

by Jens Andersen

In the town where I began reporting there were five papers, and four of them were cheap, trashy, stupid, and corrupt. They all played politics for what there was in it, and they all leaped obscenely every time an advertiser blew his nose. Every other American city of that era was full of such papers, dreadful little rags, venal, vulnerable, and vile. Not a few of them made great pretensions, and were accepted by a naive public as organs of enlightenment. Today, I believe, such journalistic street-walkers are very rare. The consolidations that every old-timer deploras have accomplished at least one good thing: They have got the newspapers, in the main, out of the hands of needy men.

H.L. Mencken  
Journalism in America  
1927

The Committee to Solve the Insoluble is back again. Its campaign for democracy has already saddled us with demagogues and mobocracy; its program for universal education has led to exorbitantly expensive rolling-mills for turning out hordes of narrow-focus technoids and cocksure socio-visionaries; and its credo that legislation is the cure for the ills of humanity had led to the uplifting of only two underprivileged groups: lawyers and bureaucrats.

journalism. A media giant can afford to report the news with impunity, fight long and expensive court battles to maintain its press freedom, and withstand the often idiotic demands of advertisers and readers (though in reality the giants are usually too cowardly or tightwad to do so). The individual papers and small chains envisioned by the Kent Commission would be no braver than our present media empires, and with their economic vulnerability they would be much more inclined to remain timid and contemptible, like the rags of Mencken's day, or the pathetic small-town weeklies of our own era.

Conglomeration, and the resultant possibilities of conflict of interest, is a more real problem, and the argument against newspapers owning or being part of non-media business is worthy of consideration. There is still the danger that such a move may weaken newspapers financially, resulting in the sort of gutless papers mentioned above, but this may be a chance that has to be taken.

Anti-conglomerate legislation to this end could easily be accommodated by the Combines Investigations Act.

ruinous 'editorial expense wars' between newspapers. Efficient editorial operations would be punished by the rule, as would be papers like the *Edmonton Journal* who are unlucky enough to operate in high advertising areas. Doubtless new horizons in account-fudging would emerge from newspaper business offices to baffle the watchdogs.

In short, if the Commission proposals were adopted, their effect would be to crank up the volume of the already deafening criticism coming from journalistic amateurs (i.e. the public and government appointees), to force the Editor-in-Chief to perform an annual public strip-tease for them (like the July 1 politicians), and to reduce the newspapers to a state of financial insecurity where the editor would think twice before criticizing even cannibals.

A rather drastic price to keep the fingers of the fat cats out of the printing press. One might even say the cure is worse than the disease, since a fat cat's influence on editorial policy is generally slight, and easily compensated for by any reader with a brain.

The intimidation power of the Press Rights Panel, on the other hand, is great (it has a great deal of leeway in applying its rules), and the fear it inspires

If the Commission's proposals were adopted, their effect would be to crank up the volume of the already deafening criticism coming from journalistic amateurs, to force the Editor-in-Chief to perform the annual strip tease for them and to reduce the newspapers to a state of financial insecurity where the editor would think twice before criticizing even cannibals.

Nonetheless, its faith unshaken, it now proceeds to prescribe the cure for the diseased newspaper industry, with all the ham-fisted diagnostic skill that has characterized its past efforts.

I speak, of course, of the Kent Royal Commission on Newspapers.

Its main proposal is to break up the Southam and Thomson publishing empires, and to keep newspaper chains small (ideally no more than five papers, or 270,000 total circulation) without geographical concentration or ownership affiliation with non-media business.

The proposal has a great deal that should appeal to the social-reformist mind, with its vision of multitudes of newspapers, owned by multitudes of people expressing multitudes of opinions, competing among themselves to improve news coverage, with their freedom from business attachments preventing possible conflicts of interest in coverage like, say, a newspaper turning a blind eye to pollution generated by a pulp mill owned by itself.

The benefits are more theoretical than real, however. First, there is no evidence that widespread holdings or a market monopoly in a given locale diminishes the quality of the editorial content (i.e. non-advertising content) of a newspaper. Even the Kent Commission had to admit that Southam, with little competition or outside prodding, makes some effort to subordinate the profitability of its papers to editorial quality.

In fact, both size and profitability are prerequisites to any sort of first-rate

Under the Kent Commission proposals, it would be done by a three man, government appointed Press Rights Panel, who would also have the power to regulate newspaper ownership, divestment and transfer, which, as mentioned before, would only cripple newspapers financially, and render them journalistically impotent. Take away these powers and the remainder of the recommendations of the Kent Commission amount simply to the foisting of busybodies onto the press.

The proposed seven-man committees to "advise" each newspaper, and the Press Rights Council and its "review" power are such busybodies. A newspaper's Editor in Chief would be required to report to the former, a ritual that will necessarily be farcical since any editor is reticent about airing dirty linen or professional problems to the average boob in the street, and in addition, even under the Kent Commission proposals, the publisher will have hiring and firing power over him.

The proposed legislation to make the Editor-in-Chief master of the newsroom is ridiculous for similar reasons. All it would do is ensure that publishers take more care in appointing docile yes-men to the post.

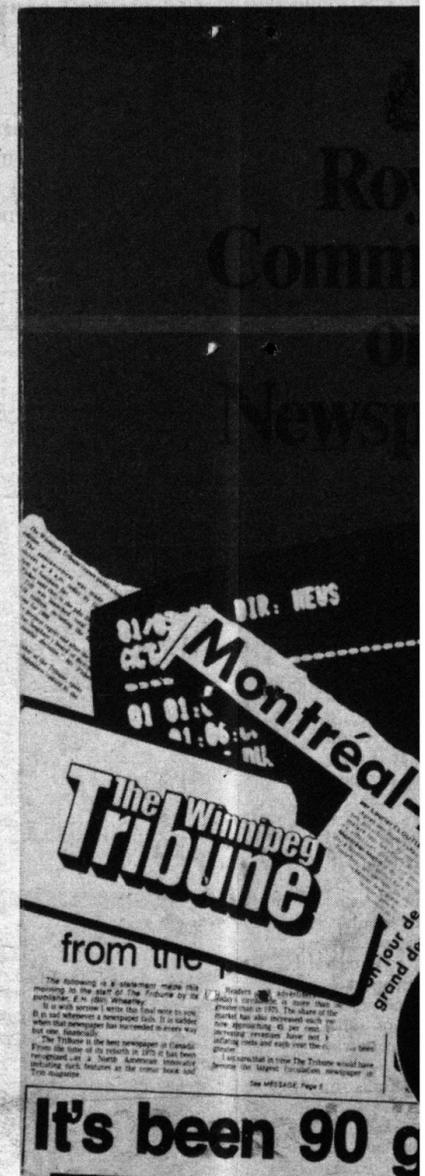
The proposed tax break for papers that spend above the industry average on editorial expenses, and the surtax for those who fall below the average is another can of worms. It could easily result in costly and

will have unpredictable results on editorial policy. A far more urgent problem than fat cat meddling in raising the quality of editorial content, and a much more easily solvable one, is educating the journalists who write the newspaper's copy. The Kent Commission addresses the problem by tooting the horn for journalism schools and on the job training, but most of the particulars are merely platitudes in passing.

It must be obvious to anyone who reads the dailies that more drastic training is needed than simply sending a candidate to journalism school and pumping him or her full of pyramid style writing and the superficial balderdash of freshman sociology and economics. The result of this general practice has been only slightly more polished dunces than the journalistic ignoramuses of Mencken's day.

Mencken's solution was to set up journalism schools as tough and rigorously policed by professional journalists, as the medical schools are by doctors. Having gone myself through a mickey-mouse journalism school where the best teacher advised me to go out in the field to learn, and having seen a Carleton journalism graduate who didn't know that interviews were grammatically edited from conversational English into written English, I can only agree that a great deal of stiffening of programs is overdue.

Make journalism a four-year course with a year of internship, and design the program to be so demanding that the wimps switch to easier fields like theoretical physics, and 90 per cent of the problems now ascribed to corporate concentration will disappear.



## Summary of

### Canadian Newspaper Act

Creation of a Canadian Newspaper Act that would stop any further significant concentration of the ownership and control of daily newspapers. The act would establish

-a Press Rights Panel associated with the Canadian Human Rights Commission to monitor and implement the commission's proposed legislation.

-a Tax Credit to encourage newspaper owners to plough more of their profits into improved editorial content and a surtax to penalize companies providing inadequate editorial content.

### Investment Incentives

-Special capital cost allowances for public share in new newspapers or in takeovers of existing newspapers  
-There would have to be 60 days' public notice before a newspaper is closed or sold.

### Ownership Guidelines

-The Newspaper Act would prevent newspaper chains from owning more than five daily newspapers with a combined circulation of more than five percent of total Canadian daily circulation, measured on a weekly basis. The newspapers would have to be in distinctly different geographic areas.

-Newspaper owners would not be able to own or control a television, radio, or cable system within the same area.

-Thompson would be forced to sell its 40 Canadian newspapers or the Globe and Mail within five years

-The New Brunswick Irving family would have to sell either its Moncton and Saint John N.B. newspapers or its radio and