

Probe exposes criminal methods in Republican right takeover of US Public TV

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A report issued by the inspector general of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) reveals that its former chairman, Kenneth Tomlinson, violated federal laws in his efforts to refashion public radio and television as propaganda organs for the Republican right and the Bush administration. The report suggests that the entire CPB board was to one degree or another complicit in Tomlinson's actions.

Tomlinson served as CPB chairman from September 2003 to September 2005. A right-wing Republican and long-time acquaintance of Bush's chief political advisor Karl Rove, Tomlinson was formerly head of Voice of America. He resigned from the CPB board in early November after the first details of the inspector general's report were reported in the press.

The report charges that Tomlinson repeatedly violated the Public Broadcasting Act and "ethical guidelines" in order to eliminate what he called "liberal bias" in public broadcasting.

The author of the report, Kenneth Konz, was hired as inspector general by the CPB in the 1990s after serving in the inspector general's office at the Environmental Protection Agency. Konz indicated he will not seek prosecution of Tomlinson.

The report demonstrates the Bush administration's contempt for the law and basic democratic rights. The White House engineered the takeover of the CPB board—which is supposed to be a "firewall" between programming and political influence—by right-wing operatives after having failed in attempts to cut off its funding.

The public broadcasting budget has been a target of right-wing attack for decades. As a consequence, local affiliates have had to rely more and more on corporate and private donations to sustain operations. However, efforts to completely shut down public radio and television have failed largely because they have broad popular support. They are seen by many as an alternative, however limited, to the barren fare offered by the corporate media.

According to the inspector general's report, Tomlinson

improperly involved himself in efforts to get \$4 million for a program featuring editorial page writers from the *Wall Street Journal*. The inspector general found that the former CPB head "violated statutory provisions and the Directors Code of Ethics by dealing directly with one of the creators of a new public affairs program with the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) and the CPB over creating the show." It says he "admonished" other CPB senior executive staff not to hinder his plan to create a platform for the right-wing views of the *Journal* on public television.

The report also found that Tomlinson imposed a "political test" in hiring the board's new president, Patricia Harrison, a former co-chair of the Republican National Committee. In addition, it said that Tomlinson hired consultants to carry out reviews of program content for "objectivity and balance" without informing the Board, and "signed a contract without Board authorization."

Tomlinson paid a consultant \$10,000 to monitor the program "Now with Bill Moyers" for three months. Moyers' liberal-oriented program was targeted by Tomlinson and the White House in their effort to portray the conventional, generally pro-establishment programming of PBS television and National Public Radio (NPR) as left-wing and biased. Moyers has since left PBS.

Tomlinson worked hard to promote the "Journal Editorial Report," even though board members are prohibited from becoming involved in programming decisions. In December 2003, he sent an email to Paul Gigot, editor of the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page, saying he was "trying to pressure (PBS President) Pat Mitchell to produce a real conservative counterpoint to Moyers. Would you be available for such an effort?" Gigot later became host of the program.

In an interview with Reuters, Konz said he had seen emails sent by Tomlinson to Karl Rove "bragging" about his success in getting the "Journal Editorial Report" on the air.

Evidently embarrassed by these revelations, the *Wall Street Journal* announced it was ending its program. The last show is set for December 2.

Investigators indicated they had seen emails between Tomlinson and the White House that indicated the CPB chief was “strongly motivated by political considerations” in selecting Harrison for the post of president and CEO. It pointed out that Harrison got the job after being recommended by an unidentified White House official.

The report noted a *New York Times* report that Tomlinson had made a speech at a 2004 dinner in Baltimore declaring that PBS programming should reflect “the Republican mandate.” The report also found that Tomlinson asked one prospective candidate for an executive post about her political contributions in the last election.

Despite these revelations, the CPB board strongly defended Harrison, denying suggestions that she had a right-wing political agenda. In fact, the CPB board endorsed and participated in Tomlinson’s attempt to turn PBS into a sounding board for the Republican right.

Cheryl Halpern, who replaced Tomlinson as CPB chairman, was a fundraiser for the Republican Party. Tomlinson said that he chose Halpern as his successor because of her commitment to end so-called programming bias.

Tomlinson attacked the inspector general’s report, saying it would “only help to maintain the status quo and other reformers will be discouraged from seeking change.” He is staying on as head of the Broadcasting Board of Governors, which supervises government broadcasting overseas.

In reaction to the exposure of White House efforts to shift public broadcasting to the right, some Republican members of Congress are seeking to retaliate by cutting CPB funding.

The inspector general’s inquiry also raised the issue of financial improprieties involving the CPB board. Independent auditors prepared a confidential report that questioned a \$500,000 consulting agreement with a former CPB president. The contract was approved as a means of getting around salary limits.

The report criticized Tomlinson’s decision to hire two “ombudsmen” to monitor program balance. The inspector general raised the possibility that there was White House influence in hiring the ombudsmen, given that a White House official, Mary Andrews, had worked with the CPB board to develop the plan.

It also criticized a severance deal with Kathleen Cox, Tomlinson’s predecessor in the post of CPB chairman. The auditors said Tomlinson structured the \$400,000 package in such a way as to avoid disclosure on the CPB’s publicly available tax records.

Cox resigned from the board in May after clashes with Tomlinson, who, she said, told her she was not “political enough” for the job.

Meanwhile, the inspector general at the US State

Department is looking into allegations that Tomlinson misused CPB money, including putting ghost employees on the payroll.

The investigation of the CPB came at the request of two Democratic House members after a report in the *New York Times* last May raised questions about Tomlinson’s activities.

The report underscores the utter cynicism of the White House, which, for its own purposes, criticizes foreign governments for attempting to suppress or control the media.

The Bush administration’s skullduggery in relation to public broadcasting is the most overt expression of the pervasive influence of the government on the US media, which already excludes any serious social or political commentary and enforces a spectrum of viewpoints that, even in comparison to Europe, is absurdly constricted. Socialist views are virtually banned from the airwaves.

To the extent that US public broadcasting provides any informative political, historical or cultural programming that might provide the public with a basis for forming critical and independent opinions, the right wing feels it to be a threat that must be stamped out.

As usual, the Democratic Party has barely reacted to the latest revelations, making no serious effort to warn the public over the implications for democratic rights of the White House assault on public broadcasting. Meanwhile, Republican members of Congress, in a blatantly partisan counterstrike, have requested that Konz investigate allegations that local PBS and NPR stations improperly used federal funds to lobby against proposed funding cuts. The cuts were defeated in the face of strong public opposition.



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