

Chretien turns down resignation of his aide for her reported 'moron' remark

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BN AUDIO

PRAGUE (CP) - Prime Minister Jean Chretien refused Friday to accept the resignation of his embattled communications director, Francoise Ducros, over her alleged remark that U.S. President George W. Bush is a "moron."

Chretien said Ducros had apologized to him for the furore sparked by a conversation she had with a journalist at the NATO summit in Prague. "She was graceful enough to offer me her resignation," the prime minister said. "I have not accepted that."

Ducros, who did not appear at the news conference in Prague, told Chretien she couldn't recall whether she made the remark but acknowledged she frequently uses the word "moron," Chretien said.

Please see below for a quick look at Ducros and the text of her resignation

"I know her very well," the prime minister told reporters. "She may have used that word against me a few times and I am sure she used it against you many times. It's a word she uses regularly."

Chretien said there have been no official complaints from American officials at the NATO summit, which closed Friday. He said U.S.-Canada relations had not been damaged.

Chretien's decision to keep Ducros quickly came under fire back in Ottawa.

"He should have accepted her resignation, perhaps with regret, perhaps understanding that people make mistakes," Canadian Alliance MP Jason Kenney said. "Senior officials should be held accountable for those mistakes."

Kenney suggested Ducros' remarks reflect a pattern in the Chretien government, "a consistent attitude of anti-Americanism which has hurt our relationship on softwood lumber, on agriculture ... It doesn't help us in getting access to the decision-makers in the White House and in Washington."

Conservative Leader Joe Clark said Chretien should have accepted the resignation. "Ms. Ducros has done the honourable thing; so should the prime minister."

Given Ducros' position as spokesman for Chretien, Clark said, "When she insults the president of the United States it is the prime minister of Canada insulting the president of the United States."

"Government is not about rewarding or protecting your friends," Clark added. "Keeping Francie Ducros, the person who calls the president of the United States a moron, keeping her in place, refusing her resignation, puts personal interests above Canada's interests."

In Prague, Chretien said Ducros has been a frequent defender of Bush, and took aim at reporters for making much of what he called a "private conversation."

"She defended many, many times the president of the United States," he said.

"And she reflected the position of Canada many times, that we have good relations. So she has apologized to me for the problem it's causing ... but we don't live in as civilized a world as we used to, where private conversations are private."

Chretien dismissed reminders that he himself - during a political storm over former solicitor general Lawrence MacAulay - said he accepts resignations as a matter of policy when they are offered.

"I said that to cabinet ministers because a cabinet minister can use a resignation to try to push you," he said. "It's not a question of her trying to press me."



Jean Chretien's Director of Communications Francoise Ducros in Prague, Friday. (CP/Tom Hanson)

Chretien noted that White House spokesman Ari Fleischer, for example, was in hot water recently over comments suggesting Washington could solve problems with Iraq by killing Saddam Hussein with "one bullet."

Fleischer said Thursday in Prague that the reported comment by Ducros was not taken as the official position of Canadian government.

When approached by a CP photographer, Ducros referred to a statement she had issued and declined further comment. She said in the statement that she wanted to "set the record straight."

"The comments attributed to me in no way reflect my personal view of the president of the United States," Ducros said.

"I have never, in any of the many briefings I have given reporters as the prime minister's chief spokesperson, ever expressed, on the record or off the record, any negative opinion concerning President George Bush."

"If I made comments in the context of what I understood to be a private conversation, I regret that they have attracted so much media attention. I accept full responsibility for them and I sincerely apologize."

"So as not to have this matter overshadow the prime minister's important work here at the summit I have offered him my resignation. The resignation was declined."

CBC Radio reporter Chris Hall acknowledged Friday he was the reporter in the conversation with Ducros. He would not comment on the exchange. Ducros' remarks were heard by another journalist, who reported it.

Earlier Friday, Foreign Affairs Minister Bill Graham said the reported remarks won't sour Canada-U.S. relations.

"I'm totally confident that Canada-U.S. relations are on a good footing," Graham said, citing a series of what he called positive meetings with U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell.

"Whatever incidents that might occur, and there will always be some . . . these are difficult issues, we raise them, we discuss them, and we deal with them as friends."

"And this issue, like all others will be dealt with in that context."

Ducros, 40, has been Chretien's director of communications since 1999. She was previously chief of staff to Intergovernmental Affairs Minister Stephane Dion following the 1995 Quebec referendum.

Earlier, she was chief of staff to Brian Tobin when he was fisheries minister during the turbot war with foreign fishermen.

Ducros is the daughter of a francophone father and anglophone mother. She grew up bilingual and bicultural in Beaconsfield, a Montreal suburb. Relatives on her mother's side of the family are in Vermont and Connecticut.

Graham vehemently denied Canada-U.S. relations have deteriorated under Chretien, saying they are no worse than they were under former prime minister Brian Mulroney despite Mulroney's reputedly close relationship with former president Ronald Reagan.

"Different styles are different styles," he said. "But the strength of the relationship is there."

Graham said he "didn't accept the premise" that the relationship has worsened significantly under a perception of anti-Americanism among some Liberals.

"We've had tremendous disagreements over trade policy," he said. "Believe you me, if you're concerned about that (moron remark), you should have heard what I had to say to Mr. Powell over softwood lumber."

But, he said, the countries have a good framework to manage disagreements.

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Here's the text of a statement Friday from Francoise Ducros, director of communications for Prime Minister Jean Chretien:

"I would like to set the record straight concerning media coverage of some remarks I made during the NATO Summit in Prague.

The comments attributed to me in no way reflect my personal view of the president of the United States. I have never, in any of the many briefings I

have given reporters as the prime minister's chief spokesperson, ever expressed, on the record or off the record, any negative opinion concerning President George Bush.

If I made comments in the context of what I understood to be a private conversation, I regret that they have attracted so much media attention. I accept full responsibility for them and I sincerely apologize.

So as not to have this matter overshadow the prime minister's important work here at the summit I have offered him my resignation."

(The resignation was declined).

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Here's a sketch of Francoise (Francie) Ducros, director of communications for Prime Minister Jean Chretien:

Politics: Has held the post in Prime Minister's Office since 1999.

Age: 40

Previous jobs: Chief of staff to Intergovernmental Affairs Minister Stephane Dion; chief of staff to former fisheries minister Brian Tobin.

Training: Lawyer.

Family: Grew up bilingual and bicultural in Beaconsfield, a Montreal suburb. Father Jacques Ducros was a Crown attorney and later a judge who was involved in prosecuting FLQ terrorists following the October Crisis of 1970. Husband Ian Christie is a federal bureaucrat.

Quote: "I'm never going to be the most loved, so maybe I should be the most hated director of communications that ever lived."

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