

## **NEWS RELEASE**

British Columbia Civil Liberties Association

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# **Civil Rights Group Says Border Should Not Be Used to Ban People from Speaking on Contentious Issues**

The B.C. Civil Liberties Association says that the Canada Border Services Agency should not be in the business of screening what viewpoints are presented to Canadians in Canada. Preventing an American anti-gay group from entering Canada in order to protest outside the performance of the *Laramie Project*, a play about the murder in 1998 of Matthew Shepard, a gay student in Wyoming, would do just that. The notorious Westboro Baptist Church routinely pickets any production of "The Laramie Project". The BCCLA opposes the use of the border to block political speech, no matter how repulsive the ideas of the demonstrators.

BCCLA President Rob Holmes said: "The BC Civil Liberties Association has a long history standing up for freedom of expression and for the rights of gay, lesbian, transgendered and other persons. One example of that arises from our action as a party in the *Little Sisters* cases opposing the use of the customs authorities to screen out the importation of books and materials by a gay and lesbian bookstore. Another arose in the context of books regarding same-sex parents being banned from schools in Surrey, B.C. In the present situation, the concern is with words of rabid homophobia. While those words and thoughts are repugnant, we say that they are and should remain constitutionally protected. The *Laramie Project* play itself negatively portrays the leader of this Westboro group through having an actor on stage recite some of his outrageous statements. That is obviously protected speech too, and not just because it is presented in the context of a play that has as its lesson and moral a message that condemns bigotry and violence.

We trust Canadians will make the right assessment of such thoughts, whether they are offered up by an actor on stage or are espoused by those who originally spoke them. We must all learn from history. The Vancouver Public Library and other libraries across the country have Adolph Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and similar books on their shelves. They are there so the public may freely educate itself about bad ideas and learn to distinguish the bad from the good. So too here, we should not use government law enforcement agents at borders to filter what is said and heard in this country and to exercise a paternalistic judgment of what is fit for us to hear. Going down that path would be dangerous.

If only speech that the government of the day or some border agent likes us to hear is allowed to enter the country, one of our most precious freedoms will be impaired. We are a strong and resilient enough people to know how to judge the character and quality of the ideas that enter the public forum, even those that are wrong and distasteful. That is the essence of our democracy."

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