

News / Canada**Tim Harper: Ottawa widow stands firm against Conservative threats**

The Conservative propaganda machine has met its match in an Ottawa widow honouring her late husband's crusade.



GRAHAM HUGHES / THE CANADIAN PRESS

Michaela Keyserlingk holds a picture of her husband, Robert, who died of cancer related to asbestos. On the laptop is the banner ad she created to put pressure on Canada's Conservative government to stop the production and export of asbestos.

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Michaela Keyserlingk pauses when asked to recite her history of political activism.

She seems to recall writing a letter to the local school board some years back after it closed some schools.

But over the past 72 hours, the Ottawa woman has outsmarted the propaganda arm of the Harper government after it handed her a gift, allowing her to publicize a cause she has championed in honour of her late husband.

The Conservative party may have success demonizing the Liberal party or painting the national media as agents of evil, but it appears to have met its match in this Ottawa widow.

Keyserlingk lost her husband, a retired university professor and one-time Progressive Conservative riding association president for Ottawa Centre, to asbestos-related cancer in December, 2009.

They were married 47 years and had four children.

Robert Keyserlingk ran marathons, never smoked and pounded the pavement for his Conservative candidate at election time.

After watching her husband die a “horrible” death, Michaela Keyserlingk continued her husband’s letter-writing campaign to the federal government, decrying its hypocrisy in exporting chrysotile asbestos to the developing world, while guarding against its use at home.

When she was largely ignored, her son designed an online banner ad which reads “Canada is the only western country that still exports deadly asbestos!”

She pays more than \$300 per month out of her own pocket to maintain the ad online. It links to her website, which includes a personal essay about her life with her husband — who contracted mesothelioma as a young naval cadet — and stories about the dangers of asbestos and Canada’s export policy.

But the ad features the Conservative Party of Canada logo, and that’s where this story really begins.

Keyserlingk received an email warning from the party’s executive director, Dan Hilton, who told her the use of the logo was unauthorized.

“This usage . . . must cease immediately. Failure to do so may result in further action. Please govern yourself accordingly.”

Keyserlingk admits she does not have the right to use the logo and used it only to get the attention of conservative Canadians.

So, she says, she will take it down — after a senior member of the Conservative government meets with her to explain the export policy and hear her story.

No one from the party has offered such a meeting and they have all but fallen silent since Keyserlingk went public with the threat.

In one fell swoop, the party created a folk hero, brought attention to an issue they don’t like to publicize and came across as bullies.

“It is a step we are required to take whenever we discover there is an unauthorized use of our logo,” party spokesperson Fred DeLorey said in an email.

“We have nothing further to add to this.”

But Keyserlingk knows a media moment to exploit when she sees one.

“While they are thinking about my offer, tens of thousands of Canadians are learning about our asbestos exports,” she said.

“(The Conservatives) have given me a voice.”

Hundreds of Canadians have sent her supportive emails and she says she is stunned at the number of people who have contacted her telling their own tales of battling asbestos-related diseases or losing a loved one to such diseases.

In June, Harper’s government for the third time refused at an international conference to put chrysotile asbestos on a United Nations list of hazardous exports.

The Prime Minister has defended the Quebec asbestos mining industry even as this country's export policy faces mounting global criticism.

Keyserlingk says she expects the next move will be the Conservatives issuing a court order.

“And wouldn't you — and everybody else at every major newspaper — love to know about that?” she says, a hint of mischief in her voice.

Then she has to run.

A radio interview beckons.