

Former US public broadcasting chairman resigns in disgrace

David Walsh

8 November 2005

Right-winger Kenneth Tomlinson resigned from the board of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) November 3, after a report by the agency's inspector general sharply criticized his performance. Tomlinson has been at the center of efforts to transform public broadcasting into a mouthpiece for the Bush administration.

Tomlinson, a former director of the Voice of America in the Reagan administration and editor-in-chief of *Reader's Digest*, was appointed to the CPB by Bill Clinton and elected chair of its board in September 2003. His term as chairman expired in September 2005.

The *New York Times* reported November 4 that Tomlinson is under investigation for possible misuse of federal money and the use of phantom or unqualified employees in his other position as chairman of the Broadcasting Board of Governors, a post that he still maintains. The latter supervises the US government's foreign broadcasting operations, including Radio Martí, Radio Sawa and al-Hurra, Washington's Arab-language propaganda vehicle.

CPB inspector general Kenneth Konz has been investigating Tomlinson's attempt to impose a partisan Republican agenda on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) and other publicly-funded outlets. Among other activities, Tomlinson allegedly hired consultants and lobbyists without notifying the agency's board.

The CPB chairman waged war in particular against "Now with Bill Moyers," hosted by the liberal muckraker and former Johnson administration official.

In December 2003, Tomlinson sent a letter to Pat Mitchell, then president and chief executive of PBS, alleging that the Moyers program "does not contain anything approaching the balance the law requires for public broadcasting."

Soon thereafter, Tomlinson paid a consultant \$10,000 to monitor Moyers' program for three months. According to

the *New York Times*, "The reports Mr. Tomlinson saw placed the program's guests in categories like 'anti-Bush,' 'anti-business' and 'anti-Tom DeLay,' referring to the House majority leader, corporation officials said. The reports found the guests were overwhelmingly anti-Bush, a conclusion Mr. Moyers disputed."

In an op-ed piece published May 10, 2005 in the ultra-right *Washington Times*, Tomlinson wrote, "To me and many other supporters of public broadcasting the image of the left-wing bias of 'Now'—unchallenged by a balancing point of view on public broadcasting's Friday evening lineup—was unhealthy. Indeed, it jeopardized essential support for public TV."

Apparently the political leanings of the guests on National Public Radio's "The Diane Rehm Show" were also monitored by Tomlinson consultants.

In other actions, the CPB earlier this year hired two "ombudsmen" for the first time in its history to review PBS news and public affairs programs for evidence of "bias"—without bothering to notify Mitchell. Konz has been looking into whether there was White House influence in the hiring of the latter two. Tomlinson is a close friend of George W. Bush's chief political advisor, Karl Rove.

Tomlinson's acquaintance with Rove dates from the 1990s, when the two served together on the Board for International Broadcasting, the forerunner of the Broadcasting Board of Governors. In 2003 and 2004, reports *Media Citizen*, "Tomlinson worked with Rove to help kill a legislative proposal that would have made it more difficult to politically stack the CPB board."

Konz has also been looking into whether Tomlinson violated agency regulations in hiring former Republican National Committee co-chairwoman Patricia de Stacy Harrison as CPB's chief executive to replace Mitchell.

The online media critic *Free Press* noted recently that Harrison, in turn, had 'stacked the deck' by hiring three

senior officers from the State Department, including two from the “Public Affairs and Public Diplomacy Division,” which oversees government efforts to “advance US interests and security and to provide the moral basis for US leadership in the world.”

The new CPB employees all worked previously with Harrison at the State Department, where she served as assistant secretary for educational and cultural affairs and acting undersecretary for public diplomacy and public affairs.

CPB’s new vice president for government affairs, Tim Isgitt, was a driving force behind the “Shared Values” campaign, “which placed pro-American propaganda in Arabic media worldwide in an effort to win Arab support for the war against terrorism. Under Isgitt’s direction, the State Department produced propaganda videos, broadcast ads, pamphlets, booklets and other materials intended for distribution in more than a dozen Middle Eastern countries. Several Arab nations refused to run the TV ads, which US media widely ridiculed for attempting to package US policy as a commercial ‘brand.’”

Mike Levy, a new vice president and communications and corporate spokesman (in fact, it was he who “declined to answer questions,” the *Washington Post* noted, following Tomlinson’s resignation), also came from the State Department, but his relationship with Harrison goes back to his service as her chief of staff when she co-chaired the Republican National Committee. *Free Press* observes that Levy’s work, in the Department’s Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, “included helping the administration put a ‘positive spin’ on US drug eradication efforts in Afghanistan, where heroin production has tripled following US military intervention in the region.”

Helen Mobley, the new senior director, corporate communications and planning, was the State Department’s senior advisor for public affairs and public diplomacy. “She has worked closely with Patricia Harrison to manage the State Department’s efforts to showcase new freedoms after the downfall of the Taliban regime by bringing Afghan women to America. On one such visit Mobley was accused of ‘heavy-handed muzzling’ of the press after reporters attempted to question a visiting delegation of 14 Afghan women. Mobley cut off all efforts to interview the Afghan women and grilled a photographer who had been taking photos of the event.” (*Free Press*)

Tomlinson’s departure in disgrace has not helped the

fortunes of the Bush administration, or Rove’s personally. The Christian Right’s Focus on the Family wondered on its Web site whether now that “the conservative voice is gone, will efforts to reform PBS go with him?” Rich Noyes of the Media Research Center commented that Tomlinson’s “real crimes in the eyes of these liberals was that he actually wanted to hold PBS accountable to some kind of political balance, which is what it says in their charter.”

Republican Congressman Zach Wamp of Tennessee told *Family News in Focus* that he would be leading the effort to take up where Tomlinson left off. However, Cliff Kincaid of Accuracy in Media, the right-wing media watchdog, suggested that any amount of money spent on PBS would be too much.

Taking advantage of the Hurricane Katrina disaster, Republicans in Congress have proposed to repeal 14 federal education programs, including the popular public broadcasting programs “Ready to Learn”, “Ready to Teach” and “Star Schools”.

Focus on the Family needn’t worry about public broadcasting’s general direction, Tomlinson’s replacement as chair of CPB was Cheryl Halpern, a longtime Republican operative and party fundraiser. The corporation’s vice chairman is Gay Hart Gaines, a founder and former chairman of GOPAC, an influential Republican fundraising group.

Rove’s name has come up in the investigation being carried out by the State Department’s inspector general into Tomlinson’s tenure as the head of the Broadcasting Board of Governors. State Department investigators, reports the *New York Times*, have seized records and emails from the board of governors, including email traffic between Tomlinson and Rove, along with other White House officials.

According to the *Times*, “People involved in the inquiry said it involved accusations that Mr. Tomlinson was spending federal money for personal purposes, using board money for corporation activities, using board employees to do corporation work and hiring ghost employees or improperly qualified employees.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact