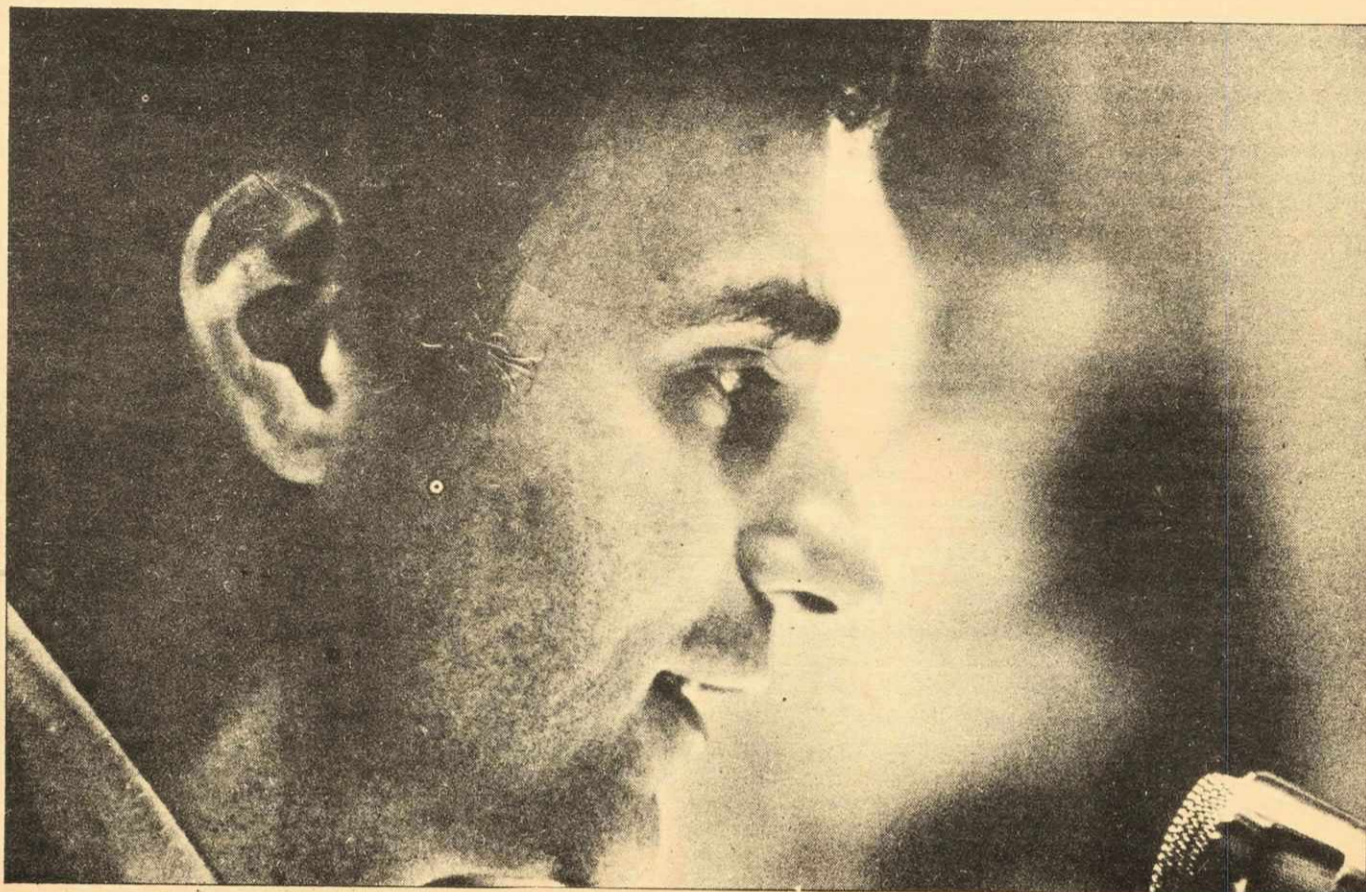


Remember the Corvair!

St. Nader and the Corporate Dragon



In 1966 *Unsafe At Any Speed* was published, embroiling Ralph Nader in a head-on conflict with one of the world's great powers, General Motors Corporation. The result was a government investigation vindicating Nader and proving that the Corporation was not invincible. Since that time Nader has championed various consumer causes and has been directly responsible for 6 major Federal Laws dealing with subjects such as auto protection, pollution, and sanitation. He has also organized consumer groups throughout the United States and 'Nader's Raiders', dedicated young lawyers feared both by corporations and corrupt politicians that operate on various projects from Nader's headquarters in Washington.

Ralph Nader payed his first visit to Halifax on Thursday, April 1, addressing a large audience at St. Mary's. That afternoon a small press conference was held. Michael Greenfield and Harvey MacKinnon were there representing the *Gazette*. The following is the interview conducted with Ralph Nader.

Question: Are there any parallels in Canada to the US consumer movement?

Nader: In some ways. In the US some of the vigour comes from Congressional investigations and reports done by the US government. You don't have that kind of interest to that degree. The Parliament does not have a tradition of investigation as our government does, and many of the reports dealing with consumer interests are held secret here. On the other hand your government funds some consumer group activities which the US does not do. Of course there are a lot of similarities, there is a gross imbalance between the large corporation in both countries and the consumers.

I do hope the Canadian commission that is studying corporate concentration pays some attention to fundamental changes in Canadian Law dealing with the degree in which the corporation has to make matters public, the degree in which consumers, workers, taxpayers, community residents, and shareholders are given greater rights. These are all groups that receive the harmful impacts of corporate behavior and they have not been given adequate rights to defend and promote their own causes.

Question: What has driven you to branch out into fields other than strictly consumer issues?

Nader: Because I've defined consumer interests more broadly than has historically been the case. Consumer interest is defined as an interest in health, safety, and economic well-being no matter from what direction the harm or economic advantage comes from. I think the whole economy has to be evaluated overwhelmingly from the consumer standpoint, because that is who it is for. I think the consumer

is the yardstick of the ultimate health of the economy. And as a result that is the constituency that should be given the greatest attention. It is interesting to know that the only two groups left unorganized in our society are taxpayers and consumers.

Question: The government has been creating consumer agencies of its own, apparently in the interest of the consumer. How is this counter to what you have started, and how does this affect the consumer movement?

Nader: Of course, some of these consumer agencies are just window dressing, they just use the public relations ploy to take the language from the consumer movement and appropriate it for corporate purposes. In the US, for example, one utility's motto literally is: "Power to the People", I don't think it really matters much.

On the other hand, there is a systematic attempt by corporations to try to damage the safety and health of the movement in the United States on the grounds that it is costing people a lot of money. That is utter nonsense. First of all because there is no better investment than safer products that prevent injuries, wage loss, and medical bills and all the rest of it.

And second because the corporations are trying to divert attention from their own mismanagement, their own corruption, their own crime which they now are admitting to day after day, payoffs, bribes, inefficiencies, stagnation, unemployment. A good deal of these can be chalked up to corporate management which is trying to harness the consumer movement.

Question: You talk a lot about a Freedom of Information Act. Can you give us any examples of the sort of secrecy you mean?

"It is unfortunate that Canada inherited the tradition of the Official Secrets Act from Great Britain, as did some other Commonwealth countries such as Australia. Now is the time to role it back and let the sun shine in."

Nader? Just in yesterday's paper there were responses by various Cabinet Members to the Parliamentary committee listing the various examples of materials that were kept secret under the Official Secrets Act. This makes for good reading. They have nothing to do with national security and they have everything to do with health, the consumer, etc. It is totally incompatible to have citizen involvement in democracy and that level of government secrecy. I think Sweden broke the path years ago in having an open government. The United States had its first Freedom of Information Act almost twenty years ago and has remarkably strengthened it since 1974. So that

"Just say to yourself - What does the economy need most? These are mass transit, health care, housing - these are just three areas the corporations are moving out of, losing interest."

now people write to the CIA and FBI and say "we want our private files" and they get them. And now if a citizen sues a government agency under the Act and wins, the government may be required to pay all legal costs.

It is unfortunate that Canada inherited the tradition of the Official Secrets Act from Great Britain, as did some other Commonwealth countries such as Australia. Now is the time to role it back and let the sun shine in.

Question: Do you keep informed as to Canadian Affairs?

Nader: We do keep informed - for two reasons. First of all there are some consumer groups in Canada that we're in touch with, there is a group in Montreal, for example, concerned with auto safety that we have communicated with for a number of years. Second, we're trying to help student groups, especially in Ontario, to establish their own Ontario Public Interest Research Groups to deal with consumer and environmental matters. And third we have been consulted a number of times by Canadian Parliamentary officials, for example we just put out a report on "Federal Chartering for Giant Corporations" and a good many copies were obtained by various officials in Ottawa. Obviously there are common interests too, nuclear power, pollution, use of water, minerals, the fact that US corporations own half of Canada's industry. All of these require close cooperation between citizen groups and not just government.

Question: What about the problem of foreign ownership of Canadian industry. How important is that factor?

Nader: First of all, the political ability to curb corporate abuse is minimal when the government is in one country and the ownership of the industry comes from the neighboring country, namely the United States. You really can't have much political independence dealing with corporate policy when there is that degree of absentee ownership. Second you lose your own innovation. Look at Sweden, Sweden has 7 million people; they produce 2 automobiles; they have dozens of their own magazines; they have literature. And Canada is 3 times the population and much more inland and resources, and its constantly the mimic - ditto - mimeographed-type of situation. From that point of view, and that's being realized more and more in Canada, there is a great need for an indigenously based economy. It is hard enough to deal with corporations when they're in your own country.

Question: You speak a lot about the individual consumer. What about the position of the United States as a consumer of a very large percentage of the world's resources and the fact that most of the world is in a much worse position than the