

Review: Interview about riot in Vancouver after Stanley Cup final game

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July 13, 2011

## **REVIEW**

On June 15, 2011, CBC Television's Hockey Night in Canada broadcast the seventh and deciding game of the Stanley Cup finals between the Vancouver Canucks and Boston Bruins, played at Rogers Arena in Vancouver.

To celebrate the presence of the Canucks in the finals, the city of Vancouver and other communities organized a handful of outdoor public screenings of the game. An estimated more than 100,000 came to downtown Vancouver for the event.

After the game, some people overturned cars, set fire to them, and began to roam the downtown to damage and loot property. The so-called "riot" lasted more than three hours as police responded. While there were no fatalities and only a few injuries, the impact totaled millions of dollars in property and goods.

Footage from the riot was broadcast around the world, in many respects overshadowing the hockey game and leaving an impression of Vancouver distinctly negative from earlier ones, particularly the upbeat images from the 2010 Winter Games. Naturally, the episode gave rise to extensive media coverage locally.

The next morning, CBC Radio British Columbia's Early Edition program discussed the riots. Host Rick Cluff convened a discussion with local CBC sports reporter Shane Foxman and CBC Hockey Night in Canada host Ron McLean, who happened to be in transit as Cluff called with Hockey Night in Canada commentator Don Cherry, co-host of Coach's Corner on the broadcast.

After a discussion with Foxman and McLean about their reactions to the riot, McLean asked Cluff if he wanted to have Cherry on the line. Cluff agreed and asked Cherry what was his reaction.

"Well, you got left-wing pinkos at the head (of) our government and you let these punks away with it, and they know when they get caught they're only going to get a slap on

the wrist. Give me about 20 guys with billy clubs and dogs, I'd have cleaned them out in no time. But they (the police) stood there.

He continued: "Same way in Toronto," a reference likely to last year's G20 summit demonstrations. "The police say their hands are tied with the lily-livered pinkos that are in government. If they had let them go, they would have cleaned those punks out. And those punks are all set to go. They weren't worried about the Canucks or anything. Immediately after that game was done, they had the fire all set to go because they know they're going to get away with it. The media's all left wing and the government's left wing, and this is the result. Give me a good right wing guy with some clubs and I would have cleaned them all out."

Cluff responded: "Well, Don, it's typical Grapes," referring to Cherry's nickname. "And by the way, I loved the jacket last night, too." Cherry wears flamboyant suit jackets for the telecasts.

Cherry replied: "That was beautiful, too. The only thing is, you have to watch what bar you go into. The guys start holding your hand." He began to laugh.

Cluff wished him safe travels, then concluded the discussion with Foxman.

The complainant, Garson Hunter, wrote June 20 that Cluff chuckled at Cherry's comments and neither challenged him about who was responsible for the riot nor for his "homophobic comment about his need to be careful where he wears his jacket."

Hunter said Cherry was alleging that people to the left of the political spectrum were responsible for the riot.

Lorna Haeber, the program director for CBC Radio British Columbia, wrote back June 23 to say that Cherry had not called the rioters pinkos. That term was used to describe those in government who let "the punks get away with it," she wrote, adding that Cherry advocated a "harder approach" to the rioters. She noted that emotions "were running high" that morning.

As for the jacket remark, Haeber wrote: "Mr Cherry's response was an attempt at humour that to your ears, and I'm sure to many of our listeners' ears, fell flat."

Hunter wrote back that Cherry definitely meant the demonstrators were leftist. "His solution was to adopt the worst posture of right-wing dictatorships and fascist governments; cops swinging clubs and releasing dogs. Cherry was not proposing a 'harder approach' as you described it. Surely as a media producer you are quite well aware of his crypto-fascist allusions in his solution."

Rather than “an innocent little jest that fell flat on some listeners,” Hunter said Cherry’s jacket remark “was a homophobic comment that your program host should have halted rather than chuckled along, seeing as Cherry is a contract employee on HNIC (Hockey Night in Canada). Cherry is not a ‘caller’ whose emotions are running high, he is a contract employee of a CBC program.”

(He asked for the response from Haerber to be part of the review, but any such correspondence is not considered programming and thus not subject to the work of the Ombudsman.)

[CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices](#) do not directly guide the conduct of guests and commentators, but they are designed to set the tone for all news and information programming and they govern the content produced on radio, television and online.

Certain qualities pervade the policy: fostering respect, reflecting diversity, and providing information that Canadians feel capture their values.

On the matter of the use of language: *“We are aware of our influence on how minorities or vulnerable groups are perceived. We do not mention national or ethnic origin, colour, religious affiliation, physical characteristics or disabilities, mental illness, sexual orientation or age except when important to an understanding of the subject or when a person is the object of a search and such personal characteristics will facilitate identification.*

It continues: *“We avoid generalizations, stereotypes and any degrading or offensive words or images that could feed prejudice or expose people to hatred or contempt.”*

The policy says journalists should *“avoid inflaming or aiding in any way the various sides in a confrontation.”*

## **CONCLUSION**

As a commentator and contracted contributor on sports programming, Don Cherry has a wider berth than do CBC’s journalists to express opinions. The Ombudsman’s mandate is to deal with news and information programming. When Cherry discusses controversial matters on CBC platforms, his contributions can fall within the Ombudsman’s purview.

Any review of his contributions is not only about him but how CBC comports itself with his presence. Principles and values of CBC news and information programming do not change simply because a commentator is the contributor.

One responsibility of CBC programmers is to ensure that a range of views is expressed over a period of time. In this respect I am satisfied that Cherry’s views on the rioters and on the leadership of government were part of a diverse blend of views on CBC Radio

British Columbia and elsewhere that day and beyond. It would have been better to contest his perspective on the riots than to note that they were “typical Grapes,” but there was no violation of CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices.

His remarks about his jacket were incongruent with his longtime support of those facing challenge and adversity. They fed division and did not reflect the values of CBC. Hosts are the front-line stewards of CBC’s standards and they need to be particularly alert in live broadcasts to speak up immediately when remarks venture from CBC programming principles. Doing so in this case would have better fulfilled CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices.

Kirk LaPointe  
CBC Ombudsman