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Article published Saturday, January 19, 2008

Free speech is not merely an American idea

By **TERRENCE C. WATSON**



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I AM a Canadian citizen and a graduate student at Bowling Green State University. After this appears in print, I may become a political refugee. But someone needs to tell Americans the truth about their friendly neighbor to the north.

If fascism comes to America wrapped in a flag and carrying a cross, it will come to Canada cloaked in the rhetoric of religious tolerance and multiculturalism.

These are the justifications for the legal persecution of Ezra Levant. His crime? Publishing the Danish "cartoons of blasphemy" in his national news magazine, the Western Standard.

Mr. Levant was the only major publisher to risk the ire of Islamic extremists and, more terrifying still, the wrath of Canada's federal and provincial human rights commissions. According to the complaint made to Alberta's commission, his simple act of expression unlawfully exposes Canada's Muslim population to hatred and ridicule.

The commissions have been called "quasi-legal" bodies. Even this gives them too much credit. They were formed to deal with complaints of unlawful discrimination in housing, employment, and other areas.

It costs nothing to make a complaint to an HRC and its decisions have the authority of law, even though the people issuing judgments are bureaucrats only sometimes trained in the law.

If the HRCs had stuck to prosecuting discrimination, as their progenitor hoped, their existence would be less objectionable.

But for some time now, Canada's HRCs (both federal and provincial) have decided they have the authority to punish thought as well as deed. They have used their power to inflict fines and tear apologies from the pens and throats of those crazy enough to hold opinions offensive to Canadian orthodoxy.

People like Stephen Boissoin. In 2002, a Canadian newspaper published his

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letter-to-the-editor. In the letter, Mr. Boissoin, a former pastor, stated his opposition to homosexual activity. Eric Lund, a university professor, complained to Alberta's HRC and it agreed to hear the case. In making his complaint, Mr. Lund not only demanded that the HRC force Mr. Boissoin to apologize, but that it also prohibit other newspapers from publishing his letters.

In 2007, the HRC ruled against Mr. Boissoin. His punishment has yet to be decided.

I could also tell you about Ron Gray, leader of Christian Heritage Party, a bona fide political party, who was brought before an HRC because of an article on his party's Web site that was critical of homosexuality. During the hearing, a top HRC investigator declared that, "Freedom of speech is an American concept, so I don't give it any value."

Maybe Mr. Levant will join the ranks of Mr. Boissoin and Mr. Gray. Alberta's HRC could force him to apologize to the radical, Saudi-trained Imam who complained about his publication of the cartoons. It could fine him into bankruptcy, or prohibit him from ever publishing another magazine.

After this essay is published, I could also be brought in front of the bureaucratic inquisition - if not for what I say here, then for what I have said on my blog. I could become a political refugee for statements I make while at graduate school in the United States. What has happened to my country?

At stake in Canada is a principle recognized in all liberal democracies for hundreds of years: the principle that all speech, even hateful speech, is sacred, and not to be limited merely to prevent offense to others. This principle is embedded in British common law and in the American Bill of Rights. As the famous statement attributed to Voltaire goes, "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it."

Speech is sacred. This principle stands between civilization and barbarism, between the good of the American Republic and the evil of Nazi Germany.

In Canada, it is under attack. In Canada, a small, bookish man defends it against a legion of well-funded bureaucrats and an indifferent or even hostile Canadian public.

Go to Mr. Levant's Web site, www.ezrlevant.com, to see his response to the inquisition. See him confront his inquisitor on video. Then send him a note of support, whether or not you like his decision to publish the Danish cartoons. Liking his decision is not the point. Defending his right to make it without fear of prosecution is the point.

Is freedom of speech merely "an American concept"? Ezra Levant doesn't think so. Neither do I. But in Canada, we are rapidly becoming a minority. As American citizens, demonstrate that freedom of speech is a fundamental right of everyone.

And the next time you hear someone tout the virtues of Canada, tell the truth. Point out what's really going on. If someone gets around to making a complaint to a Canadian human rights commission, I may not be around to do so.

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