

PBS officials cave in to Bush administration over children's program

David Walsh
4 February 2005

The most recent capitulation by officials at the federally funded Public Broadcasting System to pressure from the Bush administration and the religious right is particularly disgraceful.

PBS decided last week not to distribute an episode of "Postcards From Buster," a children's program with animated and live-action characters, to its 349 stations because the show included lesbian couples. The cancellation was announced the same day that PBS received a bullying letter from newly installed federal Education Secretary Margaret Spellings, whose department partly funds "Buster," denouncing the program.

According to Angelica Brisk, the director of the "Sugartime!" episode, this is the first time in the history of WGBH, the Boston affiliate that produces the program, that PBS has rejected one of its programs for distribution.

WGBH decided to air the episode February 2. Twenty-four other PBS affiliates, including WNET in New York, KCTS in Seattle and KVIE in Sacramento, plan to run the program. Detroit's WTVS announced that it would not broadcast the episode, along with PBS stations in Utah, Maryland and elsewhere. WGBH has rented time on a satellite, which it will use to feed the program to any affiliate that chooses to air it.

Each week on "Postcards From Buster," an animated rabbit, Buster, and his animated father visit actual people who introduce him to different locales and cultures around the US. The program, as Brigid Sullivan, WGBH's vice president of children's programming, told the *Washington Post*, has visited "Mormons in Utah, the Hmong in Wisconsin, the Gullah culture in South Carolina, Orthodox Jewish families, a Pentecostal Christian family—we are trying to do a broad reach and we are trying to do it without judgment."

In the 40 episodes, Sullivan pointed out, "We have tried to reach across as many cultures, as many religions, as many family structures as we can. We gave it our best-faith effort. We have received hate mail for doing [an episode] about a Muslim girl. We've also received mail from Muslims saying

thank you."

In the "Sugartime!" episode, Buster visits a [maple] sugar house and dairy farm in northern Vermont. He encounters families in which the parents are both women. Vermont recognizes "civil unions" between individuals of the same sex. WGBH, in its statement on the program, notes that "The parents' lives are included only as a backdrop to the kids' lives; the focus is on Buster's visits to a sugar house and a dairy farm." Remarked Peggy Charren, a WGBH board member, "You learn about maple syrup and how it gets made. You learn about cows and where milk comes from. There is so little detail about the lesbian parents."

It was too much, however, for the religious bigots who make up the thousand and one organizations dedicated to the supposed "defense of family" and "defense of traditional values," including James Dobson's Focus on the Family, the Traditional Values Coalition, the American Family Association and the like. They sprang into action against this new attempt to "normalize the homosexual lifestyle." As one television critic remarked, "To them, showing and telling about lesbian families is the same as promoting."

And the fundamentalist ultra-right has powerful allies in the Bush administration. On only her second day on the job, January 25, Education Secretary Spellings—a longtime Bush crony and his senior domestic policy adviser for the past four years—fired off her letter to Pat Mitchell, president and chief executive officers of PBS. Spellings expressed her "strong and very serious concerns" about "Sugartime!," which "would feature throughout the show families headed by gay couples."

Spellings went on threateningly to note that "two years ago the Senate Appropriations Committee raised questions about the accountability of funds appropriated for Ready-To-Learn programs." She continued, "Many parents would not want their young children exposed to the life-styles portrayed in this episode. Congress' and the Department's purpose in funding this programming certainly was not to introduce this kind of subject matter to children, particularly through the powerful and intimate medium of television."

The Education Secretary demanded that (1) if PBS aired the episode it had to remove the Department of Education's seal and any other indication that the latter approved of the program; (2) PBS had to notify member stations about the contents of the program and review it before deciding whether to air it; (3) PBS should "strongly consider" refunding to the Department of Education funds that were used for the episode.

It should be noted in passing that in the case of Armstrong Williams, a right-wing journalist paid by the Department of Education—in apparent violation of the law—to promote the Bush administration's agenda, the department has not asked for its \$250,000 back.

PBS officials claim that they had been agonizing over the "Sugartime!" issue for weeks, and had decided not to send the episode to its stations "a couple of hours before we received the letter from the secretary of education," according to programming chief John Wilson. Whether this is true or not, PBS's claim that its decision had nothing to do with the impending attack from the Bush administration is nonsense. In an uncharacteristically candid comment, the *Washington Post's* Lisa de Moraes noted that the claim "sounds great if you were born yesterday; otherwise, not so much."

In a press release, Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) argued that PBS chief operating officer Wayne Godwin and spokesperson Lea Sloan provided contradictory reasons for their act of self-censorship. "Godwin said the episode brought up an issue that was 'best left for parents and children to address together at a time and manner of their own choosing,' while Sloan said it was 'sensitive in today's political climate' (*Associated Press*, 1/27/05). Godwin also pointed out that some children wouldn't have a parent with them to 'put it in context' (*Washington Post*, 1/27/05), but at the same time indicated that it was precisely the context that parents and media coverage gave the episode that created the problem: "The concern really was that there's a point where background becomes foreground. No matter if the parents were intended to be background, with this specific item in this particular program they might simply be foreground because of press attention to it and parental attention to it' (*New York Times*, 1/27/05).

"Godwin went on to claim the episode conflicted with PBS's purpose: 'The presence of a couple headed by two mothers would not be appropriate curricular purpose that PBS should provide.'"

FAIR points out that one element of public television's mandate, as set out in the 1967 Carnegie Commission Report, is to "provide a voice for groups in the community that may otherwise be unheard," to serve as "a forum for controversy and debate," and to broadcast programs that

"help us see America whole, in all its diversity."

Dr. Michael Brody, a Washington-based child psychiatrist who is chairman of the television and media committee of the American Academy of Child Psychiatry, told the *Baltimore Sun*, "The very idea of this series ["Buster"] was to show diversity. The idea of this program wasn't to go against the religious right, or to make the liberal left feel good. The idea was to help out children by presenting the diversity of families and to make kids who weren't in 'traditional' families not feel so different."

The Department of Education grant that funds "Buster" specifies: "Diversity will be incorporated into the fabric of the series to help children understand and respect differences and learn to live in a multicultural society."

One of the Vermont mothers in the program, Karen Pike, a 42-year-old photojournalist, called the attack on the program by Spellings "disgusting." Pike is featured in the episode with her partner, Gillian Pieper, and their three children. The show is "trying to show that kids are kids and that there are many kinds of families," said Pike.

Referring to Spellings' letter, she commented, "I'm actually aghast at the hatred stemming from such an important person in our government. ... Her first official act was to denounce my family, and to denounce PBS for putting on a program that shows my family as loving, moral and committed."

She told a reporter: "I can't believe PBS would back down to this. I understand they get public funding, but they should be the one station we feel confident in, in knowing that what we see there represents our whole country."



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact