



# INFORMATION UPDATE

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## Inside the Star Chamber of *The Fifth Estate*

Members who watched the November 12 episode of *The Fifth Estate* on CBC television could be forgiven for thinking they had mistakenly tuned into a low-budget movie of the week.

The episode allegedly focused on the challenges of managing mental health issues in the Correctional Service. Instead, viewers were served an incoherent stream of rumour, innuendo, urban legend and b-movie horror effects.

UCCO-SACC-CSN recognizes the damage to members' morale and reputations at institutions across the country, but particularly at Regional Psychiatric Centre in Saskatoon. The union stands by its members' professionalism and is examining various options at setting the record straight.

In fact, *The Fifth Estate* program is a tragedy. It wasn't only a wasted opportunity to engage in an honest discussion over how to handle the most difficult inmates in Canada's prison system. It also damaged the reputations of all the people who try their hardest to manage these inmates in a safe and humane manner every hour of every day while bearing all of the copious abuse that mentally-challenged offenders are capable of dishing out.

Instead of thanks or understanding for the impossible job they perform, our members were tried and convicted in a

kangaroo court by Canada's national public broadcaster.

It almost goes without saying that the CBC completely misrepresented the reasons it wanted to interview UCCO-SACC-CSN representatives.

Last summer, National President Pierre Mallette and Prairie Regional President Kevin Grabowsky accepted a request from host Hana Gartner to speak about mental health issues in CSC. Gartner never mentioned vague, unsubstantiated allegations of torture, assault or intimidation. She told them she wanted to discuss solutions to the difficulties of managing these inmates, and she pro-

mitted to respect a union condition not to discuss specific facts relating to inmate Ashley Smith given the lawsuit against our members by the Smith family. Neither the stated reason for the interview nor the promise not to discuss Ashley Smith was respected during the two-hour on-camera interview.

The program's overwhelming bias against the union and correctional officers was demonstrated repeatedly,

including Gartner's constant use of the outdated term "prison guard" in a pejorative tone, her portrayal of Pierre Mallette and Kevin Grabowsky as "former guards" in an effort to diminish their credibility despite the fact they are still employed as correctional officers by CSC, and, best of all, her characterization of them as "union bosses" – as if they were Jimmy Hoffa's henchmen.



**HANA GARTNER, FROM THE FIFTH ESTATE WEBSITE**

And CBC demonstrated many other elements of bias, from the lighting to make the union spokespersons appear menacing, to introducing their statements with scary night-time shots of RPC replete with a nightmarish soundtrack of ghosts and goblins. If the damage and the issues involved weren't as serious as they are, the episode could have been written off simply as a bad attempt at satire.

Gartner's opening statement, that Ashley Smith died while "seven guards stood outside her cell and did nothing to save her" was a falsehood disproven even by the carefully chosen portions of the video of the incident aired later in the episode. Correctional officers at RPC and other institutions across the country repeatedly saved Ashley Smith's life.

And this is the insanity that *The Fifth Estate* helps perpetuate. Correctional officers are portrayed as goons when they enter a cell to remove a ligature from the neck of an inmate who scratches, spits and punches them, or throws urine and feces in their faces. Then officers are condemned by *The Fifth Estate*, the Office of the Correctional Investigator and various pressure groups for trying to protect themselves by using approved security techniques while saving these inmates' lives.

And when an inmate dies after hundreds of incidents of choking herself to the point of unconsciousness? Well then, it must be the fault of correctional officers who did their best to save her while trying to respect management policies that were put in place to respond to the criticisms of the OCI, pressure groups and self-appointed media watchdogs like *The Fifth Estate*.

Gartner also gives ample time to unsupported statements, such as one former social worker's musing that she "has heard of cases [of intimidation by correctional officers] over the years." Of course, she has no direct experience or proof of this abuse, nor is she asked to provide any.

When former nurse Bonnie Bracken spins a story of an inmate being beaten on his genitals by a female correctional officer at RPC, she is unable to provide a name, a date or a reason why she didn't report this serious criminal act, which she could have done anonymously and

would have been easily proven since every intervention is captured on videotape.

Other interviewees are given free rein to make unchallenged assertions. Janet Sue Hamilton's investigation of correctional supervisor's alleged assault is treated as proven fact even though a Saskatchewan Court found the allegations to carry no weight at all. Nor does Gartner provide the context that Hamilton's hostility toward correctional officers might stem from the fact she was removed as Warden of Edmonton Institution after the union and correctional officers there put together a report that denounced her many failings as a warden.

Instead, Gartner adopts her tough, gruff voice to intone, "You don't rat out a guard."

Chilling references to "parking lot attitude adjustments" help set up the telephone interview with the former RPC nurse Cindee Tzerchewski, who claims to be

afraid for her life from vengeful correctional officers for her testimony against correctional supervisor John Tarala. Tzerchewski told Gartner she has received threatening phone calls, had her tires slashed and been sent an email depicting an exploding bomb and signed, "the staff at RPC."

Most journalists would have asked for

just a smidgeon of a corroborating detail for these serious allegations of criminal behaviour. Surely there are phone records, a police report or even a bill for new tires? Why wouldn't *The Fifth Estate* put the email of the exploding bomb on air? To ask these questions, are, perhaps, a way of answering them.

Finally, Gartner had only to search the CBC database to understand why John Tarala was absolved of assaulting Ashley Smith. According to one CBC website story, "Trial Judge Barry Singer said the nurse's testimony was not credible." Indeed, the trial heard testimony from another RPC nurse who said Tzerchewski had told him that the Tarala intervention with Ashley Smith was her "golden ticket" to an all-expenses-paid transfer out of the institution.

It's odd that these statements were not worth any mention in an hour-long program by the CBC's most prestigious investigative team. Instead, says Gartner, "The evidence was clear" – when it was anything but.

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