

# Newman drawn to people of power and influence

Peter C. Newman, former editor of Maclean's and the Toronto Star, recently spoke to students at Western University. The author of such bestselling books as *The Canadian Establishment* and *The Establishment Man*, Newman is currently working on his eleventh work, a history of the Hudson's Bay Company. Western's Gazette reporter Dugie Maudsley talked to him about his study of the powerful in Canada.

**Q.** Not many people know much about the background of Peter C. Newman. Could you tell us about coming to Canada from Czechoslovakia at the age of 11?

**A.** Well actually I was born in Vienna in 1929; my mother happened to be visiting there. But we lived in Czechoslovakia. My father owned a big sugar factory. We lived in a big house, and we lost it all when the Germans invaded. In fact they turned it (the house) into a casino. We left Czechoslovakia in 1939 and couldn't get any country to take us except Canada. So we very happily came here. The one condition was that we buy a farm; they wanted farmers. So we bought a farm near Burlington, Ontario, and spent five years there. I went to school at UCC (Upper Canada College) which seems kind of incongruous. The reason I went there was they had war-time scholarships, so it didn't cost anything. Secondly my father, very wisely, thought the best way to learn English was to be immersed in it.

**Q.** At that point, when you went to UCC, you didn't speak English?

**A.** Didn't speak a word. Later I went to U of T and got a Master's degree. Started at *The Financial Post* (as Assistant Editor). Later I became the Editor of both the *Toronto Star* and *Maclean's*. I've written 10 books, sold a million copies, and now I'm mostly writing my books.

**Q.** Would you consider this *The Great Canadian Success Story*?

**A.** Well, you know it is bloody nice to have a country where the Editor of Canada's national magazine can be an immigrant. There are not many countries where that would be true. I think that says more for the country than for me.

**Q.** You have written many books: *Flame of Power*, *Renegade in Power*; *The Diefenbaker Years*, *Home Country: People, Places and Power*; *Politics*, *The Establishment Man: A Portrait of Power*, and your latest book, *True North Not Strong and Free*, to name a few. The one constant theme with all these books is the concept of power. Would you say that you are obsessed with the concept of power?

**'What I basically study is the decision-making process.'**

**A.** I know it looks that way but it isn't quite that. I believe that there are two ways of looking at a society. One is the way sociologists view it or theorists, who look at the demographics and make a conclusion. The other is to look at the real life, and to see who makes the decisions. What I basically study is the decision-making process. Whether it is in business, politics or defense it doesn't matter. In that sense I'm preoccupied with the expenditure of power. I think that is a very interesting way of looking at Canadian society. What I've concluded is that there is a group of very special people who have the power and who make the decisions. That's where the "establishment" notion comes from.

**Q.** Do you feel, then, that there are any negative aspects to how power is held in Canada?

**A.** Sure, because it can easily be abused. There is too much power in too few hands. We almost have a feudal society. We have 14 families who basically make most of the economic decisions that matter in this country. And that's bad. But I think it's the journalist's function to expose that, and that is what my books have done. Not in a scurrilous way, but certainly in a very real way. Don't think that if I wasn't accurate

that these people wouldn't sue me because they would. I've tried to stay fair and accurate but at the same time to expose the kind of power these people have. They don't like it. Their greatest luxury is their privacy, and I've invaded that.

**Q.** So what do you say to the criticism that you tend to be fairly positive towards the "Canadian Establishment" as is shown in your portrayal of Conrad Black?

**A.** Well I am and I am not. *Moby Dick* you can read as a whaling story or you can read as a great social commentary of the time. I think my books are a bit like that. I don't want to sound presumptuous, but they can be read at two levels. There is the story of these incredible people; how they spend their money, how they live and all that sexy stuff. But at another level, I think, there is a very harsh condemnation of how they abuse the decision-making process. How they have no conscience. How they make no decisions in terms of the national interest, but in terms of their own selfish interest. So I would

contend that these books, by throwing light on these families, are not quite as favorable as they seem.

**Q.** Trevor Eyton, President of Brascan, has stated "corporate concentration is unavoidable, beneficial and won't be abused." What do you think of this?

**A.** Well I disagree. Trevor Eyton happens to be an honest man, but that doesn't mean that the potential for abuse isn't there. Sometimes these people abuse power without knowing it. They get a monopoly on some manufacturing process and a whole lot of innocent, well-meaning and hard-working people are thrown out of work. What I attack them for is a closed-door policy that locks out the new person trying to start an enterprise—which in the end is where new jobs come from. New jobs don't come from Trevor Eyton buying one more company for his stable, they come from some guy who starts out small and grows.

**Q.** You say there are a lot of "closed doors." How did you, as a

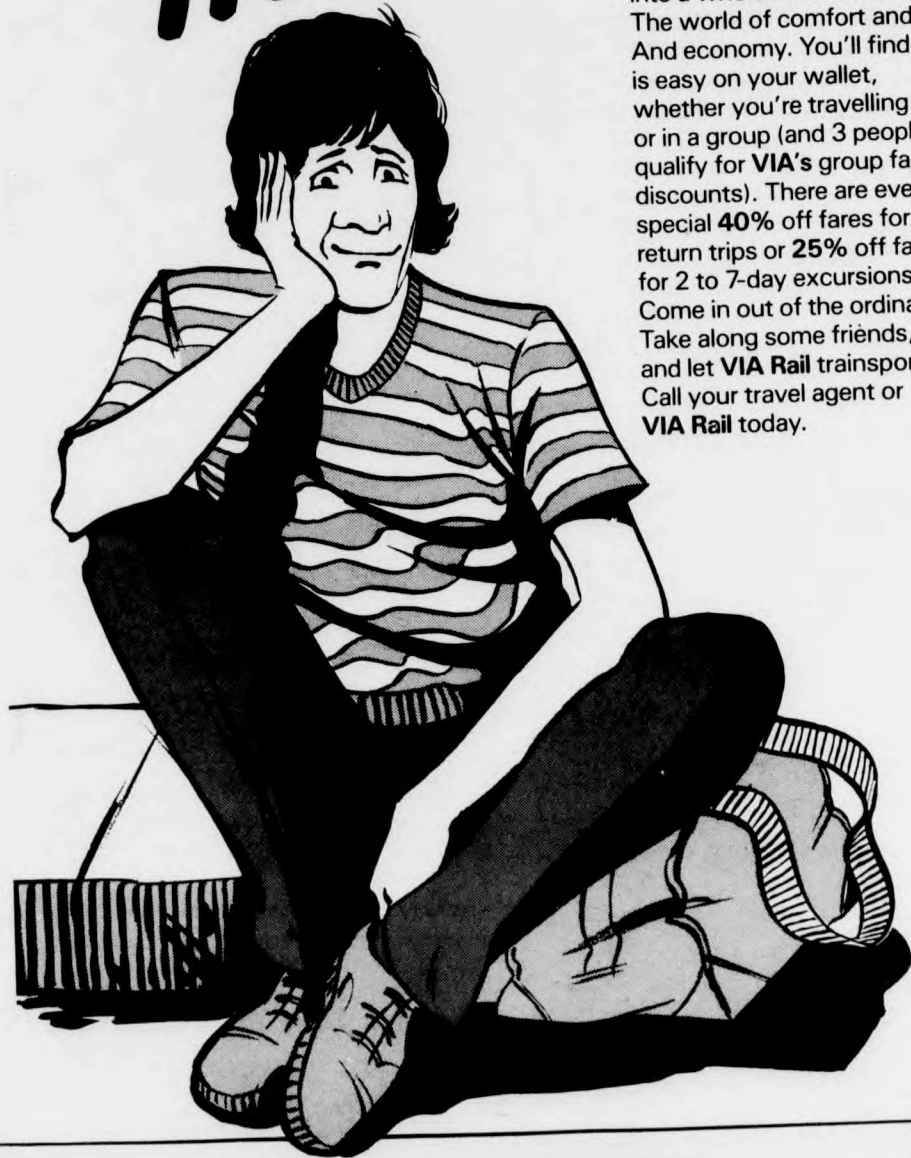
journalist, get behind these doors when most journalists would have had them slammed in their faces?

**A.** I guess that is my stock in trade. People say to themselves, 'he's going to write the book anyway, I might as well make sure he gets some facts straight,' and so they talk to me. I don't kid myself though. First of all it takes, with nearly all of these interviews, six months to a year to arrange. And sometimes I have to blackmail them.

**Q.** Blackmail them? Blackmail who, and in what sense?

**A.** Well, for example, Bud MacDougall, head of Argus Corporation before Conrad Black, didn't want to talk to me. He said he had never talked to a journalist and he wasn't going to start by talking to me. And yet I knew I had to have him otherwise I couldn't do the book (*The Canadian Establishment*). So I had lunch with about 20 of his friends. At the time MacDougall was worth maybe a billion dollars.

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