

Battle at rights agency heats up - thestar.com



Rights and Democracy president Remy Beauregard died of a heart attack after a Jan. 7, 2010 board meeting.

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OTTAWA—Three senior employees suspended from Montreal-based Rights and Democracy are accusing their employer of "unreasonable conduct" and could take legal action to have their cases resolved.

Lawyer Julius Grey, who is representing the three managers, is warning the agency – and the federal government – they will have a fight on their hands unless the status of the employees is resolved in the next two weeks.

"As far we are concerned, it's a legal case where there seems to be an illegal suspension and threats to dismiss," Grey said Friday.

"It seems to be completely ironic that a centre for rights and democracy would be acting this way."

Senior managers Marie-France Cloutier, Razmik Panossian and Charles Vallerand were suspended last month after staff at the government-funded agency wrote a letter to the 13-member board, demanding the resignation of three directors – Aurel Braun, Jacques Gauthier and Elliot Tepper.

The three employees accused the directors of "systematic personal attacks" on the reputation and integrity of agency president Rémy Beauregard, who died the night of Jan. 7 after a stormy meeting with the board.

Critics have accused the Conservatives of deliberately stacking the board to mount a hostile takeover of the agency, charged with promoting human rights and democracy around the world.

Grey wouldn't speculate on why he thinks the three were suspended but says the independent government agency – stacked with Conservative appointees – appears to have become polarized around the issue of the Middle East.

"What I see in the last year is an attempt to politicize the centre on a particular issue and what we're seeing is the result of this most unfortunate departure from the principles of neutrality," Grey said.

"There seems to be a total lack of tolerance on the part of the people who are there now."

Meanwhile, a job evaluation of Beauregard by Gauthier and Tepper paints a picture of a president at loggerheads with several of his directors.

The evaluation, obtained by the *Star*, starts with praise of Beauregard for his communications with staff and improving office morale.

But then it takes issue with Beauregard around the agency's handling of issues in the Middle East.

It highlights "tense situations" with Braun and says that "disharmony between the two top officials obviously is detrimental to the organization."

It ends by recommending that Beauregard not get paid any bonuses due to the "mixed evaluation" and the recession.

But in a display of the board's deep divisions, four directors seen as Beauregard's allies wrote the government praising the president's abilities, calling his performance "highly satisfactory."

Beauregard's family has since written the Prime Minister seeking a public inquiry to probe what they call the "political mayhem" at the agency and the circumstances surrounding his death.

Beauregard's widow has blamed workplace stress in part for his death from a heart attack.

His siblings said he endured "psychological harassment" at the hands of the board. And they point the finger at Harper's office for making appointments to the agency's board "which would impede the smooth functioning of Rights & Democracy."

Wrote Beauregard's sister and two brothers: "Such patronage has been criticized by staff of Rights and Democracy, by former presidents of Rights & Democracy and public figures from all walks of our society."

The turmoil has blown up into a public relations nightmare for the Conservatives. Attention is now focusing on why Foreign Affairs Minister Lawrence Cannon didn't act sooner to quell the controversy.

Letters obtained by the *Star* reveal that Cannon was warned repeatedly last fall that the brewing tensions risked becoming an embarrassment for the agency and the government.

In a note on Oct. 23, 2009, five board members told Cannon that the board was "dysfunctional" and demanded urgent action to ensure the agency's work wasn't imperilled.

They appealed to Cannon to appoint a new chair who acts "honestly and in good faith" as well. They also demanded the appointment of a high-ranking government official to the board.

After initially trying to keep his distance from the controversy, Cannon is now promising action within the coming weeks to stabilize the agency.