

Review: CBC report about a leaked draft report by the Auditor General on G20 expenditures

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REVIEW

On April 11, 2011, CBC Television's *The National* reported that a draft version of a report from the office of Auditor General Sheila Fraser had leaked.

[The draft](#), which CBC said had been obtained by The Canadian Press news agency, supposedly said that \$50 million in federal funds earmarked for infrastructure had been redirected to the riding of a federal cabinet minister in the governing Conservatives.

The draft supposedly said the government had misled Parliament to win approval of \$83 million in funds, including the \$50-million diversion, and that the measure might have been illegal. The report indicated the funds were part of federal spending on the G20 summit meeting, even though leaders were far from the riding in which the funds were spent.

The draft also supposedly said that only three individuals determined how the \$50 million would be spent, including the local mayor of Huntsville, Ontario, and the local MP, cabinet minister Tony Clement. Clement, interviewed for the story, said there were several meetings with mayors and reeves in the area to help determine how the funds would be allocated and that nothing was decided in private meetings.

[The report](#) included several clips from political leaders. Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff said the Conservatives had lied to Parliament and may have broken the law. "And this is not me telling you this. This is the auditor general of Canada." New Democratic Party Leader Jack Layton said the Conservatives had put their friends and political interests ahead of Canadian families.

John Baird, the federal minister responsible for infrastructure, asserted that the wording had been changed in a subsequent report from Fraser's office.

"I can say that the phrase 'Parliament was misinformed' is not contained in the next draft of the report," Baird said.

Moreover, he denied that three individuals determined how to spend the funds. The money had been vested with Infrastructure Canada and he was the person who decided, he said in the report.

CBC reporter Laurie Graham noted that the government and opposition alike were calling for the release of the final report. She said that Fraser said she could only release reports when Parliament was sitting.

The leak of the report came one day before televised leaders' debates in the federal election campaign.

The complainant, Brian Stewart, wrote April 12 that an earlier newscast April 11 had included information from [a statement that day](#) from Fraser that the public should wait for her [final report](#). (The final report was released June 9, 2011, when Parliament resumed.)

Stewart noted that Fraser said: "Sometimes during the process of fact validation, additional information is brought to our attention." But he noted The National "deliberately" did not include that information in its report, exclusion that he said "smacks of bias."

The executive producer of The National, Mark Harrison, wrote back May 26: "I agree with you to the extent that including the Auditor General's comment might have strengthened the story – additional information can often provide a fuller understanding of an event – but its absence does not imply the story is 'biased.'"

Harrison noted that the report stated repeatedly that the leaked Fraser document was a draft. He added that ministers were afforded the opportunity to rebut the allegations.

Harrison said elections were challenging to cover but that CBC had commissioned external reviews of its work during this period and they had found coverage fair and balanced.

[The CBC.ca report](#) on the leak did make note of Fraser's cautionary statement to await the final version's release, saying "only her final report will represent her audit's findings and conclusions when it is tabled in Parliament."

[CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices](#) ensures that "*facts and analysis we present on issues, candidates and parties is timely, accurate, fair and balanced over the course of the campaign. We give all candidates, parties and issues equitable treatment. This does not necessarily mean equal broadcast time.*"

CONCLUSION

The report itself was predicated on work by another news organization, The Canadian Press, to gain access to a draft report through a source. CP, a national news agency, supplies domestic and international news to CBC and other organizations.

It was sound amid an election campaign for CBC News to report about the leak, even if it could only report on the draft version's contents second-hand. The test for CBC was to provide a fair and balanced account of the leak and the reaction to it.

I found that CBC Television provided ample opportunity in its report for a substantial exploration of the issue. It provided information, with attribution to CP, on the leaked document. It gave ministers an opportunity to answer the allegations. It stressed a few times in the report that the document was a draft version. On the most serious allegation, it included a minister's comments that a statement critical of the government in the draft did not appear in a subsequent version.

There was no violation of CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices, but there was room for improvement in the report to include Fraser's cautionary statement.

Her remarks — that the public should wait for the final report and that new information is often brought to her attention as draft reports are circulated — were not definitive that the most critical elements of the draft were not in subsequent versions. But they were strong hints that raised questions that CBC Television could have permitted viewers to know. I note that CBC.ca included the cautionary statement high in its report, and I agree with The National's executive producer that including the remarks in the television report might have strengthened it.

Kirk LaPointe
CBC Ombudsman