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## SLAPPing dissent

*By Carl Rosenberg, Editor*

This issue contains a statement from the Seriously Free Speech Committee, a group formed to protest the attack on Mordecai Briemberg from CanWest for his outspoken activism in support of Palestinian rights. The attack is clearly not just directed against Mordecai himself, but is meant more broadly to intimidate critics of Israeli policies. As an honorary member of the committee to defend Mordecai, I urge all *Outlook* readers to visit the website [www.seriouslyfreespeech.ca](http://www.seriouslyfreespeech.ca) and learn more about this ugly case, and do all you can to support Mordecai and the broader values under attack.

Mordecai's case is one of the most outrageous but not the only example of vindictive SLAPP suits (Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation)--attempts by the rich and powerful to intimidate ordinary people into silence. Another case was described in a column by Daphne Bramham, "Lessons in Democracy, Powell River style" (*Vancouver Sun*, May 3).<sup>1</sup> Mayor Stewart Alsgard of Powell River, BC and the city council are suing three residents of Powell River—one of them city councillor Patricia Aldworth--who had the temerity to criticize their policies.

For a government to sue its own citizens for "libel" is, needless to say, a grotesque abuse of power. The BC Civil Liberties Association—which is supporting both the "Powell River Three" and Mordecai—notes that in Ontario, unlike BC, courts have ruled

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<sup>1</sup> It's ironic that *The Vancouver Sun* is the paper that was the object of the satire for which Mordecai (who had nothing to do with it) is being sued by its owner CanWest.

against this practice. In one case, Justice David Corbett ruled, “When a government is criticized, its recourse is in the public domain, not the courts. The government may not imprison, fine, or sue those who criticize it.” The BCCLA has asked the BC Supreme Court to make a similar ruling, and to apologize and pay damages to the three Powell River residents.

The SLAPP tactic has been aptly compared to the terrorizing of dissidents in the McCarthy era. It reminds me also of a law in some Latin American countries known as the “law of *desacato*” (insult, disrespect), making it a punishable offence to show disrespect toward state officials (like the older doctrine of “seditious libel” in English-speaking countries). The practice was used extensively in Argentina under Peron. (This was before the outright physical “disappearances” perpetrated by the later military junta.)

I urge everyone to support the work of the Seriously Free Speech Committee and the BC Civil Liberties Association in support of Mordecai and other victims of SLAPP suits, and defend our freedoms against our homegrown imitators of McCarthy and Peron.