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NONPROLIFERATION AND TRADE

THE MIDDLE EAST
AND SOUTH ASIA

Brad Sherman
Congress of the United States
27th District, California
SERVING THE SAN FERNANDO VALLEY

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PROPERTY AND THE INTERNET

October 8, 2008

Ms. Chris Boskin
Chair
Board of Directors
Corporation for Public Broadcasting
401 9th Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20004

RE: Mandate for Objectivity and Balance; Project Champion

Dear Ms. Boskin:

As you may be aware, I addressed the Board in 2004 on the matter of monitoring compliance with the objectivity and balance standard by CPB funding recipients in general, and National Public Radio in particular. Like many of my constituents, I was concerned at that time with a chronic imbalance in Middle East reporting that amounted to an anti-Israel bias in National Public Radio's coverage of the region.

During my presentation, I asked that CPB work with an independent commission of outside consultants to conduct more robust oversight of objectivity and balance in CPB-supported programming on the Middle East, especially NPR's. As I said then, when it comes to balance, the key question is: "where is the fulcrum?" That is, when measuring balance in Middle East coverage, it is not the ethnicity of the speakers that should be used, but rather their points of view, in particular the content of what they say that should be the metric.

No such commission was formed, but a little more than a year later, the CPB Inspector General recommended that the Corporation upgrade its objectivity and balance oversight. The Inspector General noted that CPB had not yet begun to meet its statutory obligation for periodic reviews of its national programming for balance and objectivity. As you know, partly in response to the Inspector General's criticism, the Corporation's Project Champion reforms include an objectivity and balance element. This involves consulting with public broadcasting journalists and journalism professors.

While I applaud this commitment to further examine balance and objectivity in CPB-supported programming, I am concerned that much of the feedback you are hearing alleges that objectivity and balance are either too difficult to define, outmoded concepts, or both. I am concerned that you are being advised that "fairness over time," as defined by a dialogue of diverse voices, would meet the Congressionally-imposed requirement of "strict adherence to objectivity and balance in all programs or series of programs of a controversial nature."

As you proceed, I urge you to work to ensure that CPB-supported programs meet the mandate for objectivity and balance, and that you not redefine these terms in a way that would allow for the support of biased programming. I especially urge that you work to ensure that coverage of the Middle East meets the legislative mandate for balance and objectivity. I look forward to the day when at least half the voices that discuss the policies of the Israeli government are positive.

Sincerely,



BRAD SHERMAN