way of life, hostage.

The third is fear of doing damage to one's interests overseas. A CBC executive has expressed, in passing, the fear that showing the cartoons on air would put at risk both personnel overseas and the ability of the CBC to gather news there.

The fourth is human rights commissions. *The Western Standard*, after all, printed the cartoons in reporting or commenting on the news. No publisher or executive, not even Mr Levant, wants to spend money or trouble dealing, even successfully, with a complaint. Of course, that human rights commissions chill and deform reporting and discussion in this country is a sufficient reason to remove from them the power to suppress or punish expression.

Mainstream news organizations do, though, possess a strong, self-interested incentive to publish the cartoons. They might want to lessen their decline in power and relevance by undercutting the internet on this story. Perhaps ironically, if they do their job well, people might just come back.

Let us wait and see, then, whether the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons, a central ingredient in a developing important news story, make it into the news. I'm sure Ezra Levant will do his best to bring them into people's sight. He's probably right now ordering T-shirts to wear when he's interviewed.

But if newspapers and television news shows decline again to present exhibits 1 through 12, let us hope that they at least discuss their decision honestly and rigorously.