

Media is not under attack after charges over budget leak



On The Hill
With
Garth Turner

OTTAWA-Well, it was quite a week around this place. I was sitting in a committee meeting in the Parliament buildings last Monday night when an RCMP news release was put in front of me saying Global TV reporter Doug Small and four others would be charged with criminal offences.

As you know, since then there's been a huge controversy about whether a reporter should be prosecuted for accepting, and publicizing, a secret government publication - in this case, one about the budget.

Does the police action mean the freedom of the press is under attack? Are politicians trying to gag reporters who embarrass them? Is Ottawa out to put a big chill on the media?

For 16 years I was a journalist, and wrote what I wanted. I was often critical of the government, of politicians and even federal budgets. I also, from time to time, received brown envelopes with government secrets inside.

Because of that background, I've found myself facing the TV cameras and microphones outside the House of Commons. Reporters want to know if I think the charge against Small was okay.

First, I don't think reporters have more rights than other people, so if the cops charged everybody who had the budget stuff, then Small should be charged, too. He knew full well what he had the night before Mike Wilson was to deliver the budget, and that there'd be some kind of fall-out.

But, having said that, freedom of the press is important to protect. Politicians need reporters looking over their shoulders, asking questions, demanding answers and being tough with decisions. Our system needs checks and balances - and the media plays an important role giving us that.

I don't think, quite honestly, that anybody's trying to scare the press with this action against Small. Maybe the RCMP went too far - but how, as I mentioned, could the police pick and choose who to charge here?

I've been telling reporters that I'm concerned about the action, and will not ultimately support any attempt to gag the press. That's one step too close to state control for this guy.

The House of Commons committee that I chair took a swing at the Governor-General over the last few days, and I'd like to tell you why.

That part of the government will spend \$9.3 million this year, which is 20 per cent more than last year. Given the mood of austerity and restraint around the country - with military base closings, VIA rail cutbacks and higher taxes - what kind of signal is this sending to people? Is it fair that expensive wine flows at Rideau Hall when we're all asked to give up more to help pay Canada's debts?

I don't think so. And that's why there was some tough questioning of the Governor-General's staff before our committee. Do we need to have the travel allowance increased by a full \$600,000?

Do we need to spend another \$600,000 to establish in Ottawa an office to do heraldry - designing coats of arms?

Frankly, this kind of spending bothers me. I'm not against the Governor-General or the monarchy or our traditions, but I just don't accept the lavish trend going on here. It's a time to make every tax dollar count, and to be totally fair.

This week the minister of public works comes before the committee. Among other things, I want to know why he plans on spending \$1.4 million this year on new statues for Parliament Hill. Again, how is this helping Canadians struggling with tax hikes? How is this fair?

I can't change a lot of stupid decisions made around here, but I can raise my voice - and will continue to do so. If there are examples of government waste or questionable spending you are aware of, then please let me know.

Give Ottawa a dose of what it really needs: Common sense.

As I write this, I'm preparing to travel back home; dig out my rubber boots and then head off to Bolton, for the first of three Pick-Up days we have planned.

It's a small way of marking Environment Week - a time we should all think hard about the kind of world we'll leave for the next generation. I have invited people to come out in Bolton, and later in Burlington and Georgetown, just to bend over and pick up polluting trash and litter.

I know most of us are vitally concerned about protecting the environment. I don't know how many will find the time to come out, or what impact the weather (and the SkyDome opening) will have - but let me say in advance that I sincerely thank everybody who's helped me on this issue.

It just doesn't matter what we accomplish in this world, if the world itself is sick.

The communities we belong to are living examples of all that's worth protecting. When Dorothy and I get back to the farm tonight, the gift of nature will be there for us. Tomorrow morning, we'll do a little repaying.

Nurses needed for Easter Seal

The Easter Seal Society urgently needs registered nurses to work with physically disabled children aged 7-19 at residential summer camps, from mid-June to late-August.

One camp has no nurses, four others are understaffed and it is less than two months until the season is due to start.

The Easter Seal camps are located near Kirkland Lake, Perth, Collingwood, London and Port Colborne. Nursing salaries are negotiable depending on experience; full board is provided for the duration of the camping season and travel costs to and from camp will be reimbursed.

Applicants must have a current Ontario Registration and a minimum of one year's recent clinical experience. Nurses who intend to specialize in paediatric, rehabilitative or public health nursing will find the Easter Seal camping program a valuable career experience.

For further details call Anne Maciej, The Easter Seal Society, 250 Ferrand Drive, suite 200, Don Mills, Ontario M3C 3P2, (416) 431-8377 ext. 2851 or toll free 1-800-668-6252.

Tire flattened

Police say someone flattened the tire of a vehicle parked on Main Street in Glen Williams during the late afternoon of May 30. Property damaged is valued at \$10.

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