

National Affairs by Claire Hoy ? Brazen disregard for press freedom

In 1990, your faithful correspondent co-authored a book called *By Way of Deception* with former Israeli Mossad agent Victor Ostrovsky.

The need for pre-publication secrecy was so acute that the publisher sent various sections to different printing plants around the country so that nobody outside the publishing house would have an actual copy of the book.

Even so, shortly before the official publication was planned, Mossad agents obtained a copy of the book jacket, enough for the Israeli government to take it to a friendly judge in New York ? in his apartment in the middle of the night ? and get a court order banning its publication.

Next day, responding to this legal ban, while Canadian media meekly deferred from publishing anything for a while, major U.S. publications, e.g. the New York Times, L.A. Times and Wall Street Journal, ran lengthy front-page excerpts from the book in a show of defiance against state censorship.

The rest, as they say, is history. It became the first Canadian non-fiction book to ever hit number one on the Times' list and was the biggest selling Canadian non-fiction book ever.

It was ever thus. It would have done well anyway, but not as well as it did, thanks to the clumsy effort to block its publication.

This is a lesson many people have yet to learn, among them Alberta NDP Premier Rachel Notley, whose government last week booted representatives from the right-wing website ?The Rebel? out of various government events on the specious grounds that the website's owner, controversial gadfly Ezra Levant, is ?not a journalist.?

I have known Ezra since my days co-hosting Face-Off on Newsworld, and I know that for the few days the NDP's stupidity was on display (until they rescinded their order) he would have thought he had died and gone to heaven.

Across the country, media outlets brought out the heavy artillery to fire at Notley's brazen disregard for press freedom.

The vast majority of these journalists are horrified by Levant's uber-partisan, take-no-prisoner's style of journalism ? he has often made me wince, although I confess to a certain admiration for his unshakeable stick-to-it-ness ? but they are joined in an even stronger distaste for the notion of a politician deciding just who is and who isn't a journalist.

Their lame rationale was that Levant once testified under oath, ?I'm a commentator, I'm a pundit. I don't think in my entire life I've ever called myself a reporter.?

Attempting to explain their colossal stupidity, Notley's director of communications, Cheryl Oates ? who was likely choking at the time ? said, ?Our rationale on this is very simple and it comes down to one thing: It's the fact that Ezra Levant himself has testified under oath that he is not a reporter and so we don't consider him a reporter.?

Oh my. Do they really believe that the only definition of a journalist acceptable to cover the Alberta Legislature is that they must be a recognized ?reporter?? For starters, unlike say lawyers and doctors, there is no formal body that recognizes reporters as such. But more to the point, does this mean that columnists and photographers are ineligible as well?

There is no doubt that Levant and his reporting staff despise Notley's NDP. And vice versa. But so what? Alberta press gallery president Darcy Henton said the move was unprecedented in his 20 years of covering the place. No doubt during that time there have been a lot of journalists who got under the skin of the premier, but no premier was dumb enough ? or ignorant of the importance of a free press ? to throw them out on the street.

Another thing. The whole issue raises another issue which many journalists, happy with the status quo, conveniently ignore.

While they united in their disdain for Notley's attempt at government censorship, all but a few conveniently ignore the principle of a press free from government dependence as well, i.e. the government's annual funding of the CBC with \$1 billion of your tax dollars. Make no mistake ? and regardless of what the CBC claims ? this money has an impact. Just look at how zealously the CBC ?reported,? i.e. cheered, the Liberal promise to reverse previous cuts to CBC funding ? calling them Tory cuts, when, in fact, the Chrétien Liberals had also cut funds previously. They were clearly in a conflict of interest here, but few journalists seem concerned about that aspect of a press free from government interference and/or dependence.

Now, with print media struggling for survival, the publicly funded CBC is touting its plan to increase its online print coverage of news, a move designed to take advantage of their public funding to undercut traditional print media.

The CBC, like every other media outlet, should stand on its own merit. And governments should stay out of it. Period.

