
**CANADIAN BROADCAST STANDARDS COUNCIL
QUEBEC REGIONAL COUNCIL**

CKAC-AM re Newscast

(CBSC Decision 93/94-0191)

Decided December 6, 1995

J. Deschênes (Chair), P. Audet, Y. Chouinard, R. Cohen (*ad hoc*),
L. Harvey

THE FACTS

At 8:45 a.m. February 16, 1994, the CKAC-AM (Montreal) newscaster began his reading of the news with the following report:

[Translation] Good morning everyone, this is Pierre Jubinville. A "Québécois pure laine" has just won Canada's first gold medal at the Lillehammer Olympic Games. Jean-Luc Brassard took first place in the acrobatic skiing moguls event, beating out competitors from Russia and France. In an interview with TVA, Brassard said he has waited a long time for this victory (interview with athlete then aired. Brassard had a perfect run, with an impressive jump.

The Listener's Complaint

A bilingual anglophone listener was offended by the news item and sent her complaint of February 17 to the CRTC. The letter read in part:

I strongly object to the use of the term "pure laine" in this context. I feel it is racist. It is my understanding that most reputable news organizations have a policy of not mentioning race, colour or ethnic background unless germane to the story. I believe that the important part of the story is that Brassard is a Quebecer - what is NOT important or germane is the fact that he is "pure laine". This unnecessary distinction only encourages listeners to differentiate among people based on their ethnic origins.

As a Québécoise who happens to be anglophone, I was hurt and insulted by the comment. The implication of the "pure laine" reference is that Quebecers were supposed to be prouder of this Olympic medal win because the skier was not a black-Quebecer, or an aboriginal-Quebecer, or a Chinese-Quebecer, but a white francophone Quebecer, a "true" Quebecer.

The Broadcaster's Response

The letter was forwarded to the CBSC which in turn sent it to the broadcaster with the request that the broadcaster respond directly to the complainant, in accordance with the CBSC's customary practice. The News Director of the station responded to the listener on March 15 and took the trouble to do so in English despite the fact that the broadcast in question was in French and that the broadcaster is a French licensee. The News Director stated:

Your understanding that most reputable news organizations have a policy of not mentioning race, colour or ethnic background unless germane to the story is absolutely correct and our news organization abides by it.

Nevertheless, in this instance, the words "pure laine" were not used to stress or mention race, colour or ethnic background. They merely are a colloquial expression and were used as such in the news bulletin.

We are sorry if you were hurt and insulted by the used of such words but I reiterate that it was not our intention to hurt or insult anyone.

The viewer was unsatisfied with this response and requested, on April 19, that the CBSC refer the matter to the appropriate Regional Council for adjudication.

THE DECISION

The CBSC's Quebec Regional Council considered the complaint under the *Codes of Ethics* of the Canadian Association of Broadcasters (CAB) and the Radio and Television News Directors Association. The relevant clauses of those Codes read as follows:

CAB Code of Ethics, Clause 2 (Human Rights):

Recognizing that every person has a right to full and equal recognition and to enjoy certain fundamental rights and freedoms, broadcasters shall endeavour to ensure, to the best of their ability, that their programming contains no abusive or discriminatory material or comment which is based on matters of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, sex, marital status or physical or mental handicap.

CAB Code of Ethics, Clause 6 (News), in pertinent part:

It shall be the responsibility of member stations to ensure that news shall be represented with accuracy and without bias. The member station shall satisfy itself that the arrangements made for obtaining news ensure this result. It shall also ensure that news broadcasts are not editorial. News shall not be selected for the purpose of furthering or hindering either side of any controversial public issue, nor

shall it be designed by the beliefs or opinions or desires of the station management, the editor or others engaged in its preparation or delivery. The fundamental purpose of news dissemination in a democracy is to enable people to know what is happening, and to understand events so that they may form their own conclusions.

[...]

It is recognized that the full, fair and proper presentation of news, opinion, comment and editorial is the prime and fundamental responsibility of the broadcast publisher.

RTNDA Code of Ethics, Article 2:

News and public affairs broadcasts will put events into perspective by presenting relevant background information. Factors such as race, creed, nationality or religion will be reported only when relevant. Comment and editorial opinion will be identified as such. Errors will be quickly acknowledged and publicly corrected.

The Regional Council members listened to a tape of the program in question and reviewed all of the correspondence. Although not without some discomfort, which is discussed below, the Quebec Regional Council considers that none of the foregoing Code provisions have been breached by the newscast in question.

The Content of the Newscast

The members of the Regional Council discussed the expression “Québécois pure laine” at considerable length. They understand that the expression is well-known and, indeed, a part of every-day colloquial language in Quebec. They fully expect that the news reader had no intention to cause harm or to insult members of any racial, ethnic, national or religious group by using the expression “Québécois pure laine”. The opposite intention, they believe, could have been evident as the result of context, tone or other factors. The Council members listened carefully to the language again and again to ensure that no such perspective was intended. That being said, the members understand that, however positive the reason for the use of the expression may have been *in this instance*, there is an exclusionary sense to the use of the term *at all*.

The Council considers it absolutely appropriate to re-quote the words of the complainant here for they provide what Council members consider to be a *bona fide* concern about the effect of the expression on persons not of French Roman Catholic origin with their Quebec roots extending back hundreds of years.

As a Québécoise who happens to be anglophone, I was hurt and insulted by the comment. The implication of the “pure laine” reference is that Quebecers were supposed to be prouder of this Olympic medal win because the skier was not a black-Quebecer, or an aboriginal-Quebecer, or a Chinese-Quebecer, but a white francophone Quebecer, a “true” Quebecer.

The complainant's list of groups who might have felt excluded was limited to visible minorities but it is clear that members of the Quebec Anglophone community or members of the other Quebec linguistic, ethnic or religious communities might also be expected to share the complainant's sentiments. It is the view of the Quebec Regional Council that the use of the expression "Québécois pure laine" or similar expressions meant to convey the same idea, such as "Québécois de vraie souche" can, in a pluralistic society such as Quebec's, create an unwelcome or negative, if not discriminatory, sense among those who do not fall within the ambit of the term. The Council believes that radio and television stations ought to be particularly vigilant in avoiding the use of such expressions on the airwaves which are, after all, *publicly* owned.

Despite the Council's obvious discomfort relating to the use of the expression "Québécois pure laine", it does not believe that, in *this* instance, the station has breached any of the Codes. Exclusion of individuals or groups alone is not necessarily the equivalent of abuse or attack upon those groups. While the complainant's understanding of the policy of "most reputable news organizations ... of not mentioning race, colour or ethnic background unless germane to the story", as affirmed by CKAC's News Director is correct, this was a case where the mention of background was not for the purpose of casting aspersions upon anyone, which is the customary cause of CBSC concern. This was a case in which a *positive* sentiment was associated with the use of a description of origin. For all of the reasons given above, the Council considers that such usage ought to be avoided; however, the national indication does *not* point the finger in such a way as to fall afoul of Clause 2 of either the CAB or RTNDA *Codes of Ethics*.

The Broadcaster's Response

In addition to assessing the relevance of the Codes to the complaint, the CBSC always assesses the *responsiveness* of the broadcaster to the substance of the complaint. This is an instance in which the broadcaster's representative, the CKAC News Director, showed himself particularly sensitive to the complainant by writing to her in English. It was a courteous gesture which the complainant no doubt appreciated, particularly given the *nature* of her complaint. The News Director also responded to the substantive issues raised by the complainant, which is his duty. Nothing more is required.

This decision is a public document upon its release by the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council. It may be reported, announced or read by the station against which the complaint had originally been made; however, in the case of a favourable decision, the station is under no obligation to announce the result.