

Hockey officials defend Doan, Bloc leader compares him to bank robber

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OTTAWA (CP) - Hockey officials' impassioned defence of Team Canada's captain left an unimpressed Bloc Quebecois leader comparing Shane Doan to a bank robber and accusing him of racial profiling.

Gilles Duceppe said it was wrong to make Doan captain of Canada's world championship team while the star forward remains embroiled in two defamation suits related to the alleged anti-French slur.

"When someone robs a bank he's presumed innocent until proven guilty - but I don't know many people who'd name them bank manager while the trial's still on," Duceppe said.

"They want to name him captain even before the verdict comes in. It makes no sense. It's an insult to Quebecers."

Prime Minister Stephen Harper, who was in British Columbia Thursday, suggested enough has been said about the Doan captaincy issue and it's time to move on.

"Whatever's been needed to be aired has been aired, I think common sense now has prevailed and what Canadians want is to get on with supporting Team Canada."

Duceppe's assessment came after Hockey Canada officials launched a spirited defence of Doan before the group of politicians that convened them to Parliament Hill.

The Phoenix Coyotes forward, was actually cleared by the NHL in 2005 of uttering a slur against a French-Canadian linesman during a game against the Montreal Canadiens.

But his alleged remarks remain at the centre of two defamation suits involving Liberal MP Denis Coderre. Doan has sued Coderre for \$250,000 and the former cabinet minister has counter-sued.

Hockey Canada chief Bob Nicholson said a cultural slur was certainly uttered during



CREDIT:

Hockey Canada chief Bob Nicholson makes his way to appear before the Commons Official languages committee on Parliament in Ottawa, Thursday. (CP PHOTO/Fred Chartrand)

the 2005 game - but said it was never uttered by Doan.

He would not say which Coyote actually called a linesman a "F**king Frenchman," but suggested the player involved might not even have been from Canada.

As for Doan, the head of Hockey Canada says he has known the star forward since he was a teenager and described him as a gentle-hearted, devout Christian who doesn't even swear.

"You should get to know Shane Doan," Nicholson said.

"You can talk to all of his teammates that have played with him. He says 'fudge,' a lot if he gets upset. He's a Christian and a person that I am proud to know."

The surreal spectacle of hockey officials being grilled by politicians played out in a stately chamber on Parliament Hill, beneath a solemn portrait of the Fathers of Confederation.

The potentially explosive mix of politics, hockey, and linguistic tension drew the attention of Ottawa's most powerful figures.

The top official in Prime Minister Stephen Harper's office - chief of staff Ian Brodie - arrived to monitor part of the proceedings and another PMO staffer sat through the entire 90-minute session.

Nicholson's voice rose in anger after aggressive questions from a Bloc Quebecois MP, who said Doan should never have been made captain with the court cases pending.

"So what you're telling me is it's OK to make racist insults in certain situations," Bloc MP Luc Malo said after one hockey official pointed out that insults are part of the game.

Malo said Team Canada should have accepted Doan's offer to step aside because of the controversy: "Why don't you follow the logical suggestion of Mr. Doan himself and give the 'C' to someone else?"

The attack from the sovereigntist MP prompted Nicholson's most spirited defence of a man he called a proud Canadian.

He said Doan has represented his country eight times, has the support of all his teammates, and has sacrificed part of his post-season family time to represent Canada for free.

"We're taking Shane Doan, his wife, his mom and dad, his four kids through an allegation that could have been dictated by someone else," Nicholson said.

"This is not right."

Harper said in B.C. that it's not his decision whether Doan should stay as captain.

"I, of course, like millions of other Canadians, fancy myself as a hockey expert but I'll let the real hockey experts make those kinds of decisions. Of course if they don't win I'll complain like everyone else does."

Members of all political parties had demanded to know why Doan was chosen captain in the face of accusations that it was he who uttered the slur at a French-Canadian

linesman.

Doan says all he did was make a sarcastic remark to a teammate - Curtis Joseph - who was infuriated by a penalty call in a game against the Montreal Canadiens.

He says he told Joseph: "Four French referees in Montreal, Cuje, figure it out." And Joseph has backed up his story.

But Duceppe called even that comment unacceptable. He said his party is right to demand answers from Hockey Canada.

"That's what you call racial profiling," Duceppe said.

"It's our duty to ask those questions. If it pleases Hockey Canada or not, or some newspapers in Canada, I just don't mind.

"We're doing our duty and we'll do our duty because we're among those taxpayers and we don't want to be second-class citizens."

The NHL has cleared Doan but just last month linesman Michel Cormier testified in a court hearing that he was skating right next to Doan when he heard the slur.

He was testifying in Coderre's counter-suit.

"There is no question those words were said on the ice," Nicholson said.

"The National Hockey League's investigation clearly shows that that was stated, but it also clearly shows that they felt that it wasn't Shane Doan. . .

"I certainly hope the person who did say those words would stand up."

Cormier's post-game report does indeed accuse a foreign-born player - the Coyotes' Ladislav Nagy - of having made the slur in the second period of the 2005 Phoenix-Montreal game.

Doan's alleged insult came at the end of the third period after the Coyotes bench had already been warned not to repeat any anti-French epithets.

Rene Marcil of Hockey Canada said French Canada is well-represented in the organization. Nine francophone players were invited to join Team Canada in Russia but all declined, he said.

He called the controversy surrounding Doan's appointment an unnecessary distraction to the national hockey team.

The Doan controversy was considered closed by the NHL, even though it remained the subject of two defamation suits involving the player and Liberal MP Denis Coderre.

It erupted again on Parliament Hill once Doan's selection as captain rekindled the controversy in Quebec - \$3 million of Hockey Canada's \$53-million operating budget comes from the federal government.

All parties are eager to gain support in the crucial electoral battleground of Quebec, where Doan has been vilified.

All 12 MPs on the Commons' official languages committee - including five

Conservatives - supported a Bloc motion to summon Hockey Canada officials for Thursday's hearing.

The summons has triggered a flood of angry reaction from NHLers, sports commentators, callers to open-line radio shows, and even a new website: www.savedoan.ca.

By the time the committee sat down with Hockey Canada officials Thursday, the politicians were mostly skating backwards in an effort to distance themselves from the affair.

"What the constituents in my riding are saying is they'd like to put the politicians in the penalty box, so Team Canada can put the puck in the net," said Tory MP Pierre Poilievre.

Liberal Leader Stephane Dion said it's time to leave the sports on the ice and the Doan case for the courts.

Another Conservative - committee chair Guy Lauzon - said the Bloc Quebecois was simply stirring up tension as part of its mission to break up Canada.

Only the Bloc pressed on.

The hearing ended with news cameras and journalists chasing the Bloc MP, Malo, down the corridors of Parliament and asking him why people should be punished over unproven allegations.

"(Doan) was not the captain when these allegations were put forward," Malo replied before muscling his way through the throng in a futile escape attempt.

"The best choice for Hockey Canada was to name someone else until this issue comes to an end (in court)."

Nicholson said he was just eager to get on a plane to Russia - where Team Canada was undefeated in three games.

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