

# Person of the Year

## Ezra Levant, foe of human rights commissions

Kathy Shaidle

Ezra Levant has been called everything from “Ayn Rand’s ideal man of action” (blogger Pamela Geller) to a guy who’s “spent his whole life becoming the kind of person you don’t like” (*Eye Weekly*’s Marc Weisblott). A Jewish friend of mine compares Levant to an Old Testament prophet, while I think of him as the Evel Knievel of the Canadian right. And now he’s *The Interim*’s Person of the Year.

What a year it’s been. Of course, it all began back in 2004. Levant, a teen-aged Reform party volunteer turned lawyer, pundit, political staffer and almost-MP, had by then become a somewhat reluctant publisher at the age of 32. He’d rescued the country’s only conservative magazine, *National Report* (formerly *Alberta Report* when it finally collapsed and no one else stepped forward to resuscitate it). Levant renamed the magazine the *Western Standard* and stocked it with an impressive array of conservative and libertarian writers, even landing world famous columnist Mark Steyn for the all-important “back of the book” spot.

The *Western Standard* reflected its new publisher’s reputation as a brash, energetic, partisan provocateur with a keen instinct for publicity. When one issue’s controversial cover depicting Liberal party leaders as “the Libranos” (in sinister, shadowy and decidedly unflattering *Sopranos* crime family style) proved particularly popular, Levant turned that cover art into an oversized poster: an exclusive premium for his magazine’s subscribers. (“Definitely a collector’s item,” Ezra enthused at the magazine’s blog. “It’s huge. And check out Paul Martin’s face ...”)

So when the so-called Danish “Mohammed” cartoons were sparking worldwide mayhem in 2006, Levant didn’t hesitate to republish them in the *Western Standard* to show what all the brouhaha was about. He assumed every other Canadian publication would, too. He was wrong.

By now the story is a familiar one: days after the cartoons ran in the *Western Standard*, two local Muslim groups – the Edmonton Council of Muslim Communities and Syed Soharwardy’s grandly named Supreme Islamic Council – filed complaints with the Alberta Human Rights Commission, charging him with publishing Islamophobic hate speech.

And why not? In the 10 years since he’d moved to Canada from the Middle East, Soharwardy had watched gay activists use the nation’s human rights commissions to bankrupt and intimidate Christians, while Jewish groups made their successful HRC complaints against neo-Nazi nobodies a cornerstone

of their fundraising campaigns. Why shouldn’t Muslims use the HRCs to silence their critics, too?

Besides, as Soharwardy explained to *Maclean’s* magazine earlier this year, he “honestly believed at the time that, in Canada, if you felt offended by something that had been said about your religion or identity, this was the way you resolved the issue.”

Again, he had a point, albeit an embarrassing one for any old-fashioned, freedom-loving citizen. The human rights commissions had been harassing ordinary Canadians – so long as they were white, conservative, straight and Christian – for years. The few victims who dared to fight back often lacked the wit or wherewithal to mount a successful battle. Others simply retreated all together.

What does seem incredible is that Syed Soharwardy was apparently the only person in the entire city of Calgary utterly unfamiliar with the inexhaustible energy, bulldog tenacity and all around orneriness of local celebrity Ezra Levant.

Levant wasted little time doing everything other targets of the HRCs had avoided, either out of misguided principle or sheer cowardice: he leveraged a lifetime’s worth of powerful connections, the miraculous “compound interest” of free publicity and his undeniable talents as a polemicist to go on the offensive. Literally.

Levant called the charges against him “the first blasphemy prosecution in Canada in 80 years” and accused the Alberta HRC with co-operating in a Salman Rushdie-type fatwa against him.

Then on Jan. 11, 2008, Ezra Levant did something that turned his case from a minor national curiosity to an international incident. Required to appear at the Albert Human Rights Commission offices to defend himself, he brought a video camera, recorded his interrogation, then went home and uploaded the video to YouTube, the hugely popular video sharing website.

To date, over 700,000 viewers have watched Levant’s defiant opening statement to the Human Rights tribunal, which began:

*I am here at this government interrogation under protest. It is my position that the government has no legal or moral authority to interrogate me or anyone else for publishing these words and pictures. That is a violation of my ancient and inalienable freedoms: freedom of speech, freedom of the press and, in this case, religious freedom and the separation of mosque and*

state ...

*I believe that this commission has no proper authority over me ... For a government bureaucrat to call any publisher or anyone else to an interrogation to be quizzed about his political or religious expression is a violation of 800 years of common law, a Universal Declaration of Rights, a Bill of Rights and a Charter of Rights. This commission is applying Saudi values, not Canadian values.*

Thanks to YouTube, news of Levant’s daring, inspiring address to his bureaucratic inquisitor went “viral” (in the language of the web), spreading around the internet and around the globe as friends passed the link to the tape onto other friends.



In footage viewed hundreds of thousands of times around the globe on YouTube, Ezra Levant faces the Alberta Human Rights Commission.

In typically Canadian fashion, it was only after Levant became a star in the United States was he deemed worthy of attention by the media north of the 49th parallel. Canada’s liberal media establishment looked down on Levant as a hyperactive partisan provocateur; in that most damning of phrases in the Canadian lexicon,

he was a “shameless self-promoter.” However, now that he and his equally loathed fellow “neo-con,” Mark Steyn, were being celebrated abroad for fighting their respective government-supported *fatwas*, the Canadian media could ignore them no longer.

Yet, even if the mainstream media had continued to treat him like a pariah, Levant rallied the Canadian public to his support through his own website alone. Thousands of people came to EzraLevant.com day after day, re-watched his interrogation videos, read his scathing commentaries on the proceedings, left encouraging comments and donated to his legal defence fund.

What’s more, Levant took advantage of all that attention and good will by publicizing lesser-known victims of the human rights commissions, like Father Alphonse De Valk and Reverend Stephen Boissain, both of whom had been target by gay rights activists. Levant’s generosity of spirit is an aspect of his personality that’s often obscured by his high voltage polemics. He doesn’t boast about his *pro bono* work or his unsolicited gestures of support for fellow “free speakers.” When he and I and a group of other bloggers were sued this year for criticizing the tactics of a former HRC investigator, the first person to call me was Ezra Levant, who’d naturally seen my name on his copy of the Statement

of Claim. As I wept into the telephone receiver, Ezra tried to cheer me up: “I still remember the first time I got served,” he reminisced. “I was in my first year of law school ...”

Syed Soharwardy withdrew his complaint against Levant, unable to withstand the onslaught of criticism and mockery. The complaint filed by the other Muslim group went ahead, however, and Levant was found “not guilty.”

He wasn’t happy about it and directed his outrage at one Pardeep Gundur, the “low-level bureaucrat” who’d obviously let Levant off the hook because the case had turned into an embarrassing international *cause celebre*.

Since they can’t very well take him to task for fighting for everyone’s right to freedom of expression, Ezra Levant’s critics inevitably take issue with his “tone” and his “tactics.” Such “hostility” and “negativity,” critics sniff self-righteously, will “turn off ordinary people.” Funny thing about that. Since Ezra Levant’s ordeal began, the abuses of the human rights commissions have become a major political issue. Almost 99 per cent of delegates at the recent Conservative party convention voted in favour of repealing Section 13.1, with its surreal “likely” to cause hate clause that makes acquittal impossible. Pro-repeal editorials began appearing in Canadian newspapers large and small, until the small matter of a parliamentary “coup” pulled the plug on the free speech cause’s momentum.

See ‘Levant,’ p. 6

## Mark Steyn honours his fellow freedom fighter

Mark Steyn  
The Interim

Ezra has been the indisputable man in the battle against the “human rights” racket. I’ve been happy to coast along, but he’s doing the heavy lifting. I’m Dean Martin to his Jerry Lewis: he’s doing all the work and I feed him the occasional line.

Shortly after this thing started, I had lunch with a journalistic bigshot in Montreal who advised me to play it cool – don’t respond to interview requests, don’t take a stand, let these suits work their way through as if it’s some legalistic technicality in which you have no particular investment. And at a fancy Quebecois restaurant, that seemed like good advice. Then Ezra posted his interrogation video and I understood that my friend’s advice was all wrong and that Ezra’s strategy was right. Go nuclear. “Denormalize” them. Expose them for what they are – hacks at best and, at worst, deeply corrupt thugs. Ezra is like one of those shower settings where the merest nudge of the dial

whacks it straight from nothing to a scalding torrent – which in a moribund public discourse such as Canada’s is what it takes.

One thing that was confirmed to me this last year is that the incessant media self-congratulation about journalistic “courage” is in inverse proportion to any mustering of the real thing. It took Ezra going nuclear, going bananas, going medieval on Jennifer Lynch’s totalitarian ass to rouse the great dopey herd of conventional wisdom even to take notice of this issue sufficiently to move the debate one smidgeonette in the direction of sanity. I forget who it was who said that Canadians weren’t going to put up with some blowhard going crazy over “their” beloved “human rights” commissions, but they got it exactly wrong. Let’s take it as read that Ezra is everything his detractors say he is – a blowhard, loudmouth, self-promoter, a “controversy entrepreneur,” etc. If he weren’t a blowhard, loudmouth, whatever, he wouldn’t have been so spectacularly successful in his “denormalization” of

Canada’s “human rights” commissions.

For a while, whenever I switched on *The National*, they seemed to be running lame soft-focus features on “Canadian heroes making a difference in the world.” Most of these heroes weren’t in the least bit heroic: they were just hitching their stars to the usual wagons of the international feelgood circuit. But Ezra, in the face of relentless battering by nuisance lawsuits, made a difference in the heart of the Canadian state and exposed the ugliness of the Orwellian “human rights” regime. By comparison, Jennifer Lynch is the typical Canadian “hero” – wafted up from one bauble of the state to the next, garlanded with the Queen’s Jubilee Medal and all the other finery Ezra will never ever be considered for. But he is the real hero and Canada could use more like him.

Mark Steyn is the author of *America Alone* and the recipient of three human rights complaints over a *Maclean’s* excerpt from the book.

## Q&A with Ezra Levant

### Interim talks to its first Person of the Year about human rights commissions

**Editor’s Note:** Interim editor Paul Tuns interviewed Ezra Levant by e-mail on Dec. 12 about his own case with the Alberta Human Rights Commission and his ongoing battle against the human rights commission industry.

**The Interim:** In your reply to the Alberta Human Rights Tribunal, famously posted on YouTube, you not only defended yourself against the charges related to publishing the so-called Danish cartoons, but fought back against the entire human rights commission industry. Why?

**Ezra Levant:** I had been peripherally aware of the problems with Canada’s human rights commissions – how they violated real human rights like freedom of speech and freedom of religion and how they violated natural justice and due process to do so. But it wasn’t until I was ensnared by one of them myself that I truly came to grips with how un-Canadian and unjust they are. I decided to address the weed by the root, not its ugly flower.

It didn’t seem appropriate for me to defend, to a government busybody, the editorial choices of the magazine I published (*The Western Standard*). To do so would be to grant the government moral and legal authority it lacks. I decided that I would use their interrogation for a different purpose: to expose the tyranny that it represented.

**TI:** What inspired you to put the video on YouTube – what I would suggest is the single most important moment in the battle against the human rights commission industry.

**EL:** It was important to me that the interrogation be recorded, for legal reasons – I wanted to lay down the proper paper trail to appeal a guilty verdict to a real court and I had a feeling that the interrogation would be a gong show. My lawyer had to negotiate at some length for the right to record the interrogation – they’re usually done in secret. We didn’t specify that it would be a video recording; when my interrogator walked in, she saw the camera and hesitated briefly, because she had assumed we had meant an audio recording. But it was a Friday afternoon and she seemed to just want to get the thing done, so she didn’t object.

See ‘I,’ p. 6