



NEWS RELEASE

British Columbia Civil Liberties Association
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Free speech faces Olympic-sized threat, says BCCLA

(VANCOUVER) - In the wake of UBC forbidding students from posting signs and posters on dorm buildings or in dorm windows "visible from the Thunderbird Winter Sports Centre" and VANOC urging cities to prohibit political leafleting or signs during the Olympic torch run, the BCCLA has come to the troubling conclusion that free speech is not welcome at the Olympics.

"Canada, B.C. and Vancouver said in our bid documents that we would honour our constitutional commitment to free speech, but they forgot to mention this right was reserved for Olympic sponsors alone," said Robert Holmes, President of the BCCLA. "It's time for a sober second look at these anti-free speech activities, and if necessary seek review of them by our Courts."

UBC is asking students who wish to live on campus to sign a tenancy agreement which obliges the students not to post "signage or displays that create a false or unauthorized commercial association with the Olympics." The BCCLA will be working with students in September to overturn this prohibition on speech that led to confrontations during the APEC protests.

Earlier this month, 24 Hours newspaper reporter Bob Mackin obtained through a Freedom of Information Request a copy of documents drafted by VANOC identifying activities such as handing out political pamphlets or displaying political banners while the Olympic Torch Relay takes place as matters of "high concern." In response to his article, the BCCLA sent a letter to the thirty largest Canadian cities along the torch run asking for clarification three weeks ago has gone unanswered by all but six municipalities, each of which referred the issue to their legal departments.

"Such silence from Canadian mayors is very troubling and suggests they may be more interested in free tickets to Olympic events than in protecting the free speech rights of the rest of us," said Holmes. "It is unconscionable that Canadian leaders would even think about restricting the public's fundamental freedoms at a time when Canadian values will be on display to the world."

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BACKGROUND

The BCCLA has identified and spoken out about a troubling trend of anti-free speech activities by VANOC, the Vancouver Integrated Security Unit (VISU) and other government and quasi-government agencies around the Olympics.

- **Oct. 2008 – No outdoor advertising permitted by non-sponsors**
The BCCLA files a competition complaint still being considered by the Competition Tribunal concerning VANOC's purchase of all outdoor advertising space in the Lower Mainland for \$40m over the ten weeks of the Olympic period for the express purpose of only reselling it to Olympic sponsors and refusing access to non-sponsors.
- **Jan. 2009 – City seeks to punish leaflets and signs at \$10k/day**
The City of Vancouver asks for special powers to prohibit the distribution of "advertising-matter. . . if likely to be thrown or left on a street" and to enter private property to remove "illegal signs" from private property, accompanied by fines of up to \$10,000 per day. The BCCLA wrote and spoke to City Council to oppose this threat to free speech.
- **Feb. 2009 – VISU stakes out city hall, book store for dissent**
The BCCLA writes to VISU to protest against Olympic security force representatives sitting unannounced in the City Hall gallery to monitor speakers on an Olympic related issue, and visiting an independent bookstore to ask the owner to provide information about Olympic critics.
- **Jun. 2009 – Cities won't confirm free speech rights during torch run**
The BCCLA writes to the thirty largest Canadian cities to ask them whether they will enforce guidelines provided them by VANOC that suggest the distribution of political leaflets or display of political signs would be matters of "high concern." Only six municipalities respond. None of them take a position endorsing free speech rights.
- **Jun. 2009 – VPD wants protesters to register with the police dept.**
The Vancouver Police Department releases a statement that says groups planning protests during the Olympics should "contact our Operational Planning Unit," a suggestion that if enforced would be unconstitutional. The VPD also say that protesters will be allowed to "put up signs or distribute written material. . . unless the signs or their support mechanism are used as a weapon or to obstruct the vision of others."
- **Jun. 2009 – UBC repeats APEC by prohibiting student signs**
The BCCLA is notified that UBC seeks to limit student abilities to put signs in dorm windows and on outside dorm walls "in view of" Olympic venues on campus.