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Should your Opinions Jeopardize your Citizenship?

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Member, CHRI's International Advisory Commission; and representative, Commonwealth Journalists' Association the right of citizenship usually looms largest when it is challenged, as it was recently for a Canadian family of Pakistani origin who had, by their own declaration, an association with terrorism.

A mother and her teenage son returned to Canada from their native Pakistan this spring, and the family's background and public utterances generated a firestorm of comment and controversy in the media. Much of it challenged the family's right to citizenship.

Much of it defended their right to it, in the belief that freedom of belief and expression is guaranteed fundamentally and by the constitution. The latter was the government's decision and the position taken editorially in most major newspapers. But letters to the editor described the family as treasonous, forsaking their right by their irresponsibility in supporting a jihad.

The Khadr family had left Canada to return to Pakistan and Afghanistan to help the "cause" they believed in - defence of their faith. One version described their role as humanitarian. Other versions linked them with action against coalition troops in the post-Taliban era, including efforts to blow up Canadian soldiers. The father was subsequently killed in a shootout with authorities and a son was arrested in a bombing incident. U.S. forces in Afghanistan for indeterminate residence in Guantanamo Bay took another son. A third son (the black sheep of the family who told all on Canadian television) is a runaway from an al-Qaeda training camp. The youngest son, a 14-year-old, was wounded in a gun battle and is paralyzed from the waist down, pending hospital care. And a daughter, who proselytizes suicide bombings, says Canadians have misunderstood Osama Bin Laden.

At issue with the critics is whether the Khadr family's behaviour and sentiments so strongly contrary to received wisdom in Canada should force forfeiture of their citizenship. It is a view shared by some in their Mosque in Toronto in the belief that with citizen rights come responsibilities. One angry newspaper letter-writer said: "Their sons were properly trained by al-Qaeda...and they led their sons by example in fighting against Western democracies. As such, they violated the oaths they took to become Canadian citizens. By supporting this family the Canadian government has insulted every responsible law-abiding Canadian citizen, and degraded the value of the Canadian passport."

The official position disagrees. The word from the capital is that mother, son and daughter are entitled to their views and expressions of them, notwithstanding reports of actions of others in their family. Is such a view fundamental to all citizens of democracies? Could the Commonwealth embrace it?