



## Broadcasting Decision CRTC 2008-9

Ottawa, 17 January 2008

**Canadian Broadcasting Corporation**  
Across Canada

### **Complaint regarding the broadcast by the CBC of the *Little Mosque on the Prairie* episode “Traditional Mother”**

*In this decision, the Commission addresses a complaint alleging that the Little Mosque on the Prairie episode “Traditional Mother” broadcast by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) constituted an instance of abusive comment. Subsequent to a complete review of the file, the Commission finds no evidence of abusive comment. The Commission is also of the view that the CBC adequately and responsibly addressed the complainant’s concerns.*

#### **Background**

1. In March 2007, the Commission received a complaint alleging that the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) broadcast abusive comment against homosexuals when it aired a *Little Mosque on the Prairie* episode entitled “Traditional Mother” on 28 February 2007.
2. The CBC filed a reply on 20 March 2007, to which the complainant in turn responded in a letter of 6 April 2007 (revised 19 April), expressing his dissatisfaction with the CBC’s response.
3. Following examination of the logger tape, Commission staff informed the complainant, by letter dated 23 August 2007, that it had found no evidence of abusive comment. Commission staff also expressed its view that the CBC had satisfied its regulatory obligation to respond to the complainant’s concerns about the broadcast.
4. On 10 September 2007, the complainant wrote to the Commission again to request that it review the complete file and issue a decision on the matter. On 21 September, the CBC advised the Commission that it had nothing further to add to its 20 March 2007 response.

#### **The episode**

5. “Traditional Mother” was first aired on 28 February 2007 at 7 p.m. The program was accompanied by a PG (Parental Guidance) classification displayed onscreen at the beginning of the program.
6. As described by the CBC:

In this episode, Reverend McGee, the Anglican Minister, is asked to perform a same-sex marriage for Johnny, the community swim instructor, and his partner. Reverend McGee agrees to marry the couple, in part because Johnny is a lifelong member of the church. McGee believes it would be a sin to turn his back on Johnny.

As is not unusual in both fictional and real towns, however, not everyone is overjoyed by McGee's decision. Fred Tupper [the 'right-wing' radio talk show host], Fatima [the Muslim diner owner and caterer] and Baber [the 'radical Muslim'] state openly that they are against same-sex marriage and/or homosexuality, but to varying degrees. For example, although Fatima tells Johnny that she does not "approve" of homosexuality, she does agree to cater his wedding, because, for her, good food is more important than issues of morality. Baber, in contrast, declares he will picket outside the church during the wedding, which he considers "an abomination."

7. Comments in favor of the marriage come from Reverend McGee, who says that it is not that he "likes it, but that it's the right thing to do." When speaking to the issue of gay marriage and performing the ceremony at the church, the Minister uses terms such as "peace," "tolerance," and "understanding." Some characters pass no judgment on the marriage, while others express their negative opinions in various ways. The 'radical Muslim' character refuses to pray in the same building as that in which a gay marriage ceremony will be performed. The 'right-wing' local radio host questions the Minister's morals and morality because he will sanction a gay marriage. Finally, two characters, the 'radical Muslim' and the local slow-witted 'redneck,' organize a protest outside the church. The audience briefly sees them talking about how they think gay marriage is wrong; they also see their anti-gay marriage messages on their placards. In the end, the couple chooses to get married in Toronto.
8. The main gay character in this storyline is a visiting character and not part of the regular cast.

### **The complaint**

9. In his original complaint, the complainant submitted that the "Traditional Mother" episode was offensive towards homosexuals and promoted intolerance towards this group of people by:
  - trying to get "a few hurtful stereotype-laughs";
  - "vilifying and portraying homosexuals as being unimportant plus stupid";
  - "encouraging anti-homosexual behaviour";
  - "contributing to fanning the flames of bigotry";
  - implying "that attacking homosexuals was acceptable in Canada"; and
  - showing "hateful people ruining the Gays' wedding and driving the gay couple out of town."

10. The complainant concluded his letter by requesting that the Commission stop the CBC from broadcasting the series.
11. In his subsequent letter of 6 April 2007, the complainant elaborated his position by alleging that:
  - the episode showed the world how to harass homosexuals and that it did so “under the guise of comedy”;
  - the signs carried by the two protesters served no other purpose than to express hate;
  - repeated negative suggestions (expressions against homosexuals) have destructive power;
  - the CBC was trying to encourage conflict; and finally,
  - the CBC’s intention was to be offensive partly by reproducing offensive conditions the audience would have to experience.
12. The complainant also raised other regulatory concerns over balance in programming (“broadcasting anti-homosexual behaviour in a largely-unchallenged manner”) and the fact that the episode was not accompanied with obvious disclaimers telling the audience that the episode or series contained “negative stereotypes and other potentially unpleasant radical positions.”

### **CBC’s reply**

13. The CBC regretted that the complainant was offended by the series and stated it was not its intention to offend any viewers.
14. The CBC agreed that there were some stereotypical elements to the main homosexual character, yet disagreed that his portrayal was that of being “unimportant” or “stupid” as the complainant asserted. The CBC also disagreed with the complainant’s overall assessment of the series and the “Traditional Mother” episode. The CBC explained that *Little Mosque on the Prairie* is a comedy about the interactions between members of a new Muslim community and their non-Muslim neighbours in Mercy, a small, fictional Canadian prairie town, and that the show’s humour stems from the conflicts found not only in religion and culture but also among the different characters within each community, some of whom are more broad-minded than others. According to the CBC, this mix helps create the conflict that drives the plot of the program. In this respect, the CBC underscored that its policy on stereotypes clearly and specifically recognizes that greater latitude in portrayal is required in dramatic and fictional productions in order to meet the requirements of plot, character or program purpose. The CBC added that there is a significant difference between presenting the views of fictional characters in a comedy program and “encouraging” or promoting hateful behaviour.

15. Finally, the CBC stated that it did not promote the opinions of any of the characters in this program and emphasized that it was not its intention to suggest that Canadians should adopt the behaviour of any of the characters exhibited. Though the CBC conceded that the appeal of humour is not universal, it stated that the intention of this program is to promote tolerance and understanding through humour.

### **Commission's analysis and determinations**

16. Section 5(1)(b) of the *Television Broadcasting Regulations, 1987* (the Regulations) states that no broadcaster shall broadcast any abusive comment or abusive pictorial representation that, when taken in context, tends to or is likely to expose an individual or a group or class of individuals to hatred or contempt on the basis of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, sexual orientation, age or mental or physical disability.
17. The Commission has stated in a number of decisions that the regulation prohibiting abusive comment is intended to prevent the very real harms that such comments cause, harms that undermine Canadian broadcasting policy objectives. Comments that tend to or are likely to expose a group to hatred or contempt cause emotional damage that may be of grave psychological and social consequence to members of the target group. The derision, hostility and abuse encouraged by such comments can have a severe negative impact on the targeted group's sense of self-worth, human dignity and acceptance within society. This harm undermines the equality rights of those targeted, rights which the programming of the Canadian broadcasting system should respect and reflect according to Canadian broadcasting policy. In addition to preventing the harm to those targeted by the comments, the regulation prohibiting abusive comment is required to ensure that Canadian values are reflected and respected for all Canadians. The broadcast of comments provoking hatred and contempt also undermines the cultural and social fabric of Canada, which the Canadian broadcasting system should safeguard, enrich and strengthen.
18. The Commission considers that on-air comments contravene section 5(1)(b) of the Regulations when all three of the following criteria are met:
  - 1) the comments are abusive;
  - 2) the abusive comments, taken in context, tend or are likely to expose an individual or a group or class of individuals to hatred or contempt; and
  - 3) the abusive comments are on the basis of an individual's or a group's race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, sexual orientation, age or mental or physical disability.
19. In the Commission's view, the broadcast under review meets the third criteria, as the comments in question were made on the basis of an individual or a group's sexual orientation. Therefore, in what follows the Commission focuses on the other two criteria.

20. Given that there were 13 accusations made by the complainant, the Commission has grouped these by issue for the purposes of applying part one and two of the test respecting abusive comment. Specifically, the Commission has identified the following three issues to be addressed in its determinations:

- stereotyping;
- the role of comedy; and
- encouraging hatred.

21. The remaining allegations are addressed collectively under “Other issues.”

### **Stereotyping**

22. The complainant has alleged that the gay male characters on the program were stereotyped negatively and that by doing this the CBC was being “hurtful,” “vilifying” and denigrating towards homosexuals.

23. The Commission notes that although two homosexual characters are depicted in the episode, only one has dialogue; the other is symbolic, demonstrating that the talking character has a male partner. Both gay characters have similar physical attributes. The talking gay character is depicted as effeminate by his tone of voice, his hand and head gestures, and his ‘campy’ dialogue. These traits can involve a pejorative insinuation regarding homosexual tendencies. One can conclude, therefore, that the characters are stereotyped.

24. However, it is important to recognize that the use of stereotypes in dramatic programming, or any type of storytelling, is not automatically abusive. It is the Commission’s view that the CBC series in question is laughing at stereotypes and caricatures via all of its characters, which ultimately could give way to the viewer’s realizing and laughing at just how ignorant the views of others can be. Specifically, the program contains as part of its main cast various stereotyped characters such as the ‘radical Muslim’ and the local ‘redneck.’ The ‘radical Muslim’ is a former Imam who is consistent in conveying absolutist opinions on everyone and everything. He often claims that something is an “abomination,” whether it be women speaking in the mosque, men and women praying together, or in the case of this episode, homosexuality. The local ‘redneck’ is Caucasian and is portrayed as generally ‘dim-witted,’ delivering comments that are racist, homophobic and often not very well articulated.

25. In assessing allegations of abusive comment, the Commission looks to find evidence that the representation of the stereotype at issue would incite the viewer to hatred or contempt, such as despising people of the targeted group to the point of extreme ill will or being intentionally disrespectful to the point of inciting treatment of individuals identified with the group as inferior.

26. In the present case, the Commission is of the view that the intentional exaggeration of the personality traits of the characters for comic effect would be apparent to the reasonable viewer. The portrayals at issue are not malicious or extreme. Further, after viewing the episode and several others in the series, the Commission finds that in general the portrayal of all the characters tends to convey the idea that the opinions they express are part of their caricatural nature. The Commission considers that this is consistent with the series' use of caricature as a storytelling device to carry the plot forward and ultimately underscore a particular moral lesson. Stereotypes, in this case, are a dramatic tool that helps to tell a story, rather than to harm or denigrate any targeted group. Therefore, the Commission finds that in this instance the portrayals, while not necessarily ideal, raise no regulatory concerns.

### **The role of comedy**

27. The complainant is also alleging that the episode showed the world how to harass homosexuals and that it did so "under the guise of comedy."
28. This allegation suggests that the program is not a comedy as claimed by the CBC, but rather hatred secretly cloaked as a comedy in order to provide a vehicle for messages of hate.
29. After viewing the episode and others in the series, the Commission is satisfied that *Little Mosque on the Prairie* is clearly a well-intentioned comedy as defined under television program category 7 (Drama and Comedy) of Public Notice 1999-205, namely an "[e]ntertainment production[] of a fictional nature." As set out in Appendix I of that notice, category 7 includes program subcategory 7b) On-going comedy series (sitcoms).
30. In this regard, the Commission notes that *Little Mosque on the Prairie*
- is based in a fictional town,
  - has invented and scripted characters that are played out by actors, and
  - features the same main characters debating a new situation in each episode.
31. Additionally, the Commission notes that the use of the term "comedy" in literature denotes, according to Merriam-Webster, "a drama of light and amusing character and typically with a happy ending" that "deal[s] with the comic or with the serious in a light or satirical manner." The Commission is of the view that the "Traditional Mother" episode deals with the issue of gay marriage (a serious and controversial matter) in a light, comical manner. Also, the episode has a happy ending, a simple resolve: the two main characters in opposition to the marriage follow the instruction of their respective religious leaders and peacefully go home; the 'issue' is closed. The gay characters are not chased out of town as the complainant suggested; rather, they decide to hold their wedding at a more upscale location than Mercy – a spa in Toronto.

32. The Commission has also viewed other episodes in the series and found that those episodes also treat serious themes in a light and comedic manner. Moreover, while the series engages in caricature and stereotypes to make its points, the use of these devices shows no indication of malicious or underhanded intent.
33. In conclusion, the Commission is of the view that *Little Mosque on the Prairie* meets all the criteria of an on-going comedy, and more specifically, that of a well-intentioned situational comedy. Moreover, as discussed below, the Commission has found no evidence that the CBC is promoting hate or propagating hateful messages “under the guise of comedy” via the “Traditional Mother” episode.

#### **Encouraging hatred**

34. The complainant has accused the CBC of encouraging hate towards homosexuals by broadcasting this episode of *Little Mosque on the Prairie*.
35. As stated in the description of the episode, the following characters express their opposition to gay marriage, each to a varying degree: the local radio host, the ‘radical Muslim,’ the local ‘redneck,’ and the diner owner and caterer.
36. The Commission notes that when these characters express their opposition to gay marriage in the episode, they do so without any insinuation that any kind of harm should or will be inflicted on the gay characters. Further, when the ‘radical Muslim’ and the local ‘redneck’ decide to prepare a protest against the marriage outside the church, they do not ask anyone to join them or suggest that anyone should also demonstrate against the marriage. The demonstration is attended only by them, and they are holding placards with their own opinions (i.e. “gay marriage is an abomination” and “marriage is for man and wife”). There are no acts of violence or suggestions that there could be an act of violence towards the gay characters. Finally, the demonstration occurs outside an empty church; the gay characters do not see it, nor does anyone else in the town (except for a man taking out his garbage), at least onscreen. While a demonstration could have the potential to be a ‘hostile environment’ as the complainant argues, it is difficult to conclude that two people with placards and no audience could create a hostile environment.
37. It is the Commission’s view therefore that the episode in question presented opinions on gay marriage, including some in opposition to varying degrees, but that these were clearly the characters’ opinions in isolation only.
38. The Commission has also carefully evaluated the dialogue and interactions between the gay characters and the rest of the cast. Although negative repeated messages could potentially lead to the desensitization of the public towards this identifiable group in a particular context, the Commission is of the view that this was not the case here. In particular, the Commission agrees with the CBC that there is a significant difference between presenting the views of fictional characters in a comedy program and encouraging or promoting hateful behaviour. Like a ‘morality tale,’ the “Traditional Mother” episode delivers its moral, tolerance, through its closing scene when the

Minister tells the two picketers to “go home” and that “every little bit hurts.” During this scene the Imam stands by the Minister and gives non-verbal cues that he obviously agrees with the Minister. In so doing they are conveying the message that intolerance is not the ‘proper’ Christian or Muslim way. As a result, it is clear that the message of the program is not the encouragement of hatred, as alleged by the complainant.

#### **Other issues**

39. The complainant further alleged that the CBC intended to be offensive and to encourage conflict by broadcasting the “Traditional Mother” episode and raised questions about balance in programming. Specifically, the complainant submitted that the CBC should broadcast “disclaimers” with the series.
40. As noted above, the Commission has found no evidence that the CBC intended to promote hate. The negative messages towards gay marriage were an essential part of the plot; the ‘moral’ of the story, as delivered by the community leaders, was tolerance. Because the negative remarks were plot drivers and because of the strong message of tolerance delivered by the Minister throughout the episode and by the two religious leaders at its conclusion, the Commission is of the view that balance is not an issue in this case.
41. Similarly, with respect to the issue of disclaimers or viewer advisories, the Commission notes that viewer advisories are usually employed for programs that contain mature subject matter intended for adult audiences or otherwise contain violence, nudity, or offensive language. *Little Mosque on the Prairie* is presently accompanied by a PG classification. The Commission has found no evidence of the need for viewer advisories in the present case.

#### **Conclusion**

42. As discussed above, the Commission finds no evidence of hatred or contempt within the “Traditional Mother” episode. The Commission agrees with the CBC that the program presents the views of fictional characters in a comedy program in a way that does not “encourage” or promote hateful behaviour, but rather delivers a message of tolerance.
43. While the stereotypical portrayal of the gay characters is not necessarily ideal, in this case that portrayal, along with the rest of the stereotypes used to portray other characters, is a dramatic tool that helps tell a story. The portrayal in question is not malicious or extreme and raises no regulatory concerns.
44. Accordingly, for all the reasons set out above, the Commission finds that the CBC has not breached section 5(1)(b) of the Regulations by broadcasting the “Traditional Mother” episode of *Little Mosque on the Prairie*. The Commission is also of the view that the CBC adequately and responsibly addressed the complainant’s concerns.



Secretary General

**Related document**

- *Definitions for new types of priority programs; revisions to the definitions of television content categories; definitions of Canadian dramatic programs that will qualify for time credits towards priority programming requirements, Public Notice CRTC 1999-205, 23 December 1999*

*This decision is available in alternative format upon request and may also be examined in PDF format or in HTML at the following Internet site : <http://www.crtc.gc.ca>*