

Review: Interviews on The Current about the proposal to grant Palestinian statehood

October 18, 2011

REVIEW

CBC Radio's [The Current](#) and other programming on television, radio and online provided extensive coverage in the days preceding the United Nations vote on a proposal to grant Palestinian statehood status.

Two such segments of coverage are the focus of this review: On September 22, The Current featured [an interview with Israeli deputy prime minister Dan Meridor](#), and on September 26, the program featured [an interview with the chargé d'affaires for the Palestinian delegation to Canada, Linda Sobeh Ali](#).

The interview with Meridor focused on Israel's opposition to the bid for statehood on the day before the [appearance at the UN by Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas](#).

Host [Anna Maria Tremonti](#) posed several questions in the interview, among other things whether there had been too much talk and not enough political action; whether he supported France's support of a proposal for non-member state status for the Palestinians; why Israel had used the United Nations to advance its status and now opposed the Palestinian bid; why there could not be recognition and then negotiation; and what he made of the criticism that Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu bore some responsibility for the challenges to effective negotiations.

The interview with Sobeh Ali took place three days after the Abbas speech at the UN.

Among other things, Tremonti asked what it was like to see the Abbas speech; whether she should have watched the speech with a Syrian representative as that country's people sought the government's overthrow; what was stopping the parties from negotiating peace; why Israeli settlements in the region posed a roadblock to talks; how going to the UN changes the dynamic; what she thought about official Canadian opposition to the proposal; what she thought was the relationship between Canada and the Palestinian Authority; what Hamas' non-support of Abbas meant in the matter; why Palestinians would never give up their right to return to a homeland; whether Abbas was representing the Palestinian Authority or the

political Palestinian Liberation Organization; and whether she agreed it was necessary to negotiate.

The complainant, Arthur Milner, wrote September 26 after hearing both interviews. He said the interview with Merido was polite, that he was given an opportunity to explain his position, and that he was never questioned about Israel's continued settlement expansion in the occupied West Bank, including east Jerusalem.

By comparison, he felt Tremonti was rude to Sobeh Ali, had an "insistent, hard tone throughout . . . she wasn't interviewing Ms. Sobeh; she was interrogating her."

On September 29, the executive producer for The Current, Pam Bertrand, wrote Milner. She said the program had heard a range of views in the last week on the issue of Palestinian statehood and expected to continue to do so in the coming weeks.

Bertrand said it was Tremonti's responsibility to test Sobeh Ali's views. "A journalist who persists may be seen as 'rude,' arrogant or disrespectful when that is certainly not his/her intention," she wrote.

Milner wrote back October 3 to say his complaint was about the differences in the approaches in the two interviews, something he considered evidence of bias. He noted a subsequent interview with an Israeli settler in the West Bank he said did not challenge the guest. He asked for a review of the matter.

He later wrote October 7 to acknowledge that The Current had featured some "very good items of late on the Middle East."

[CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices](#) call for individuals and organization to be treated "*with openness and respect . . . even-handedly.*"

The policy adds: "*On issues of controversy, we ensure that divergent views are reflected respectfully, taking into account their relevance to the debate and how widely held these views are. We also ensure that they are represented over a reasonable period of time.*"

It strives for impartiality and notes: "*We do not promote any particular point of view on matters of public debate.*"

CONCLUSION

In an [earlier review](#) I have noted the difficulty for a broadcaster to achieve balance on complex issues within a segment. Instead, the performance measure needs to include an examination of its efforts over a period of time, even among different programs across different platforms, to understand if it is providing fair coverage that includes a balance of views.

An evaluation of fairness also has to take into account the context in which a segment was presented. What seems to be even-handed treatment of one person on one day might be considered light-handed the next day, and what seems to be heavy-handed one day might be considered even-handed the next.

In this instance, I can acknowledge the frustration of the complainant that the Palestinian delegation's representative was provided a tougher encounter, but I concluded it was fair to do so under the circumstances.

The context of Anna Maria Tremonti's discussion with Linda Sobeh Ali was significantly different than her discussion with Dan Meridor, and it was not unfair to pose more aggressive questions to her in that context.

Which is not to say Tremonti's interview with Meridor did not seek accountability. She asked questions that sought explanations on the Israeli position and she found several opportunities to challenge him.

The Sobeh Ali interview was a different opportunity in a different context, given that it took place after the United Nations speech and in the midst of world reaction to the bid for Palestinian statehood. It was appropriate to ask her tough questions and compel her to defend the statehood proposal as a proponent of significant geo-political change. The circumstances called for an interview seeking accountability, which is what Tremonti delivered.

On repeated listening, I did not find Tremonti rude. Instead, I concluded she was attempting to understand Sobeh Ali's statements and positions. In a couple of instances she wondered if there was an inconsistency in them, but there was nothing impolite or problematic in the line of inquiry. Indeed, Tremonti carefully avoided stepping into an adversarial role or into expressing an opinion, even when Sobeh Ali asked her.

Sobeh Ali was given an ample platform to express her views, even if it was clear at times that she was finding it challenging to deal with a seasoned interviewer who has a solid understanding of the region's politics.

They were strong segments and reflected well on the overall commitment of the program to the issue. I found no violation of CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices.

Kirk LaPointe
CBC Ombudsman