EDITORIAL CANADA ᑲᓇᑕᒥ

Excessive use of unnamed sources undermines reporting

It might be old-fashioned, but good journalism means 'show your work'



Corey Larocque

Could Donald Trump himself or White House staff have tipped off Radio-Canada that he had mentioned Canada becoming the 51st state during his first phone call with Mark Carney back in March? Maybe?

Could the newly minted Canadian prime minister or someone in the Prime Minister's Office have been the one who told the French-language public broadcaster that Trump's fixation with annexing Canada did actually come up in that first call? Maybe?

We just don't know.

Just days before the April 28 federal election, Radio-Canada reported the U.S. president in fact did use his "51st state" rhetoric during his March 28 phone call with the Canadian prime minister.

It was important news because after the call, Carney had told reporters that Trump had respected Canada's sovereignty during the private call.

The report made it look like Carney, who portrayed himself on the campaign trail as Canada's best option for standing up to Trump, hadn't given Canadians a full account of his first interaction with the president.

Radio-Canada should have identified its source for the story about the Carney-Trump phone call.



Prime Minister Mark Carney speaks at an announcement in Iqaluit in March as Nunavut Premier P.J. Akeeagok looks on. A Radio-Canada report during the recent election campaign cites unnamed sources to question Carney's version of his first phone call with U.S. President Donald Trump. (File photo by Daron Letts)

Instead, it cited two sources familiar with the discussions ("au fait des discussions").

Radio-Canada was right. When asked about it after the report, Carney confirmed Trump had indeed used the "51st state" language during their phone call.

What does this have to do with Nunavut or Nunavik?

When Nunatsiaq News reported the Inuit Child First Initiative's universal food-voucher program had been effectively cancelled, it named the sources.

An email from a federal bureaucrat to a Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. employee was the evidence needed to report that the Department of Indigenous Services was no longer going to approve funding for universal food-voucher programs.

In the past 10 years, national news organizations have become increasingly comfortable using unnamed sources. Too frequently, you'll see news attributed to unnamed sources who are "not authorized to speak publicly." (You should ask yourself why they're not authorized to speak publicly.)

When news outlets do that, it amounts to saying, "trust us," while the journalistic tradition has been like high school math class — "show your work."

Part of the shift is because governments (of all political stripes) have become so controlling of their messages. Another reason for the change is that many politicians and bureaucrats don't want to be accountable for what they say.

Nunatsiaq News has generally resisted the temptation to grant public servants (and other sources) anonymity.

Good journalism requires transparency, which is why the standard has been to tell readers how a newspaper gets its information.

Readers should know why information is coming out at this particular time.

The number of people who were in the know about the Carney-Trump phone call is likely small. Why would one of them leak a tidbit that contradicts Carney's version of the call, four days before the election?

It's important for readers to know the source of information reported to them. Readers can then decide for themselves how much credibility to give it, how important it is, and how trustworthy both the source and the news organization are.

NEWS CANADA ᑲᓇᑕᒥ

News quiz | Elections, elders and melting permafrost

Test your knowledge of current events in the North

Nunatsiaq News

Have you been paying attention to the news of the North over the past week? Let's see for ourselves. Fire up the quiz!

1. *Monday was an important day on the calendar. Why is that?*

   A. It was the anniversary of Iqaluit being named Nunavut's capital.

   B. It was the fourth anniversary of Mary Simon being named Canada's first Inuk Governor General.

   C. It was Red Dress Day.



The Liberals came up three seats short of a majority government in winning the April 28 federal election. According to reports, they are trying to entice enough opposition members to cross the floor to create a majority. (File photo)



Politicians and elders tour one of the rooms of the newly built 24-bed Rankin Inlet long-term care facility on Jan. 14. (File photo by Arty Sarkisian)

2. *A team from Laval University recently released results of a study on the composition of Nunavik's melting permafrost. What substance were they testing for?*

   A. Mercury
   B. Arsenic
   C. Lead

3. *Speaking with a Nunatsiaq News reporter, newly re-elected NDP MP Lori Idlout was asked about reports that the governing Liberals, who are three seats short of a majority, were trying to convince opposition members to cross the floor. How did she respond?*

   A. She is leaning toward joining the Liberals.
   B. She didn't rule it out.
   C. Not a snowball's chance in hell.

4. *Canada's chief electoral officer issued a response to election day problems in Nunavik voters, including polls that didn't open and others that closed early. What did he say?*

   A. He apologized and said Elections Canada would investigate.
   B. He apologized and promised a new election will be held.
   C. He apologized but said that's just the way it goes sometimes for remote communities.

5. *Later this month, a new long-term care facility in Rankin Inlet will start receiving Nunavut elders currently living at Embassy West Senior Living in Ottawa. The Government of Nunavut is planning two other long-term care homes — where will they be built?*

   A. Grise Fiord and Iqaluit
   B. Pangnirtung and Iqaluit
   C. Cambridge Bay and Iqaluit

ANSWERS

1. C — Monday was Red Dress Day, formally known as the National Day of Awareness for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls and Two-Spirit-Plus People.
2. A — The researchers studied mercury that gets released as Nunavik's permafrost melts. Fortunately, it found levels of the toxic substance were much lower than feared.
3. B — Idlout appeared to not close the door entirely on switching parties. While citing "many promises that were broken" by the previous Liberal government, she also said "it's something I will not make a rash decision" about.
4. A — Stéphane Perrault issued a statement apologizing for the "shortcomings" and said Elections Canada will investigate so it doesn't happen again.
5. C — A 24-bed facility in Cambridge Bay is expected to open in late 2028 and a 48-bed home in Iqaluit should open by late 2029 or early 2030.