

EXCALIBUR INTERVIEW

With Peter C. Newman, editor of Maclean's

Editor of *Maclean's*, Canada's most widely read newsmagazine, Peter C. Newman is a fixture in the Canadian media establishment.

His most recent book, *The Canadian Establishment*, went to the top of the charts last year becoming the biggest-selling book in Canadian history.

His inside look at the Canadian business elite, was one of the topics covered in a recent interview with Canadian University Press newspaper, the *Ontario*, from Guelph. As well, Newman touches on Canadian nationalism, the Canadian identity, and sex.

ONTARIO: As far as I know, you came to Canada at the age of ten...

NEWMAN: Eleven.

ONTARIO: How is it then that you are much more deeply immersed in Canadian life and much more interested in the facets of Canada and its culture, than those who were born here?

NEWMAN: Because when you're born here you take everything for granted. You take your language, your country and your whole way of life for granted; if you're uprooted as I was, you have to establish a new identity and a completely new language, a new way of looking at things.

You learn not just the language, but the history of the country; you learn manners, the way to eat. Everything is a learned experience, and because it's learned it makes much more of an impression on you. However, if you pick something up by osmosis over 15 years of life, it just appears to be natural like breathing and it doesn't make much of an impression on you.

The other of course is that Canada literally saved my life. I was running away from Nazis with my family and Canada was the only country that let us in. We tried to get into the States, South America, Australia, New Zealand and only Canada opened its doors. So we felt a real debt and therefore we started off loving this country and loved it ever since.

ONTARIO: In *Home Country* you said that if we join a North American common market it would be the first step in our political absorption and an end to the Canadian dream. What do you consider as being the Canadian dream?

NEWMAN: In the context that I use the term, it means having a separate entity from the US, it means being different; being perhaps a little more conservative. Unlike us, the Americans have a talent for excess.

Also, I think there's more allowance (in Canada) for individual differences. You can be a Newfoundlander first, and a Canadian second. In the United States, maybe with the exception of Texas you have to be an American first. We have more individual freedom, more freedom in terms of getting into the elite.

I've just done a study of the establishment and it's a very fluid thing. Most people in the establishment here are first generation. In the US they have second and third generation.

So I guess in a negative way we define ourselves by not being Americans, but in a positive way it's a country that has the greatest potential on earth. I sometimes think that we search too hard for a Canadian identity, in terms of trying to articulate a very precise definition. What really matters is being here, having a feeling that everything is possible which you do in Canada, and you don't in many other countries of the world.

ONTARIO: With the exception of *Home Country* all of your books seem to be constructed around power. Why are you so interested in it?

NEWMAN: The two most interesting aspects of the human experience are sex and power. Just because I write about power, doesn't mean I'm not interested in sex, but it is also a transaction in human relations.

If you're studying a society, which is really what I'm trying to do in my books, the various aspects of a society, whether they're political or economic, sociological or psychological; you have to eventually

descend or ascend to transactions in power, individual power as well as collective power. It gives you a good frame of reference for studying a society.

Also it tends to be a dramatic thing to write about, so in terms of both authenticity of writing about a society, and in terms of the possibility of dramatizing the events in a society's evolution, using power as an entry point, can be very useful.

ONTARIO: But in one of your statements you have said: 'My interpretation of journalistic objectivity is to be against everybody who's in power.' Is this just to keep powerful individuals under check, or do you hope for a society where no individual or group would ever exercise a great deal of power?

NEWMAN: Oh, no, there's bound to be a group that holds power.

ONTARIO: Are you then against that group?

NEWMAN: Well, in a way. But the way I'm against it is that I believe they have to remain accountable for the power they hold. I believe that one of the ways they remain accountable is an alert press, of which I am a part. So in that sense I'm against them, I keep pressing them for accountability.

I'm not against them having that power, because in a democracy you elect people to rule, and therefore they have power. There's nothing wrong with that.

ONTARIO: You have inferred that the 'Establishment' (of about 1,000 people) is the real institution that runs Canada. In that case, how much power or influence does it have over our politicians?

NEWMAN: That's a very good question and it's a difficult one to answer. I tried to get at the answer in the last chapter (of *The Canadian Establishment*) but I don't think I was very precise because I don't think it is possible to be.

In fact, the business establishment doesn't have as much power as it thinks it does. It thinks that it controls the politicians. Politicians don't pay that much attention to it. Politicians are accountants by instinct. They go where the votes are; they work by numbers. The business community doesn't have the numbers but it does have some clout in terms of financing elections, in terms of giving jobs to politicians, in terms of contracts and other monetary rewards.

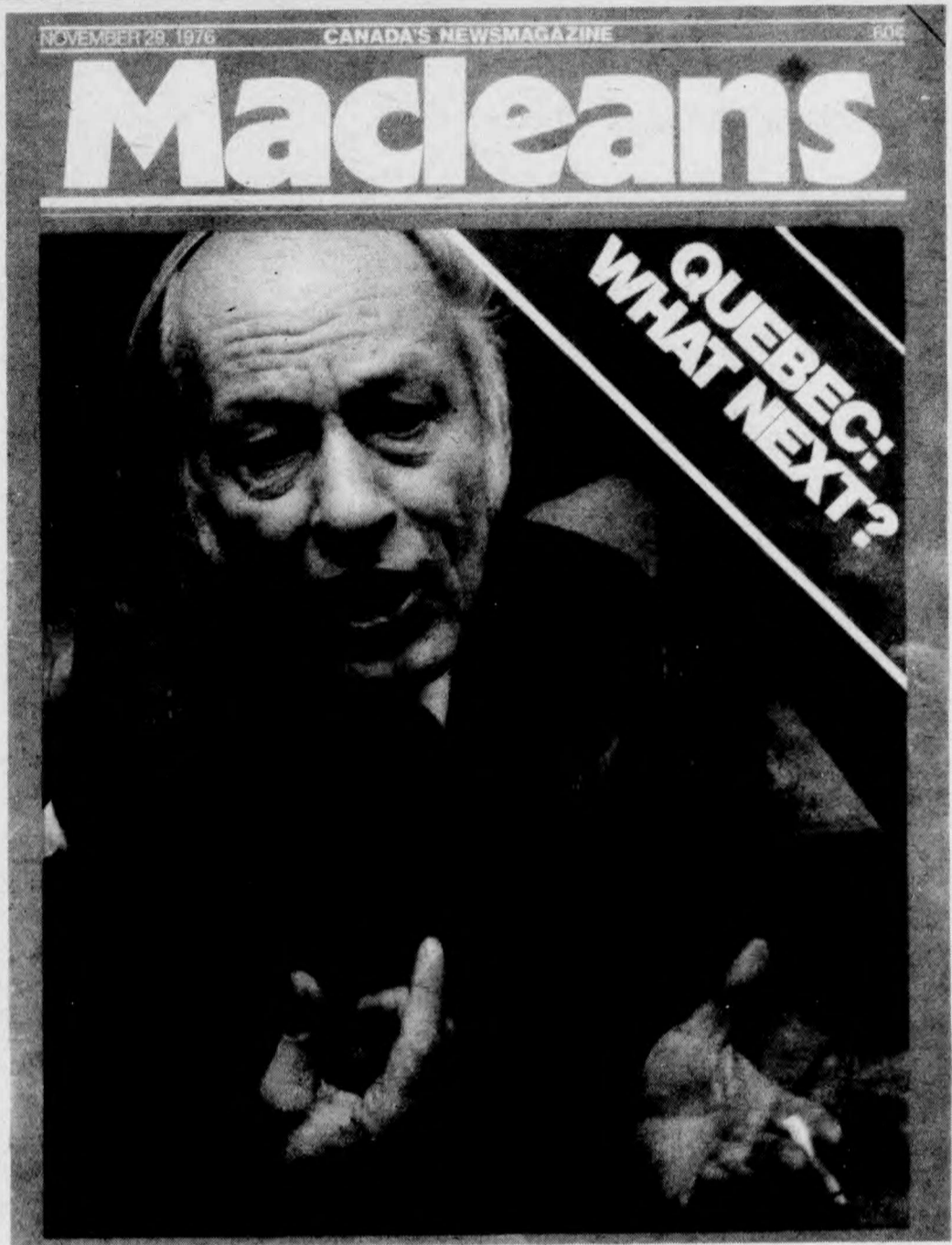
You can assume that just at the present time the business community has a lot of influence because the Trudeau government has backed away from the so-called 'new society', because of the pressure from big business. They are now talking about the middle way: they're saying that they were never really against free enterprise etc. etc. Well this is a straight response to business pressure, so that businessmen have a lot of influence. I don't think they have that much power. That's an important difference.

ONTARIO: You are now writing a 'new history of Canada'. Is it limited to contemporary history or does it examine Canada's general history from a new perspective?

NEWMAN: What I've attempted in my books, is to write about things in a new way. Before *Renegade in Power* was published, there were no critical books about living Canadian Prime Ministers. It was always done posthumously; it was done in a kind of back alley way. Suddenly 'Renegade' came out and here was a contemporary book about a guy who just six months before had been Prime Minister. The same thing with the Pearson book. Now, of course, it's been done since, here and in other countries, but those books set a trend.

In *The Canadian Establishment* I try to write about Canadian business in a very new way. Again, what you had before; on the one hand you had the radicals saying all these guys should go to the guillotine, or you had the Chamber of Commerce people saying 'long live the status quo.'

I try to present business from an interesting point of view with a lot of anecdotes, with a lot of stories about what these



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people are really like. I wouldn't come out for them or against them. I said this is what it's like. This is the way it is. So again I was trying to set a new trend in business reporting.

When I mention history books, I'm going to attempt a new way of looking at the whole of Canadian history, which is kind of a third facet of this.

ONTARIO: Many Canadian periodicals seem to be constantly on the verge of financial crisis, with perhaps the exception of *Maclean's*...

NEWMAN: Oh no. We're always on the verge of financial crisis.

ONTARIO: As the editor of Canada's leading magazine...

NEWMAN: Canada's only newsmagazine.

ONTARIO:... do you think that this can be attributed to the threat posed by certain US periodicals and if so, why?

NEWMAN: Not any more. I think as long as *Time* was here as a so-called Canadian publication that was true. What we're competing against now is not another periodical as much as we're competing for the time of our readers, with a small 't'. A reader in the old days; before television, before the whole explosion of knowledge, would actually spend an entire evening reading *Maclean's* and that was a legitimate leisure activity. Somebody would say, 'Mabel, what are we going to do tonight? Let's read *Maclean's*. Fine.' That doesn't happen anymore.

ONTARIO: Isn't the average time of a *Maclean's* reader now averaged at 99 minutes?

NEWMAN: Yeah, well even that you have to fight for, because there are so many other things you can do. You can go to the movies,

you can watch television, etc. There are 200 things you can do, and so the only way you (magazines) can stay in contention is to produce a publication which is topical enough, which is urgent enough, which is going to repay the investment of time. That's what we're trying to do.

If we succeed, it's not because we're Canadian, it's because we're good enough to succeed. I don't know whether we will.

ONTARIO: A few issues back in *Maclean's* you found that the medium income of your readers was \$18,800 and just under 50 per cent had attended university. Has *Maclean's* content been deliberately geared towards the more educated, or have they simply been attracted by the pre-existing content?

NEWMAN: There is a change in the audience of *Maclean's* because our function used to be to connect the small towns. It was the only national medium. But now, in this new format we're really more attractive to urban audiences which are plugged into the whole new system. Although we don't discourage them, we don't target our coverage to the small town readers particularly.

ONTARIO: In your opinion, is today's youth any more prepared to take over the country's institutions, than your generation was?

NEWMAN: I hope so. We had this terrible attitude of going to university to serve our apprenticeship. We never thought of having any original ideas or questioning conventional wisdom we just accepted everything that was fed to us.

I like to think that the next generation is going to be much more open to new ideas. Out of their energy and talent will come new institutions and a renewal of existing institutions and eventually a better country.