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**CANADIAN BROADCAST STANDARDS COUNCIL**

**ONTARIO REGIONAL COUNCIL**

**DECISION CONCERNING  
CFTO-TV'S PHONE-IN PROGRAM "BRIAN MULRONEY ON THE LINE"**

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*April 26, 1991*

**FACTS OF THE CASE**

CFTO-TV produced a ninety-minute live phone-in show with Brian Mulroney entitled "Brian Mulroney On the Line" which was broadcast live throughout Ontario on November 5, 1990 on the following stations:

CFTO-TV in Toronto  
CJOH-TV in Ottawa  
Mid-Canada group of CTV stations in Timmins, Sudbury, North Bay  
CHBX-TV in Sault Ste. Marie

Viewers were invited to call a 1-800 number flashed on the screen at the commencement of the show at 7:00 p.m. in order to ask the Prime Minister their questions. The number was kept secret until it was shown on the air.

Twenty-one callers were able to speak to the Prime Minister. Calls were taken in the order they were received. The producers of the program decided that calls would be screened only for sobriety and coherency.

CFTO-TV received numerous phone calls from angry viewers through its switchboard, or directly to the news department during the evening of November 5th. Viewers also complained to local stations (radio and television) and to the newspaper media throughout Ontario. CFTO-TV also received written complaints from viewers (seventeen) alleging that the show was "rigged" and only a political platform for The Prime Minister.

**CBSC DECISION**

The Canadian Broadcast Standards Council Ontario Regional Council was approached by Baton Broadcasting Incorporated on December 20, 1990 to "review against the standards

set in the CAB's Code of Ethics" a matter concerning CFTO-TV's phone-in program "Brian Mulroney On The Line". The six-member Council met January 18, 1991 in Toronto.

Baton Broadcasting Incorporated, in their letter to the Council, stated:

We understand that the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council usually operates on the basis of individual complaints. However, given the large number of written complaints of a similar nature received from the public, and the importance of the issue to the public and the broadcasting system alike, we believe that this would be an appropriate matter for the Ontario Council of the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council to review against the standards set in the CAB's Code of Ethics.... This matter might also be considered against the backdrop of perhaps establishing some guidelines in the Code of Ethics for a fair and equitable process for phone in programs for both television and radio.

The Council has a mandate to deal with complaints on the basis of existing industry codes. In this case the specific code would be the Canadian Association of Broadcasters' February 1988 Code of Ethics. Following a full review of the code, the Council has found that the Code of Ethics does not provide assistance in formulating a decision on this matter.

The Council fully examined the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission Public Notice CRTC 1988-213, December 23, 1988 regarding "Policy Regarding Open-Line Programming which states:

The Commission recognizes the responsibility demonstrated by the broadcasting and cable industries overall in the area of open-line programming. Moreover, it recognizes that many licensees have internal guidelines, policies, or other mechanisms in place with respect to the conduct of open-line programs.

Consequently, the Commission is not persuaded that it is either necessary or desirable for it to impose industry guidelines on open-line programs at this time, but will continue to deal with concerns regarding open-line programs on a case-by-case basis.

The Council acknowledges that a variety of different approaches to open line programming exists within the broadcasting industry. Baton Broadcasting Limited chose one approach to produce this particular television open line program.

The Council agrees with the CRTC that internal guidelines concerning open-line programming are important and that the broadcaster must determine procedures for balance and fairness when producing this type of programming. Therefore, it is incumbent upon broadcasters to constantly review their guidelines in response to audience reactions.