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Attention Newsroom Managers:

CAJ urges changes to human rights laws

OTTAWA, Feb. 22 /CNW/ - The Canadian Association of Journalists is calling on federal and provincial governments to amend human rights legislation to stop a pattern of disturbing attacks on freedom of speech.

Two recent cases spotlight the dangers of allowing state-backed agencies to censor speech based on subjective perceptions of offensiveness - MacLean's magazine, which is facing complaints in two provinces and nationally for an article by syndicated columnist Mark Steyn, and Ezra Levant, the former publisher of the Western Standard who is now before the Alberta Human Rights Commission for his decision to publish the Danish cartoons of the Islamic prophet Muhammad.

"Human rights commissions were never intended to act as a form of thought police," said CAJ President Mary Agnes Welch. "But now they're being used to chill freedom of expression on matters that are well beyond accepted Criminal Code restrictions on free speech."

The CAJ supports Liberal MP Keith Martin's private members motion to have section 13(1) of federal human rights legislation, the clause dealing with published material, repealed. Similar provincial legislation should also be amended as required.

"The lack of political leadership on this issue, apart from Mr. Martin and a few others, is appalling," said Welch. "Even people who helped create human rights commissions have said they were never meant to act as censors. Since a number of commissions have accepted these complaints as worthy of investigation, there clearly needs to be government direction to stop the ongoing erosion of one of Canada's most fundamental rights."

The CAJ believes that laws of libel and slander, hate speech and other provisions found within the Criminal Code provide sufficient restrictions on freedom of speech. Human rights commissions, which are not bound by the same rules of evidence of the courts, have become last-ditch end-arounds for those who want to silence commentary they disagree with.



"Whether you agree with Steyn or Levant is immaterial. If they're breaking no laws, they should have the right, in our democracy, to speak freely," said Welch.

The CAJ will be monitoring the investigations in these two cases and plans to intervene if the process moves to the tribunal stage. The CAJ, however, strongly urges the Canadian human rights commission, as well of those of Alberta, B.C. and Ontario, to simply dismiss these complaints completely.

The Canadian Association of Journalists is a professional organization with some 1,500 members across Canada. The CAJ's primary role is to provide-public interest advocacy and high quality professional development for its members.

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