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### **Who's Afraid of Conrad Black?**

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### **Concentration of ownership**

Concentration of ownership in the newspaper business has reached an all-time high. The three biggest chains now control 72 per cent of daily circulation, up from 57 per cent in 1980. At the pinnacle of this ownership triangle is Conrad Black. After a year-long spree of buyouts and takeovers, Black's Hollinger Corporation now owns over half of Canada's daily newspapers. Given the influence of newspapers on our daily lives, any single owner with this much power is troubling. The fact that Conrad Black is the owner is downright scary.

### **Black Saturday**

One of the first paper's to be affected by Black's ownership drive was the Regina Leader-Post. When Black took over the paper in March 1996, one-quarter of the staff were fired, including four reporters and 15 editorial workers, in a day that came to be known as "Black Saturday." The quality and the quantity of coverage suffered immediately. According to a study conducted by the University of Regina's School of Journalism and Communication, localized beats including agriculture, health and civic politics were covered at as little as twenty per cent of their previous levels.

### **The "Black" view of Canadian journalism**

It hasn't just been reporters and readers that have been affected by Black's ownership. Since his take-over of Southam newspapers in June, several senior editors have left their papers over "editorial differences" with their new boss.

Joan Fraser at the Montreal Gazette was the first to go. After almost two decades at the paper, she left, pointing to the "change in approach" at the paper as her reason for leaving. Bill Peterson, publisher of the Kingston Whig-Standard was next, citing uncertainty within the Southam chain as his reason for leaving. Then the Ottawa

Citizen was hit with a double whammy, losing editor James Travers in early October, followed one week later by the Citizen's editorial page editor, Peter Calamai. In an interview with CBC's Joe Schlesinger, Travers said "Mr. Black's view of Southam newsrooms is that they are essentially peopled by long-haired dope-smoking freaks left over from the 60's." Both Calamai and Travers cited "differences of opinion" over the future direction of the paper as their reason for leaving.

For the most part, Black's "opinion" on the editorial direction of these papers isn't hard to discern. Since his take-over, right-wing pundits such as Andrew Coyne and Barbara Amiel (Black's wife) have become regular fixtures on the pages of newspapers. But just in case their message alone isn't strong enough, Black himself has also been known to take over on occasion, commandeering space for his own views on Southam's editorial pages.

### **The animosity of partisans**

After long-time Southam columnist Chris Young wrote an editorial denouncing Black's position on Quebec separation and a possible alliance with the U.S., Black took one-quarter of the Gazette's editorial page to publish his rebuttal. In that column, he stated:

"This is the latest in a long series of Mr. Young's scurrilous onslaughts against me... it is hard to think of an odious left-wing regime he hasn't sympathized with or a socialistic or anti-American fad or individual he hasn't endorsed. The animosity of such a failed and trivial partisan is somewhat gratifying." Shortly afterwards, Young's column was discontinued by Southam newspapers.

### **The Paper King**

A CBC documentary on Black's takeover of the Southam chain prompted a similar response. When the "Paper King" series was being made, the CBC says Black refused to be interviewed. Yet after the two-part series finally aired on The National in late October, Black took the opportunity to write, and publish his own lengthy response. The resulting article filled the top of the Saturday editorial page in every single Southam paper across Canada, dispelling any question about Black's real "opinion" on journalism in Canada. Here's an excerpt:

"Unlike our febrile adversaries in the CBC and the dreary procession of tired and authoritarian leftists trotted through their program, we see no contradiction between quality and profitability ..... The prospect of the varying of the virtual monopoly the soft left has had on central outlets of information in Canada has presumably motivated them to this fantastic imputation of a conspiracy to a coup de press." (Ottawa Citizen, Oct. 26/96)

### **The need for diversity in the democratic press**

Clearly, Conrad Black is a media owner with a strong vision for his newspapers. But the question the Council wants to raise is: Where are the other visions? Where are the dissenting opinions, and the editorial diversity, so crucial to the democratic press? With Black's Hollinger Corporation now controlling over one half of Canada's dailies, it's a question worth asking.

## Pre, Post and Propaganda

### NewsWatch Canada study of Vancouver Sun casts a shadow on other Black papers

By Scott Uzelman

Last fall Conrad Black launched his long-promised *National Post*. As chairman and CEO of Hollinger Inc., Black already controls 60% of the country's dailies. When the new national paper was announced in the spring, Donald Babick, president of Southam News, a Hollinger subsidiary, declared, "We're serious in our intent to create a newspaper that represents all the regions of the country....There's room for another voice...." Few would disagree. However, research last year into another paper owned by Conrad Black, the Vancouver *Sun*, confirms what many already suspect to be true of the *Post* and other Black papers - they do not adequately reflect the diversity of viewpoints in the country.

Each year, the media watchdog NewsWatch Canada brings together students in the School of Communication at Simon Fraser University to conduct content analysis studies of important topics in Canada's news media. In 1998, students studied the Vancouver *Sun* - part of ongoing efforts to investigate the effects of increasing concentration of ownership. The pre-Hollinger *Sun* was compared with the *Sun* after the 1996 Hollinger takeover.

How well does the *Sun* cover diverse viewpoints? Has the change in ownership affected the *Sun's* ability to reflect the diversity of its community?

#### His Master's Voice

The report compared business and labour coverage in 1987 and 1997 and found several disturbing trends. Despite the fact that most Canadians are paid employees, the *Sun* disproportionately emphasizes the concerns and opinions of business. The ratio of business to labour stories increased significantly - from 2 to 1 in 1987 to 3 to 1 in 1997. At the same time, the business section grew from about 10% of the paper to 17% in 1997. Business reporting differs fundamentally from news reporting in that opposing opinions are largely absent. Of the total coverage given to business and labour, business received much more positive coverage than labour (30% vs. 6%). As well, business leaders were almost three times as likely as labour leaders to appear in the articles examined.

The NewsWatch study also investigated the *Sun's* coverage of poverty. Given the recent UN report on the growing gap between rich and poor in Canada, poverty would seem to be a pressing public concern. However, despite the increase in the rate of poverty in B.C. over the last decade (from 15% in 1988 to nearly 18% in 1996), coverage of this issue actually declined in the *Sun*. While, on the whole, the poor were depicted as victims of social and economic forces, there were significantly more articles portraying poor Canadians as lacking the incentive to work and thus undeserving of public aid. This finding suggests the *Sun* presents a less-compassionate view of the poor in the Hollinger era.

To more fully explore the link between ownership and content, the study examined how the *Sun* covered its new corporate owner, Conrad Black, and his holding company, Hollinger. Hollinger received more favourable coverage than other media

companies such as Rogers or Thomson. The few negative stories on Black and Hollinger were buried, usually in the business section. Recent coverage of Conrad Black and Hollinger has been more supportive than it was in the 1980s before Black was involved. This recent coverage was also compared with that appearing in *The Toronto Star*. Here, too, the *Sun* provided less critical coverage of its parent company than did the *Star* (22.7% vs. 42.4% of news stories).

### **Friends of the Fraser Institute**

The report examined many other aspects of the *Sun*. Coverage of Vancouver's "Leaky Condo" problem suggested advertising pressures may have influenced news content. The diversity of editorial voices declined. The *Sun* provided the right-wing Fraser Institute with more coverage than the left-wing Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. In addition, the study compared 1986 B.C. provincial election coverage with that of 1996. It found that the *Sun* published more negative editorials and opinion pieces on the NDP and its policies in both elections compared with the Socreds in 1986 and the Liberals in 1996.

If the results of the Vancouver *Sun* study are any indication, the Hollinger-owned *National Post* may not provide the additional "voice" promised by Donald Babick. But it may sound familiar.

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