

2020-06: Kinahan vs Toronto Sun

March 9, 2020

The National NewsMedia Council has dismissed a complaint about misleading characterization in an opinion article published on January 15, 2020 in the Toronto Sun.

Complainant Gord Kinahan objected to the use of a particular individual as a source in an opinion article, “WARMINGTON: Teachers must stop holding students hostage.” The article featured an interview and comments from a person who opposed the Ontario teacher strikes and supported a stronger government stand. The interviewee was described as a family man and owner of a small business, who “leans conservative but supported the federal Liberals during the era when Jean Chretien and Paul Martin were prime ministers.” The article stated many like him are displeased with teachers’ job action.

The complainant did not argue with facts stated in the article, but said the description of the interviewee was misleading because it omitted information that the person featured was an active partisan who supported the education minister’s election campaign. He said the article failed to note information on social media posts and online evidence about the interviewee’s campaign activity, and described that information as pertinent to the context of the story.

The Toronto Sun denied knowledge of the interviewee’s political activism for the Conservative party, and said he was chosen for the article because he was the only parent among several interviewed willing to be named. It also said it subsequently checked with the education minister’s office, which denied knowledge of, or contributions from the interviewee.

The news organization discounted the reported social media postings, stating that politicians taking photos with voters is a common practice, and defended the opinion writer’s point of view and accuracy.

The NewsMedia Council supports the freedom of journalists and opinion writers to select the focus of a story and to choose the sources they deem appropriate. It upholds the principle that opinion must be based on fact, but allows the writer to select the overall focus of an article.

The NNC notes that facts in the article were not contested, and supports the prerogative of the columnist to select and feature the ‘face’ of a story. It recognizes the practice of

columnists to include comments from individuals whose point of view resonates with their readers. For the above reasons, the NNC dismissed the complaint.

The NNC is cognizant of the long tradition among Canadian news media of expressing support for one political party or another, and recognizes that information, opinion and discussion from different parts of the political spectrum contributes to a healthy democracy.

The reader may agree with those views, or may find fault with an overly-partisan choice. In this case, the complainant raised a question about the credibility of partisan opinion, but took opportunity to express his disagreement by pursuing follow up stories and investigation by other news media. This is a reasonable course of action that contributes to public dialogue.