

opinion, a little in the way that every public company is required to, by law.

Of course, there is only one reason for the onslaught: it is an old technique that if you haven't got a case, you tell a big lie. What the Royal Commission actually says is that conglomerate ownership of monopoly newspapers is shortchanging the public, putting too little into the product, into journalism, in order to take out too much in profit. The publishers dare not face that issue; they'd have no public sympathy.

What they are in fact defending is their power of profit and therefore, in effect, the inadequate pay and status of journalists. In order to defend the indefensible, they have to say that it's something else.

The Commission recommends government regulation to restrict the number of newspapers one company may own. To put it mildly, given how many papers some companies already own and would be allowed to keep, frankly, it would leave ownership in Canada more concentrated than any other democratic society would tolerate. It is regulation of the kind that every other free enterprise society, advocating competition, opposed to monopoly, (the United States, of course,

the most conspicuous), considers to be a primary duty of government.

That kind of regulation, related to ownership, and very modest regulation with regard to future ownership, is the *only* kind of regulation the Commission recommends. In no way at all, would the Commission establish any regulations as to the contents of the press. We would give government no power whatever to interfere with what is written, what it's about, how it's written, what opinions are expressed or anything else. The assertion the Commission would restrict the freedom of the press is a lie. It's a lie of desperation, by people we disturbed by what we actually recommend but don't have any respectable argument whatsoever against it.

Would what we recommend do any good? Peter Desbarats wrote a perceptive article recently to the effect that the fundamental issue involved in the report is one of power. I agree. Governments should stop the takeover of newspapers by conglomerates. But there is another power issue. That is, that given our realistic, modest proposals, given therefore that the ownership of newspapers will remain much as it is, the issue is the relative power of journalists and corporate management. Our tax proposals would make manage-

ment more willing to spend money on the editorial departments.

Opening up editorial affairs to more public view, giving journalists an equal say with management on the selection of the advisory committee, enhancing the status of the editor, all that should give journalists more influence in how the extra money is spent. Our hope, of course, is that there would be larger journalistic staff, better paid staff and therefore less attrition, more expenditures on training, more opportunities for travel and career development, more time to specialize and dig into stories,

better libraries and reference systems, and so on.

Now none of that, we emphasize, is going to be achieved by created any government presence in the newsrooms. The legislation that we propose would create an environment in which journalists would be more free to operate as they think best. It is legislation that protects the public, in exactly the same way that general legislation about companies protects the public and enhanced the potential hopes of shareholders relative to company management.

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If we didn't have the tax measure, the only respectable alternative would be to require a general divestment of the ownership of newspapers by proprietors who have other significant business interests."

Commission for changes

Last spring, it seems a long time ago now, we felt the Kent Commission had to be a self-contained package, not dependent upon any assumption about other government policies. And particularly after the long, on again, off again watered down story of anti-combines, or competition legislation, we felt we should make our proposals in the form of a *Newspaper Act* that would stand by itself.

Now, more recently there have been some signs the government may now be serious about strong competition legislation for newspapers. If happily there is some kind of legislation soon, I would certainly like to see some adaptation of our proposals....Many of them could become a part of the Competition Act — it's a strong genuine act — most importantly, the responsibility for administering our rules about the ownership of newspapers could be located with an improved administration for competition policy generally.

That would also simplify another of our proposals: in the absence of competition legislation, we gave our proposed Press Rights Panel two jobs: to administer the ownership provisions and to be a kind of ombudsman/commentator on the press. Now if the other machinery, the competition machinery, should come to exist, it would be practicable to separate the two functions. The panel then would become a small section of the Canadian Human Rights Commission with just one purpose; namely, to make the kind of comment on the press that is necessary, in the public interest, because in English Canada, only a handful of papers have the elementary sense to support genuine press councils.

There is another probably

modifications in our proposals that frankly is a less happy one; we recommended a tax haven provision to encourage investment in newspapers. But with last November's budget, we think one must say that it's become a non-starter.

But let me emphasize that the tax haven for investment is a minor part of the Commission's proposals and has no connection whatsoever with the Commission's major tax proposal, which relates to the taxation of newspaper income, not to investment. That proposal is entirely unaffected. It is to introduce a kind of progressive taxation on newspaper incomes by means of a tax credit/surtax related to how much of its revenue the newspaper puts into its result. In my view, a tax measure of that kind is essential to improving news reporting in the situation we have.

A more precise way of putting it would be to say the tax measure is the necessary justification for what is after all the essentially 'live and let live' attitude to existing conglomerate ownership that the Commission adopts.

If we didn't have the tax measure, the only respectable alternative would be to require a general divestment of the ownership of newspapers by proprietors who have other significant business interests.

But I don't recommend that. I'm a very moderate sort of person, I don't like that much of an upheaval. But in the condition that we've got in to we can avoid that upheaval only if we put the tax system to work to lessen the consequences of business conglomeration.



Oh... just a friendly little two-handed game, that's all.

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