

“Live” with TAE

IN A NEWSPAPER WORLD DOMINATED BY CHAINS AND FACELESS CONGLOMERATES, CONRAD BLACK IS ONE OF THE LAST OF THE OLD-FASHIONED PRESS BARONS.

Conrad Black

Conrad Black, chairman of the Canadian-based Hollinger Inc., presides over the fastest-growing media empire in the world: its properties include the Telegraph papers of Britain, the Chicago Sun-Times, the Jerusalem Post, and almost 500 daily and weekly papers in the United States, Canada, and Australia, from The Vancouver Sun to the Punxsutawney (PA) Spirit.

Black's press clippings make him sound like a Canadian-accented version of Orson Welles' Charles Foster Kane. He is called both “erudite” and “ravenous”; Ontario Premier Bob Rae mocked him as a “symbol of bloated capitalism at its worst,” while supporters praise him as the most brilliant newspaper proprietor of his era. He and the Telegraph have recently emerged, unbowed, from a price war with Rupert Murdoch.

Born to a prominent family in English-speaking Montreal, Black's headquarters are in Toronto, though since his purchase of the Telegraph in 1985 he has spent the better part of his time in London. He remains one of Canada's most controversial figures: as Quebec has edged closer to independence, Black and his wife, the columnist Barbara Amiel, have mused on the possibility of a U.S.-Canada merger.

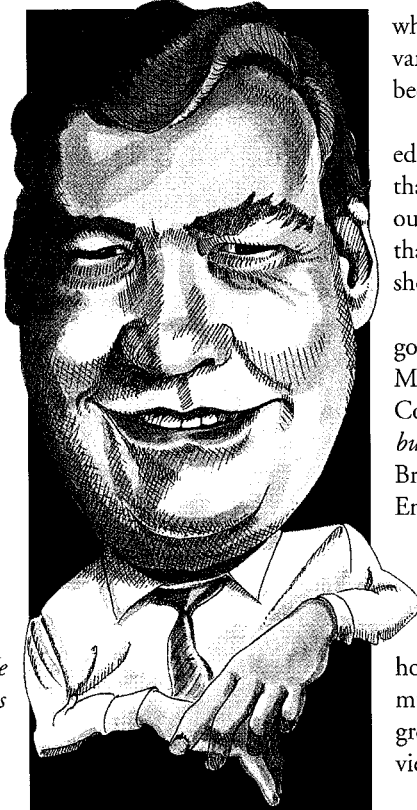
Associate Editor Bill Kauffman interviewed Conrad Black at his Toronto office.

TAE: Elsewhere in this issue, Michael Barone argues that we may be about to see the revival of sharp-edged partisan newspapers—that the days of mushy, Gannett-style, “objective” journalism are numbered and the likes of Colonel McCormick and William Loeb will ride again. Does this sound at all plausible?

MR. BLACK: The two can coexist, and they always have coexisted, haven't they? I accept that Colonel McCormick and Mr. Loeb are dead, but there are rather opinionated publishers around.

But I think for that to happen you need a revival of proprietors. Loeb and McCormick were resident proprietor-publishers. I am not so sure that I see that happening.

TAE: The analogy might be American radio,



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where in the last five years Rush Limbaugh and various populist ranters have revitalized what had been a dying medium.

MR. BLACK: I had a talk with a prominent editor in the United States a while ago. He said that the daily press had failed to give a proper outlet to a large section of the people, who found that outlet in these radio and television talk shows. There may be some truth to that.

By the way, I would defend Rush. He is a good deal more reasonable than Colonel McCormick was. I always rather admired the Colonel for giving such a personality to the *Tribune*, but he was outrageous. I mean, he had the British Empire always referred to as “the Brutish Empire.” He defamed people regularly.

TAE: An old-fashioned Anglophobe.

MR. BLACK: Yes, pandering to the Germans and Irish in the Midwest. And also an extreme right-winger, claiming that Eisenhower was a leftist and that Roosevelt was a communist and so on. He was a colorful man, and a great man in a way, but some of his political views were really off the wall.

TAE: Hasn't one bane of contemporary journalism been the disappearance of the resident proprietor?

MR. BLACK: I think so. They give a personality to a paper. And it does become harder and harder to do it, if you get more and more papers. Perhaps even the Colonel found that.

TAE: The nearest big city to me, Rochester, is one link in the Gannett chain. And Gannett sends to Rochester corporate careerists to write editorials that don't have a Rochester accent. They could be written for Des Moines or El Paso or anywhere. These people see Rochester simply as another rung on the ladder to Fort Lauderdale or *USA Today* or whatever the summit of the Gannett world is. Isn't this what chains do: blanket us with a suffocating homogeneity?

MR. BLACK: I would, perhaps, de-escalate slightly the phrase “suffocating homogeneity.” But I'm afraid there is a cookie-cutter approach. That

need not be the case, but in practice it often has been. I think they have become impotent paymasters managing a budget and taking no interest in editorial. Leaving in a state of complete lassitude the so-called local working press to do what they want can lead to some pretty disagreeable results. Or, in the alternative, they've just imposed bland everywhere. Some of the chains have done that.

TAE: Will the decline in American newspaper readership ever be arrested or reversed?

MR. BLACK: We're obviously in a state where new media are carving the pie into more and more slices, and that means all the existing media have to give some ground. It's a pie that's being divided more quickly than it's expanding. But I think that at, as the British would say, the popular level, the more down-market tabloid level, there's much more of a danger. Those are essentially newspapers for entertainment. And if entertainment is what you want, a newspaper is not necessarily the best place to get it.

At the higher quality newspapers, I think the circulation you're losing is the less profitable circulation, and what you're keeping tends to be the most literate, educated, and prosperous people. So you're saving yourselves newsprint costs—"you" being the publishers—while not losing, if the franchise is managed properly, the advertisers. So I see it as not necessarily all bad. Eventually the newspapers will give greater flexibility as to how the content is delivered. Those who want it on the screen can get it on the screen.

TAE: There's a tactile delight, isn't there, in holding a paper and folding it?

MR. BLACK: And there's a portability and a non-linear aspect to it. Except if you've got a screen where you can call up what you want, you get away from having things just scrolled across at the direction of someone that you have no power over. There is always going to be a place for a newspaper. After a while, it's a damned nuisance carrying a screen around with you.

So I think the trend you described will be arrested. I would have my doubts about its being reversed. But already, the fragmentation of channels in television is reducing the efficacy of television advertising. And the existence of the remote control device in almost all viewers' hands reduces the efficacy of television advertising. Whereas, if you have advertised in the *New York Times*, you know that the people you want are going to read it.

TAE: You've been through a price war with the *Telegraph*. Aren't price wars ultimately good for the newspaper industry? Don't they encourage people to start buying newspapers again?

MR. BLACK: Well, I think as it's turned out

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that particular war has probably been good for us. It strengthened our franchise. We've got millions of pounds of free publicity out of it. A great many people in Britain had been accustomed to thinking of the *Daily* and *Sunday Telegraph* as their parents' or grandparents' newspaper, and we've actually succeeded in lowering the average age of our reader. And we have the self-confidence that comes from having been squarely in the crosshairs of the world's foremost media proprietor, who attacked us in a manner that wasn't at all personal. He couldn't be a more gracious individual. But that's scant consolation in a competitive situation.

He attacked us by trying to clone our paper, raid our journalists, and produce a look-alike paper that published more pages and was sold at a lower price and was more heavily promoted. And it was a strategy that was disquieting, but we have weathered it well. On the broader question, it hasn't raised circulation of newspapers as a group all that much.

TAE: Do you admire Murdoch as a swashbuckling buccaneer, or do you think he's a vulgarian who's dragged the popular taste further into the muck?

MR. BLACK: The answer to the first part is, yes, I do admire him in that respect; not just as a swashbuckling buccaneer, but a bold builder of enterprises. The fact is, he's done some great things that required courage and vision and were objectively good things. He cracked the absolutely outrageous, unsustainable labor practices in the newspaper industry in London. Now, Mrs. Thatcher's regime made it possible, but the fact is, he did it. Needed to be done. Recognizing that the three-network quasi-shared monopoly of American television could be cracked: that took great courage and application. Seeing the potential of satellite television in Britain, where you had to persuade people to buy the dish and then tune in to you: he almost went bankrupt doing it, but it was the action of a great industrialist. See, he's not just a swashbuckling buccaneer. I rather admire him more as an industrialist who's been a pioneer.

On the second point, I think at heart Rupert Murdoch, whom I rather like as an individual, is a cynic who thinks that the average member of the public is essentially a slob, and the lower you pitch it to him the better he likes it. And I don't agree with that. I have a higher opinion of the average person than I believe he does. A great industrialist, a very nice man socially, a swashbuckling buccaneer, and a cynical panderer to rather base instincts—all of those aspects of him coexist quite happily. He's relatively untroubled and, as far as I can see, not at all a neurotic personality—

unlike many great media proprietors of the past.

TAE: "Conrad Black could walk through the front door of any of his papers in Ohio or Idaho, and nobody would have the first idea of who the hell he was," one of your employees told Nicholas Coleridge, author of *Paper Tigers*. Is the editorial quality of your smaller papers of interest to you, or just the profitability?

MR. BLACK: We have a division of work in our company, and my associate, Mr. [David] Radler, takes care of those. So the same statement—which is accurate as quoted—could not be made about him. They would know who he was. I must confess that the editorial quality of the individual papers—those smaller ones—is not something I can get too much involved in, but some of them are very good.

TAE: Doesn't this lead back to what we were talking about earlier, though? Wouldn't the *Punxsutawney Spirit* be better off if there were a resident proprietor who knew Punxsutawney?

MR. BLACK: It's hard to answer a hypothesis like that. I mean, was it better off before we bought it? I would have thought not. I think that it's probably commercially a bit stronger and the editorial product is no weaker. That's a paper that is known a bit because of the *Groundhog Day* movie. And that is one paper that I do look at occasionally.

The editor who is there now is the same one who was there before we bought it, and he is quite an opinionated and colorful local personality. And he is encouraged by us to continue as he was before. We try to avoid precisely the phenomenon you described at the outset, of chains producing the cookie-cutter newspapers that are all bland. We don't move editors around. We always try to encourage local people to take a local viewpoint and really push the local angle.

TAE: Twenty-five years ago you told a Canadian Senate committee: "My experience with journalists authorizes me to report that a very large number of them are ignorant, lazy, opinionated, intellectually dishonest, and inadequately supervised. The profession is heavily cluttered with abrasive youngsters who substitute commitment for insight; and, to a lesser extent, with aged hacks toiling through a miasma of mounting decrepitude. Alcoholism is endemic in both groups." Is this still the case?

MR. BLACK: Much less so. I think it was the case when I said it. I was speaking especially of journalists in Quebec in 1969, and I was appalled at the pro-separatist biases and just how overwhelmingly left-wing their views were. They had these over-zealous crusading youth—all of them thinking they were Bob Woodwards of the fu-

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ture—and these rather pathetic hacks who didn't have the energy to try to maintain standards. That's changed a lot. In general, the ideological orientation of the so-called working press in North America is much more varied and more representative of the public they're trying to serve.

TAE: You moved your principal residence from Toronto to England because of "the cultural bigotry in Quebec, the inexorable erosion towards the left in Ontario, the constitutional quagmire, the pandemic envy, mediocrity, and sanctimony." Given that an independent Quebec now seems inevitable, are you considering a full repatriation? And do you, in fact, see the division of Canada as inevitable?

MR. BLACK: I still have my house here, and here we are in my office, so I haven't slammed the door. I haven't done a Jack Kent Cooke, and just left and pretended I never lived here and can't remember the name of the place. But I left because I thought that a change would be refreshing. Change often is. I thought that it was the responsible thing to do, given the importance of the asset that we'd bought in London.

And not least, I left because London is, after all, with all due respect to Toronto, one of the world's greatest and most elegant cities. Toronto is a very nice place, but it's the top of the second division, and London's at or near the top of the first division. On the second part of your question, no, I don't think the independence of Quebec is inevitable. And if it were achieved, that in itself wouldn't particularly motivate me to come back here. I am, as you know, not at all anti-Quebec. I'm anti-separatist, but pro-French Canadian.

TAE: You and your wife, Barbara Amiel, have both suggested the possibility of a post-Quebec Canadian-American federation of some sort. In fact, you used to tell your separatist friends, "Every vote for the secession of Quebec is a vote to make me a citizen of an expanded United States." This is a frightening prospect for Little Americans. For instance, do we really want the Maritimes? Wouldn't annexing them be a little like adding another Puerto Rico to our country?

MR. BLACK: If I were an American, I'd be delighted if any part of Canada applied for closer adhesion to the United States. There's nothing wrong with the Maritimes at all, except that they've become accustomed to receiving heavy regional welfare payments. The Americans would not engage in such programs.

And I think that the comparison with Puerto Rico is not accurate. The Atlantic Provinces populations speak English. They are not people who would be difficult to assimilate in the mainstream of American life.

My preferred alternative is a bicultural Canada—by which I do not mean people coerced to learn a language other than their mother tongue; I mean two cultural communities that respect each other and fundamentally feel that it is a good thing that they have each other to share a country with.

If that's not going to work, then I think the continent is better divided along linguistic lines than geographic ones. If the United States seriously examined the possibility of benignly and with complete voluntarism on each side extending itself to include non-French Canada—Canada apart from Quebec—the lure of more than 20 million English-speaking people, well-educated, prosperous, law-abiding, entirely compatible with the United States, and this vast treasure house of natural resources, would be an opportunity for the United States to be born again geopolitically.

TAE: Is Canadian anti-Americanism—and by that I mean resentment of American capitalism and mass culture—sometimes justified? For instance, Canada's most distinguishing achievement in sports, the National Hockey League, is in the process of moving teams from medium-sized Canadian cities—Quebec, Winnipeg, possibly Edmonton—to cities south of the border, some of which have absolutely no hockey tradition. And this is being done under the commissioning of Gary Bettman, a former Disney executive. If you were a fan of the Winnipeg Jets, wouldn't you be tempted to burn an American flag, or at least a flag of Mickey Mouse?

MR. BLACK: To have a team called "The Mighty Ducks," and to have hockey played in places where you could not possibly have a natural ice rink for more than four days in the year—it is a vulgarization I regret.

But I think it would be a rather extreme reaction for people in Winnipeg to burn an American flag because the Winnipeg Jets are not able to make it financially in a community that size, but could do so in an American city to which they might move.

With that said, I understand the reservations of some people, and particularly certain types of Canadians, about American capitalism and mass culture. There are aspects of American life that *are* unappealing, including to a great many Americans.

TAE: You are a convert to Catholicism. Do you ever worry about Christ's statement that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God?

MR. BLACK: Not really, because I've sought clarification for the meaning of that from learned theologians, and I am satisfied that what

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was intended was not that the wealthy alone be singled out, but that it was a challenging thing to be wealthy and to act in what He would accept as a Christian way. And I think there is some truth to that.

That's rather presumptuous of me to say that I think there's some truth to things said by Jesus Christ. Let me word it more respectfully: I can understand the truthfulness of that statement, as I had it interpreted for me.

TAE: It has been reported that your father's last words to you were, "Life is hell, most people are bastards, and everything is bulls--t." First, is this true? And second, was he right?

MR. BLACK: Those were not his last words to me. That's from a book by Peter Newman [*The Establishment Man*]. He didn't get that from me, so I don't know who he source was. Now, in his more morose moments, that was not far from his views. But I don't recall his ever presenting things in quite such—[laughs]—gloomy terms as those. In any case, no, I don't think that everything is bulls--t, and I don't think that all people are bastards.

TAE: It's sometimes said that the role of the press is to speak truth to power. You're a member of the Bilderberg Group and the Trilateral Commission. Is it possible to speak truth to power while you consort with power?

MR. BLACK: There is nothing that need be particularly socially inhibiting about truthfulness. Being truthful doesn't mean being discourteous, and being powerful doesn't mean being uncivilized or intolerant. And the fact is, in the assemblies that you mentioned—where, in fairness, I think the composition is largely selected on the basis of an aptitude of people to have an open and reasonable discussion of a variety of sensible viewpoints—I find exactly the reverse is true: the discussions are very stimulating and very informative, and they sometimes change people's opinions, including mine.

TAE: Are you in the newspaper business primarily to make money, or to make a mark on the world?

MR. BLACK: My very first interest is commercial. A very close second is, it is an interesting business; you get what amounts to a ringside seat to a great deal of what's going on. And my interest is not to dictate to the population or the political leaders what their position should be, but to—again, I'm bordering on self-righteousness here—but to make the debate more interesting and more likely to produce a sensible result. And I think we do that. Anyway, we do our best.





Why Liberals Find Talk Radio So Threatening

icon illustrations by Geoff Smith

On December 7, 1995, a story in the *New York Times* announced that the Clinton administration would try to sell its Bosnia intervention by putting spokesmen on radio talk shows. "Talk radio is cost free, travel-free and time-efficient, and reaches millions of Americans who do not normally keep *Foreign Affairs* by their bedsides," the article enthused.

An excellent idea, but an unexpected one—for just eight months earlier the president was indicting talk radio as a destructive medium that keeps "some people as paranoid as possible and the rest of us all torn up and upset with each other," a conclusion the media elite fell over each other to agree with. Talk radio is an evil bane to many liberals. According to their view, Svengalis of the airwaves are beguiling credulous followers with right-wing propaganda, playing on fears and prejudice, generating hostility toward compassionate policies, and making the country virtually ungovernable.

In the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing, this fear and loathing reached a fevered pitch. Talk radio was "an unindicted co-conspirator in the blast" argued Richard Lacayo of *Time*. Rush Limbaugh and G. Gordon Liddy are "fomenters of a mood that is fairly described as hateful," said *Washington Post* columnist Jonathan Yardley. "Talk radio is not democracy in action but democracy run amok," insisted NBC reporter Bob Faw. "It's about anger. It's about tearing down," agreed former *Wall Street Journal* reporter Ellen Hume. Conservative talk shows are "politically partisan and sometimes racist" clucked Dan Rather.

President Clinton himself charged that talk shows "spread hate. They leave the impression, by their very words, that violence is acceptable.... It is time we all stood up and spoke against that kind of reckless speech and behavior." (Backpedaling aides later maintained the president wasn't referring to Limbaugh and colleagues, but rather to extremist shows on shortwave radio.)

Why does the Left loathe talk radio? Is it possible that animus toward this increasingly potent medium says more about the state of liberalism than it does about the nature of the programs? Are call-in forums truly arenas of hate, or just the most recent stage in the evolution of American democracy? And who really makes up the talk radio audience?

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By Don Feder