

## **Ombudsman's Review Regarding the Treatment of Israel on the October 15, 2010 Broadcast of *Le match des élus* on RDI**

### **SUMMARY**

The complainant felt that the host of the program *Le match des élus* had made a questionable and baseless comparison between Israel, a democratic country, and Iran and Sudan.

Radio-Canada acknowledged that it was inappropriate to use Iran and Sudan as examples to illustrate the dangers of Canada's unconditional support for Israel.

The host committed an error. However, the error was corrected on air even before this review was published, in compliance with CBC/Radio-Canada's *Journalistic Standards and Practices*.

## THE COMPLAINT

On October 15, 2010, one of the topics of the program *Le match des élus* on Réseau de l'information (RDI) was Canada's failure to win a seat on the United Nations Security Council. To kick off the discussion, host Simon Durivage asked Conservative MP Steven Blaney the following question:

A lot of people are also saying that it was the Muslim and Arab world [that led to Canada's Security Council defeat], given that Canada is very close to Israel. And there's another example of that, as we just learned this morning, Mr. Blaney. Canada has been representing the State of Israel in Venezuela ever since Venezuela cut diplomatic ties with the country. Israel, which has often been, um, you know, which is a controversial country and has often been censured by the United Nations. Isn't it a bit dangerous to stick so close to a country whose policies are controversial and have even been condemned by the UN? I mean, I'd ask you the same question if Canada decided to represent Iran or Sudan somewhere in the world.

On October 21, David Ouellette, director of research and communications with the Quebec-Israel Committee, filed a complaint following this "baseless" comparison between Israel, Iran and Sudan. The complainant stressed that Israel is a democratic state and in no way can be compared to the power of the Iranian regime, which "relies on election results considered fraudulent by many Iranians and on violent repression of all forms of dissidence," or to the regime of Sudan's putschist president Omar Al-Bachir, "accused of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide." In Mr. Ouellette's view, this questionable comparison derives from host Simon Durivage's personal, subjective opinion. My office received a dozen other complaints on the same topic. HonestReporting Canada, a pro-Israel pressure group, posted a message on its website encouraging dissatisfied readers to complain to Radio-Canada's News and Current Affairs department.

On November 5, Martine Lanctôt, Director of Complaints Handling with Radio-Canada News and Current Affairs, replied that the host's question was not intended to blame Israel but to determine whether it was prudent for Canada to present itself as Israel's unconditional ally, given some of the Jewish state's controversial policies toward Palestinians:

[...] By choosing to illustrate his question with a number of other examples, Mr. Durivage sought to highlight the repercussions that close ties with a country applying such controversial policies could have on Canada. You are, however, quite right in pointing out that Iran and Sudan were in no way suitable examples. [...]

Mr. Ouellette replied that Mr. Durivage's intentions were not at issue here, but rather the fact that the host had placed "Israel in the category of states that oppress and suppress their own people, and cultivate and export a politico-religious fanaticism that perpetuates the Arab–Israeli conflict." The complainant said that, for some time now, he had noted "too many errors, omissions, and questionable positions not to wonder whether there wasn't a prevailing culture of hostility toward Israel at the public broadcaster."

## THE REVIEW<sup>1</sup>

CBC/Radio-Canada's *Journalistic Standards and Practices*,<sup>2</sup> a document that has just recently been updated, outlines the procedure to follow in the event of errors:

[...] In keeping with values of accuracy, integrity and fairness, we do not hesitate to correct a significant error when we have been able to establish that one has occurred. This is essential for our credibility with Canadians. When a correction is necessary, it is made promptly given the circumstances, with due regard for the reach of published error. [...]

On November 26, 2010, host Simon Durivage made the following apology at the top of that week's episode of *Le match des élus*. This clarification lasted a little over a minute:

Before introducing my guests, however, I'd like to return to the *Match des élus* broadcast of one month ago, where we discussed with our Ottawa panel the reasons that might have led to Canada losing a coveted seat on the United Nations Security Council. Among the reasons for this defeat, I raised the fact that Arab and Muslim countries surely had a hand in it, and had voted against it, because of the Harper government's unconditional support for Israel since coming to power in Ottawa. And I asked our four MPs whether it wasn't dangerous for the Harper government to get too close to Israel, a country whose actions and policies are sometimes controversial, and I added that I would have asked the same question if Canada was too close to other countries, like Iran or Sudan. In this case, I acknowledge that the two examples were very poorly chosen. Israel clearly bears no resemblance to Iran and Sudan when it comes to controversial policies, not to mention that Israel is a democratic country, and that the other two are not, or at least not by our criteria. Incidentally, it was not my intention to compare Israel to those two countries, but it appears that some viewers took it that way and were offended by it. I would therefore like to sincerely apologize to anyone who may have taken offence. I promise to be more careful in my choice of examples next time."

<sup>1</sup> Ombudsman's mandate: <http://www.cbc.ca/ombudsman/page/mandate.html>

<sup>2</sup> <http://cbc.radio-canada.ca/docs/policies/journalistic/xml/policies.asp>

On October 15, by erroneously associating Israel with Iran and Sudan, Simon Durivage did not adhere to one of the central principles of CBC/Radio-Canada's *Journalistic Standards and Practices*, that of accuracy. The host offered to make a rectification and apology on air. This clear, detailed clarification occurred six weeks after the initial error. This is a relatively long delay, but *Le match des élus* is on only once a week. In airing its apology, Radio-Canada chose to wait until *Le match des élus* dealt once again with federal rather than Quebec politics, in order to have the same guests in the studio who were there when the error was committed.

The Quebec-Israel Committee is concerned that the errors it has observed on air, some of which have been corroborated by my office, show that "a culture of hostility toward Israel" prevails at Radio-Canada. I took serious note of the complainant's concerns, but the fact that I have found errors in only six programs over three years does not prove any systemic bias. Since I was appointed Ombudsman, eight of the thirteen complainants that have asked me to rule on their complaints have been pro-Israel pressure groups: the Quebec-Israel Committee, HonestReporting Canada, and the Regroupement québécois pour un journalisme informé, honnête et responsable. Yet these cases do not constitute a representative sample of everything being said on air about the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. To conduct a truly representative analysis of all Radio-Canada coverage, I would have to go over with a fine-tooth comb all reports and interviews on the topic during a given period, regardless of whether they generated complaints. This type of qualitative study would require time and money.

## Conclusion

Radio-Canada acknowledged that it was inappropriate to use Iran and Sudan as examples to illustrate the dangers of Canada's unconditional support for Israel.

Associating Israel with Iran and Sudan in this way constituted a journalistic error.

The error was corrected on air before this review was published, in accordance with CBC/Radio-Canada's *Journalistic Standards and Practices*.

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CBC/Radio-Canada  
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