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The PM and the press

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With the strained relations which continue to exist between the Prime Minister and the press, and the mutual distrust, each side may be excessively sensitive to any suggestion of criticism from the other. There is, however, a matter which warrants comment, involving as it does the professional reputation of a good reporter and a question concerning the appropriate role of members of the Prime Minister's staff.

The journalist in question is Michael Lavoie, at 32 an experienced political reporter on the parliamentary staff of Canadian Press.

A week ago, Mr. Lavoie wrote a story of an interview with Ivan Head, Pierre Trudeau's foreign affairs assistant, and the story was prominently played in newspapers across the country. The burden of the piece was that Mr. Trudeau intended Canada to play a more activist, moralistic, left-wing role in the world.

Predictably, this talk of activism disturbed a good many people, from editorial writers (no radicals they) to Mr. Head himself who felt his remarks had been misrepresented or misinterpreted, and it disturbed the Prime Minister.

The matter is not likely to be resolved to anyone's satisfaction. Mr. Lavoie feels his story was right. Mr. Head feels it was wrong. It is possible that Mr. Lavoie misunderstood what Mr. Head was telling him. It's equally possible that Mr. Head's well-known enthusiasm for foreign affairs and for Mr. Trudeau led him to say things he should never have said.

At any rate, Mr. Head did not complain to Mr. Lavoie about his story, nor request that Canadian Press issue a correction or clarification. But the matter came up at the Prime Minister's press conference on Tuesday when a reporter, without mentioning the Lavoie story, asked about possible new initiatives in foreign policy.

"I think," Mr. Trudeau replied, "you are alluding to Mr. Head in my office who gave an info ~~and who tells me that~~ there was much more interpretation to what he said than to what he said in fact." If the Prime Minister had left it at that, there would be no complaint. But Mr. Trudeau went on to indulge in

an unnecessary bit of over-kill: "I think they are pure fictions or inventions of the particular writer."

The Prime Minister seemed taken aback when the reporter who had asked the question jumped up to say that he, too, had been told much the same thing as Mr. Lavoie by members of the Prime Minister's staff. Mr. Trudeau backed off, saying he would have to have a talk with his staff, that it was not their job to make statements on foreign policy. "Therefore, I regret if anything happened of that nature. There are no really flashing new initiatives."

Following the press conference, Mr. Trudeau's press secretary, Pierre O'Neil, asked Mr. Lavoie to walk back to the Parliament Buildings with the Prime Minister to see if they could not resolve their differences. They walked off, with Carl Mollins, the assistant bureau chief of Canadian Press, in hot pursuit.

There was an agitated discussion at the west door of the Centre Block in which Mr. Mollins angrily told the Prime Minister that if the matter were to be resolved, "it should be public, just as the slandering of Lavoie is public". When Mr. Mollins turned away, Mr. Trudeau took him by the lapel and turned him around to continue the discussion. It ended inconclusively, although Mr. Trudeau did say that, if what Mr. Lavoie had told him was correct, "maybe I do owe you an apology". Both Mr. Mollins and Mr. Lavoie recall Mr. Trudeau saying he wondered why the press, which does not hesitate to criticize him, gets upset when he criticizes the press.

The Prime Minister's point is valid as far as it goes. The press is often far too thin-skinned. But in accusing Mr. Lavoie of writing fictions or inventions, he was not merely questioning the reporter's competence. He was accusing him of deliberately spreading lies.

The upshot of the matter is apt to be that Mr. Trudeau will do with Mr. Head what some officials in External Affairs have long wished he would do—bind him, gag him and stuff him in an East Block closet. That would be unfortunate, particularly for Mr. Head who enjoys the influence and attention of the political stage. Mr. Head's dilemma is that there is really no room in the Canadian system for a backstage Henry Kissinger.