

CLA Advancement of Intellectual Freedom Award

Acceptance Speech, Brian Campbell, 2015

I would like to begin by thanking the CLA Intellectual Freedom Advisory Committee, and Alvin Schrader, Chair and former recipient, for choosing me for the prestigious CLA Advancement of Intellectual Freedom in Canada Award. It is an honour to follow in the footsteps of June Callwood, Les Fowlie, the Toronto Public Library Board, and other exemplars of intellectual freedom in Canada.

This award does not represent the work of one person but the work of many. Thank you to all those involved in the work of the BCLA Intellectual Freedom Committee, and the BCLA and CLA Information Policy Committees. I would especially like to thank everyone who wrote such generous letters of recommendation about my work.

The early years of the BCLA Intellectual Freedom Committee focussed, like many, on defending individual authors and books from censorship. We participated in Freedom to Read Week and developed educational materials, but our work was primarily defensive. However, a climate was developing, following the example of the Reagan Administration, to reduce government collection of data and access to it. The suppression of information access through self-censorship and government regulation was growing.

The BCLA Intellectual Freedom Committee began to take on projects broader than cases of individual defence. In conjunction with and under the leadership of Les Fowlie we participated in the 1988 fight against Bill C-54 (proposed amendments to the *Criminal Code* and the *Customs Tariff* regarding pornography). As BC libraries distributed postcards, Toronto Public Library, in an heroic act of defiance, shut down most of its branches for a half day study session.

The BCLA Information Policy Committee played a pivotal role with other organizations in campaigning for and helping to write the BC Freedom of Information and Privacy Act. BCLA and CLA initiated a campaign against the Multi-Lateral Agreement on Investments, and the WTO General Agreement on Trade and Services, which became in international library campaign.

Both Committees were instrumental in delaying and in some instances stopping the federal government from reducing or eliminating their statistics gathering programme, and charging for government statistics, while preventing the immediate elimination of the government depository program. Both also lobbied libraries and government to introduce free public access internet stations and training into public libraries. Eventually, working with other organizations, especially community networks across Canada, sustained funding was gained through the creation of Community Access Programs and other funding initiatives. No single effort resulted in such a broad increase in access to information for the general public.

While individual challenges to books and authors could be viewed as affecting only the reading public and literary community, the next decade and a half has seen a broadening attack on the right to know and the right to speak freely.

Through a multi-faceted political and policy-making regime, the present government has diminished the collection of data, notably the long-form Census, has eliminated government agencies and fired civil servants critical of government policy. Partisan CRA tax-audits have been used to attack social justice and advocacy organizations that have played an important role in keeping the public informed. The lack of whistleblower protection legislation has made government accountability even more difficult.

Bill C-51 (Anti-Terrorism Act 2015) is the culmination of repressive government legislation, representing the greatest threat to the right to know and to speak in Canadian society. It strengthens the legal infra-structure that validates and underpins antecedent legislation and regulations such as the Anti-Terrorism Act 2001, the No-Fly List, Security Certificates, the mass electronic surveillance recently revealed by Edward Snowden, and the MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) between Israel and Canada expressing mutual “concern by efforts to single out the State of Israel for criticism ... including calls for a boycott...divestment...and or sanctions...” No longer can anyone pretend that these isolated legislative and regulatory instruments are directed towards specific threats to Canadian society. Among other things, Bill C-51 conflates terrorism with Islam in the same manner that the government conflates criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism.

I have been asked to mention what work I am doing currently in these areas. I co-founded an organization called the Seriously Free Speech Committee Vancouver, which was created to defend three people being sued by CanWest in a civil lawsuit for producing a parody of the Vancouver Sun's one-sided support for Israel. One of the three people was not engaged at any level in the creation, production and distribution of this parody. It is for this reason that SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation) legislation is so important.

The Committee has now existed for six years and continues to defend students, faculty, individuals and political organizations who are attacked for their defence of Palestine and their opposition to its illegal occupation. Many of these individuals have lost academic positions, research grants, artistic roles in defending what they think is right. In addition to working on these issues, the Committee is now shifting toward joining other organizations in opposing Bill C-51.

Bill C-51 is a direct attack over many aspects of public and private life – including thought. The Bill expands the power of preventive detention by changing one word from “will” to “may”. It weakens privacy protection by allowing information sharing among government agencies. Of particular importance to libraries and to this audience is the definition of terrorist propaganda as “any writing, sign, visible representation or audio recording that advocates or promotes the commission of terrorism offences in general”. Note the vagueness of the term 'in general'. A previous example of this was the enthusiastic confiscation of lesbian and gay magazines at the border under obscenity laws.

Just as 'fear' is being used by the government to justify this attack on our civil liberties, the protection of free speech is being used internationally to rally for the expansion of the war on terrorism. In these cases the issue is often not free speech but the military adventures of the affected countries. A telling example of this misuse of free speech was seen in the repugnant image of world leaders marching arm-in-arm at the head of France's massive response to the Charlie Hebdo attack. Almost every country represented already had or was in the process of instituting restrictions on public demonstrations, free speech and the rights of minorities. Just as the liberation of women was used to validate the attack on Afghanistan, so free speech in this instance is clearly being used as an ideological prop for the 'war on terrorism'.

Many civil libertarian and other agencies have already spoken out against Bill C-51, as have prominent public intellectuals, retired members of the judiciary, the legal profession and politicians. It is clear however that the vast majority of the public has not understood its significance. A recent IPSO Reid survey showed that 82% of Canadians support the Bill.

Thousands of grass roots organizations oppose Bill C-51, in which environmental and indigenous organizations are clearly targeted. Those organizations must mobilize a public education campaign that highlights the threat to stifle public participation in the decisions that affect our lives. Libraries, as they did with Bill C-54, can play an instrumental role to enable this public mobilization.

Libraries are an important public institution, perhaps the only one whose sole mandate is to make the collective literature and information of society available freely to the public. But we are only one institution and it is only by forming coalitions with social justice organizations, writers, publishers, indigenous organizations, trade unions and environmental organizations that we will have the opportunity to defeat Bill C-51 or, more likely, mount legal and civil disobedience campaigns against its implementation.

This can only be successful by combining our resources in a massive public and political education campaign.

Again, I wish to thank you for this award. I regret that health considerations prevent me from receiving it in person and engaging in discussion with this distinguished audience. On behalf of myself, and all those who have worked so hard to defend intellectual freedom and information access, thank you.

Brian Campbell

P.S. After this was written I discovered a reference to a book entitled *Glorifying Terrorism* (2007) compiled by Farrah Mendlesohn, with 25 science fiction contributors – each writing a story specifically designed to be illegal under Britain's 2006 Terrorism Act – a wonderful example.