

# Conversation

## with Barbara Amiel

Maclean's columnist Barbara Amiel discovered not long ago that her opinions were being investigated by the Ontario Human Rights Commission. In response she wrote the soon-to-be-published **Confessions**, an autobiographical defense of her controversial views. *Excalibur's* Hugh Westrup recently discussed some of the ideas in the book with Amiel.

**The sixties. There's still a lot of reference to it as a golden age. You lived in the United States when there was so much unrest on the campuses. What is your view of the period?**

The sixties were a hideous time. Which is not to say it didn't serve a good purpose. Because of the sixties we are a somewhat freer society. We're less fixed in our attitudes and more tolerant of eccentricities and lifestyles. But it was a mindless time. Irresponsible, thoughtless behaviour was elevated into a virtue. It was also a very authoritarian time. In Steven Knelman's book, **Push Comes to Shove**, he talks about the dreadful intimidation of the vast number of students on campuses by the extreme left. If you were against the left wing spirit you were subject quite often to not only verbal but physical abuse. There were cases all over of center and right wing students being clubbed and beaten by left wing students.

**Was there any improvement in the "me decade" that followed?**

In the seventies, selfishness was elevated to a skill. Looking into one's soul became a cult. The sixties had a kind of vitality and exuberance, and students, though they may have been mistaken many times, often cared. But in the seventies there was no more of that kind of moral impulse. Instead there was a preoccupation with finding oneself through clothes or classes on self-assertiveness.

**You've been called the "Dark Lady of Neo-Conservatism" which is nothing if not fashionable. How does that label fit?**

I find that people writing about my opinions under the rubric of neo-conservatism are confused. Neo-conservatism is a broad label referring to people, like myself, who have looked at approaches to social problems, and since those approaches have not worked, are suggesting alternate approaches. I don't like it being used on me because it suggests I'm in favor of all kinds of things that I'm not. I don't believe in the complete and unadulterated benefits of the free market system. I do not believe in the conservative idea of the public good over the individual good.

**How do you label yourself, then?**

A classic liberal who draws very heavily on the idea that individual liberty is the highest value of the state. I believe that we have to have certain laws but that the state only has a right to make laws to protect one individual from another.

**Where do your classic liberal views stand in terms of the evolution of Canadian democracy?**

What Canada is moving towards, if we haven't already come to it, is a social democracy. There are certain ideas of the left wing that have become as much a part of the ether of society that people who call themselves Conservatives or Liberals as well as the NDP take them absolutely for granted. And these are ideas that are antithetical to a liberal democracy: the idea that you can legislate all people into equal achievement; that elitism is bad; that competition is something we should shun; that standards and grades are bad; that if 40 per cent of women are in the labor force, then there ought to be 40 per cent of women in executive positions. The idea that equality and parity are the same.

This society has moved so far to the left in such a mindless, lazy way that people now adopt certain ideas or principles that are those of a social democracy and they refuse out of laziness to examine them. We are losing sight of the principles that animate the best instincts in society—initiative, loyalty, decency.

**Are classic liberal views so out of step that you should warrant being called a "fascist bitch", "reactionary Queen Bee", and "redneck in Givency dress"?**

This is a society that is in some sense hostage to pressure groups, whether it is the women's movement or the homosexual rights movement, or parity for purple people. These are people with shrill voices and loud voices.

Now I happen to want to live in a society where they can call me names. And at the same time pressure groups have some value. The women's movement has drawn attention to some important issues. It is not particularly pleasant for women to be denied access to board rooms, or certain jobs



because of their sex and therefore pressure groups are useful in pointing this out. It's also ludicrous to have a society that legislates against homosexual relationships.

**You admit then that inequalities and injustices do exist?**

Of course. This is a society that is very silly on some levels. But I do believe that one of the rights of a free society is the freedom for individuals to be stupid. If people don't want to hire me because I'm a woman or a Jew, I think they may be stupid, but I'll grant them that freedom. I think that so long as we live in a society where the government does not legislate against hiring people because of their sex, color, creed or sexual inclination, then we are free. In other words, the German Reich made it illegal at various times to hire Jews, gypsies, homosexuals. That is a deplorable state. But it is equally dreadful to live in a society where people are legislated in situations where they are not allowed to refuse employment.

If someone is fired, as in the case of school teachers who have been performing perfectly adequately simply because some maniacal school board finds out that they are homosexual, then I do believe that there are remedies under civil law for wrongful dismissal and those are the remedies I would support to the hilt. Society is in a position of transition at the moment and if you try and hurry it up to be more fair, you will end up being unfair. There is a greater acceptance of alternate lifestyles and women in the work force. It is not callousness or a reactionary spirit that impels me to urge people to follow the law, to be patient, to use those remedies that we have at hand, and not to rush into extreme legislation.

**Where does social democracy lead?**

I think in Canada we're moving to a coercive society. Canada is a society that has gone totally mad on regulation, in order to create a society that will be more fair. Everything from commercials to television programs are regulated in order to match the best expectations of our social democrats. We don't show women as bank tellers because that's sexual stereotyping, never mind that most bank tellers are women. We regulate textbooks for sexual stereotyping. You can't show mother as homemaker, you have to show her as a lawyer. Dad has to do the dishes, the girls have to play with war toys and the boys with dolls. There may be a number of men who like to do dishes and little boys who like to put on aprons but common sense observations indicates that this is not in fact the norm. It's as distorting to suggest that it is the norm as to suggest that all women want to be homemakers. The social democratic impulse insists that everybody is equal and, by god, they're going to regulate society so that it reflects that whether or not it is true. So you regulate commercials, you regulate textbooks, you make quotas for the number of women who have to be hired. You coerce, you coerce, you coerce, because reality doesn't match your wish-think.

**Can you really call Canada coercive when we live so close to the Soviet Union where countless millions have been executed by the state?**

It is dangerous to use the term when we are bordered by such a barbaric country. But overall, coercion is a relative thing. The Soviet Union has never been free. We have been remarkably free. And as I see the forces of both the left and right narrow these

freedoms, then it is not out of place to use the word coerce.

There is an illustration of how the left and the right come together to narrow freedom. That is the issue of censorship to which I am unalterably opposed. The right wing censors books because they depict women in sexual acts they find distasteful. The left wing censors books because they find women performing jobs that they consider are sexual stereotyping. Each has a different reason for censoring a textbook, or commercial, or film, but the end result is the same. Both wings wish to make laws for two different sets of reasons that tell me how I may live, with whom I may sleep, what books I may read, who I may hire, indeed what history is. They're doing this to create an ideal world and in doing so they're creating a holy nightmare.

**Why do you refer to the women's movement as a marvellous con game?**

The women's movement seems to be based on a completely false understanding of history. They seem to believe that all history has been arranged as a conspiracy against them by men. This is utterly foolish. Societies have arranged themselves in terms of their own best interests to survive. In the old days, physical strength and the slight superiority that men seem to have in spacial-perceptual relationships meant that men should do certain things, that men were better at hunting, that the arrow could find the mark. It meant that men had the physical strength to push the plow down the extra half-inch necessary for the crops. Society needed offspring so women had to be kept breeding. Society did not arrange itself with women at home having children and men out there working simply to keep women in a state of exploitation, they arranged it that way because it was the only way to survive. Those women who weren't needed for childbirth always enjoyed positions of power from the time of the high priestesses right through the various dynasties. In the fourteenth century women went in for higher education while the men learned how to ride a horse well for a tournament. It is true that today, given our population and contraception, women are no longer needed to breed and so very naturally they've been going back into the labor force and there is a change that I'm delighted to see. But women will have to earn their place in the labor force.

**Are you aware that there is now a Feminist Party in Canada?**

I have no idea why people should vote for somebody based on the arrangement of their reproductive organs. I'm not interested in their nocturnal emissions, I'm interested in the emissions from their cerebral cortex. I have no idea why women cannot represent men very well, or why men cannot represent women very well.

**Part of the theory behind the Feminist Party is that when women become represented equally in power centres of government, business, the professions, somehow the nature of power will change.**

I have no idea why power held by women is going to be any better than power held by men. Women have been as good and as bad as men in office. They've equalled any men in the capacity for murder and bloodshed and mayhem. Look at Mrs. Mao, a woman of exquisitely unpleasant nature doing the most dreadful damage. Women in power are neither better nor worse than men.

**As book critic for Maclean's, what are your observations about Canadian literature?**

Canada has a very culturally active life and we've done well for such a young country. We've produced some fabulous writers from Mordecai Richler, to Margaret Atwood to Mavis Gallant. But somehow we seem to believe that anything that is Canadian is *ipso facto* good. This is the attitude among our literati. We have turned into a society that wants to subsidize, subsidize art.

But frankly, I believe that we will be a lot better off with more starving artists. The state should take over at that level where necessity and hard times weed out the dilettante artists from the serious artists. There's no harm in having people live a rather sparse life in order to write the first book. Right now we're subsidizing writers at a very junior level who have proven nothing more than that they can fill out a Canada Council form. We are publishing practically everyone who sashays past a publisher swivelling their hips and flashing a manuscript because the publisher gets a grant per Canadian book. This actually has had its own punishment. Our publishing industry is in serious shape and has had to cut back because they published promiscuously the worst kind of junk. Now they're having to cut back on good authors.