

Kent gives journalists a fair chance

...to help stop the takeover of Canadian newspapers by conglomerates

Editorial writers in newspapers across Canada emitted great huffs of indignance last year when Tom Kent released his Royal Commission on Newspapers, sat back, and watched owners and publishers choke down their crocodile tears to the Commission's central thesis: "Freedom of the press is not a property right of owners."

Every so often since, those same

by Tom Kent

The two main theses of the Kent Commission report are not that concentration of ownership is detrimental and should be reduced. What the commission found and stated was that the main factor is the *kind* of ownership. What is chiefly detrimental to the public interest is not whether an owner has one paper or seven; it's whether his newspapers are his primary interest or are merely one business among others.

To be specific, we didn't find any evidence that Southam papers generally serve the public interest less well than most independent papers. The main problem from the Commission's findings is conglomerate ownership. The main problem is that monopoly newspapers are wonderful cash cows from which proprietors with other interests can milk enormous profits (or capital gains) and the more so, the less they spend on the content of the newspaper.

That is the first thesis of the report. The second thesis is that if the law is not changed, it is inevitable that the trend to conglomerate ownership will conquer all Southam and the remaining independents. I should now say Southam and Maclean-Hunter will be taken over in their turn by conglomerates; the newspaper industry as a distinct industry will disappear. Every newspaper in the country will be simply a profit centre in some conglomerate empire.

I can't help commenting that with all the editorial outpourings on the Kent Commission, I haven't seen one that tried to challenge that thesis, not one. Even the Southam editorialists write as if the choice were staying as we are or being raped by Kent. In irresponsible moments, I must say, I'm tempted to contemplate the

possibility; we would do nothing about the report and just stand back and have the fun of watching how Mr. O'Callahan and the rest will respond when Thompson or Brascan or whatever conglomerate it might be takes them over.

The third thesis of the report is that sadly, realistically, things have gone too far to reverse any but the most extreme cases of conglomeration. But therefore, the main recommendation that we can make is to lessen the effects of conglomeration on the way that newspapers fulfill their responsibility to the public for accurate, comprehensive, and fair news coverage.

We see two methods of doing that: one is the tax measure that I referred to already (see box). I think it would have a

significant influence for some newspapers on the point of tradeoff they make between taking out profits and putting money into editorial content. But frankly, if it were the only measure, I'm afraid that a lot of the spending would not do very much for reporting; it would be expenditure on the softer things. So the tax measure, while essential, has got to be reinforced.

Now we come to the controversial area. The second main proposal is designed to give more influence to journalists and to public opinion as a countervailing force to managements that are overly concerned with maximizing profits. What we propose

newspapers have taken just casual swipes at the Kent report, but we should prepare for another great barrage now that it looks as though the federal government is preparing to act on some of the Commission's proposals.

Tom Kent gave this speech February 28 at the national conference of the Centre for Investigative Journalism in Toronto.

A newspaper is an important institution in its community. But the fact is the affairs of most newspapers are hidden from public view, part of the consolidated statements and consolidated reports of a conglomerate enterprise. These newspapers should be saved from being mere profit centres with a conglomerate in that in editorial affairs they should be required to do some things of the kind that every public company is required by law to do as a condition of its existence.

A company must have articles of association, which tell the world what it is in business for. We propose that a

— a contract, defining the job and its terms.

But in a company, the power of a chief executive officer does not rest on the contract; what is more publicly embodied is his responsibility for presenting the annual report, that, as a matter of law, the company must make. We propose that the newspaper be required also to make public an annual report about what it has done about its declared objectives.

Of course, the significance of an annual report is not just that it is published. The annual report is open to discussion at the shareholder's annual meeting, which again, is a matter of law. What we propose is a pale equivalent — we recommend that a newspaper would have an advisory committee, to comment on its annual report. On the committee, the owner would appoint two representatives, the journalists would elect two representatives, and those four would select two representatives from the community. Those two people would themselves appoint a third community representative who would chair the seven-man committee. It would be repeat, an advisory committee; it would have no power to instruct anyone to do anything. Its influence would be that its comments on the annual report would be public.

Now, our recommendations would have stopped at that point if all newspapers had the sense to support effective press councils with strong public representation. Of course, very few have. We therefore do need what we call a Press Rights Panel; its job would be to review the

The main problem is that newspapers are wonderful cash cows from which proprietors with other interests can milk enormous profits

actual job performance of the papers in relation to their declared self-chosen objectives. I saw review and I mean just that. The panel would have no power whatever to issue any instructions of any kind about the performance of the press. The only influence would lie with the extent to which the panel's own report was in fact read; its only weapon would be publicity.

Well, that's it. That is the terrible onslaught on the freedom of the press the Kent Commission proposes. It requires that editorial departments of newspapers behave in terms of their exposure to public

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