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Dealing with Government - Patrick Brown

Passing the Buck

Well, if you don't like the way things are going, you can always write to the prime minister. As readers will know, I felt quite strongly about the lockout at the CBC, so I did just that—thought I'd give it a try.

My letter, sent by email on August 24, was a shorter and earlier version of the article published in the last issue of *Island Tides*, basically making the point that the CBC was an essential service, and neither management nor the union had the right to halt the service over a labour dispute. I also included some other related opinions.

On August 26, I received the following email reply:

Dear Mr Brown:

On behalf of the Right Honourable Paul Martin, I would like to thank you for your email, in which you raised an issue which falls within the portfolio of the Honourable Liza Frulla, Minister of Canadian Heritage. The Prime Minister always appreciates receiving mail on subjects of importance to Canadians.

Please be assured that the statements you made have been carefully reviewed. I have taken the liberty of forwarding your email to Minister Frulla so that she too may be made aware of your comments. I am certain that the Minister will give your views every consideration.

L. A. Lavell, Executive Correspondence Officer
Agent de correspondance de la haute direction

The buck, as you can clearly see, has been passed. The letter somehow failed to convince me that the prime minister always appreciates receiving mail on subjects of importance to Canadians. It was also unclear to me whether my letter qualified as such a subject or not; clearly this all-purpose reply could be used whatever the prime minister happened to think about the importance of my subject to Canadians.

Having had this magnificently-crafted piece of correspondence from the passer of the buck, I was at first relieved to receive an email from the passee of said buck. Sent on September 6, (buck-passing apparently takes seven working days), it reads as follows:

Dear Mr Brown:

I am writing in response to your correspondence forwarded by the Office of the Prime Minister to the Honourable Liza Frulla, Minister of Canadian Heritage and Minister responsible for

Status of Women, regarding the current labour dispute at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC).

The Minister appreciates being advised of your views and has carefully noted your comments with respect to this matter. While the Department of Canadian Heritage is responsible for overall broadcasting policy and legislation, the CBC operates independently of the Government under a framework provided in the *Broadcasting Act*. As an autonomous Crown corporation, its Board of Directors and senior management are responsible for its day-to-day operations, including its labour relations.

In view of the autonomy of the CBC, you might wish to share your views directly with Mr. Robert Rabinovitch, its President and Chief Executive Officer, at the address provided in the enclosure.

I trust that this information is useful. Please accept my best wishes.

Yours
sincerely, Luc Rouleau, Director
Ministerial Correspondence Secretariat

On reading this letter carefully, my excitement waned. I guess maybe I hadn't made myself clear. Or maybe I had been deliberately misunderstood. My point was that the *government* had a responsibility for the continuing provision of the CBC's services, no matter what was going on in its labour relations and now I had been referred back to one of the parties to the dispute.

In advising me, ever so politely, that I should be writing to Mr. Rabinovitch, who was the individual directly responsible for the lockout in the first place (and who will soon be replaced anyway), Ms. Frulla was absolving herself, her department, and the prime minister of any responsibility for the existence of the CBC.

I was, naturally, disappointed. The buck has once again been passed, this time into outer space.

It's easy to send a letter directly to the prime minister. But it's clear that his interest, and that of Ms Frulla (who used to work for the CBC, I understand), is to deflect any responsibility for what goes on, or even whether it does go on. These two rather patronizing and cynical letters are fine examples of how to do this. I suggest readers cut them out and apply them permanently to their refrigerator doors for use when the bailiffs arrive. ☺

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