

editorial

## A SPECTRE IS HAUNTING CANADA

THESE REMARKS stem from the disturbing recent history of Pierre Berton's dismissal from the staff of *Maclean's Magazine*. If Berton had been sacked from *Maclean's* on the grounds of the quality of his writing, one would have assumed that the editors were fulfilling their legitimate selective function. But Berton was not dismissed because he was thought a poor writer. He was dismissed because, in an article actually passed for publication by the editors of the magazine, he expressed rather pungently certain views on current hypocrisies regarding sex which offended those people who for various motives — including both prejudice and profit — try to limit what other Canadians shall be allowed to read, hear and see.

Berton's case is not isolated. At almost the same time Robert Thompson, leader of the Social Credit Party, stood up in the House of Commons and asked for action against Max Ferguson (alias Old Rawhide) on the grounds that his radio show was "undermining our national morals" and that it threatened in some undefined way the security of our social order. A few weeks earlier the *Quest* television programme, based on a selection from the British satirical revue, "The Establishment", brought a series of frenzied protests from individuals and groups. An Anglican clergyman in Ontario called for heads to roll. "I challenge the Members of Parliament," he said, "to demand quick disposal of those senior officials of the C.B.C. responsible for such programmes. They have no excuse." The particular aspect of the *Quest* programme that annoyed the reverend gentleman and many other viewers was a satirical impersonation of the Queen as public speaker. To cap the record with a citation from the press, the *Vancouver Province* on June 5th linked Berton's dismissal, of which it evidently approved, with the controversy over television programmes like *Quest*, in an editorial which began with these words:

In the firing of writer Pierre Berton from Maclean's Magazine many Canadians must see a notable example of the difference between private enterprise and public ownership. The reaction of the magazine's customers to the disgusting material Berton was publishing in Maclean's had its effect. But the reaction of the public to similarly disgusting TV programmes presented to the nation by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation had no effect whatever.

In this comment the *Province* uses the emotive word *disgusting* without attempting to state what in its view arouses disgust; in trying to stir up feelings rather than provoke thought, this is typical of such attacks. It also talks in vague terms of "the reaction of the public" without telling us who "the public" in this case may be. To that point I shall return.

These three incidents, in which disapproving readers, listeners and viewers attempted to impose an unofficial censorship — and in the case of *Maclean's* succeeded — came within a few weeks of each other. They achieved prominence either because they involved well-known personalities like Berton and Ferguson or because they involved the C.B.C., a familiar target of attack. Less publicity has been given to the persistent attempts of individuals and organizations to interfere with the freedom of publication in its various forms, such as the recurrent campaigns to "clean up" the bookstalls and to prevent so-called "objectionable" books from being made available in public libraries.

Perhaps Mrs. Grundy has always had a home in many Canadian hearts, but nowadays her presence seems uncomfortably evident in the form of a continual pressure to restrict the freedom of opinion and expression, a pressure that is dangerous precisely because its nature and its limits are ill-defined. Official censorship, bad as it is, at least proceeds by law, and cases can be argued in the courts with the possibility of appeal, so that in the end manifestly foolish judgments, like that which banned *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, are sometimes reversed. The unofficial censorship presided over by Mrs. Grundy is defined not by law but by such intangible elements as emotion and prejudice. Its advocates begin from personal distaste, and seek to deprive others of what *they* find offensive. When reasons are produced they usually fall into one of two categories. Where the work condemned has an element of social or political satire, the objector bases his case on public order; its mockery can sap the foundations of society by destroying reverence for institutions hallowed by custom. Where sex enters the question, the would-be censors are liable to fall back on the hoary old argument of the corruption of the young.

The first kind of objection completely misses the purpose of satire — to expose

and laugh away the pretences and complacencies which in themselves can rot a society away. Satire is part of the healthy functioning of a mature society that can look at itself ironically, and no institution or public figure — even the royal family — can claim legitimate immunity from this salutary process. As for the argument on the corruption of the young, that was disposed of three hundred years ago by a Christian poet, John Milton, in *Areopagitica*.

But possibly the most disquieting aspect of contemporary Canadian Grundyism is the difficulty of telling how far it spreads. A single man with an axe to grind can and sometimes does create panic by a determined campaign of letter-writing and telephoning. And twenty devoted bigots can raise enough noise, individually and through organizations, to suggest that battalions are behind them. It is the impossibility of assessing the following of these self-styled spokesmen of the public that makes them seem so frightening to publishers and broadcasting administrators. In the *Province* editorial which I have quoted, the vague statement about the reaction of “the public” to current TV programmes calls up the idea of a multitude of angry voices. In fact, the voices are numbered not in thousands or even hundreds, but in dozens; in the British Columbian region, despite the shouting and the fury, the C.B.C. received 44 protests by phone and mail against the controversial *Quest* programme on “The Establishment”. It is the amount of unexpressed feeling which these 44 vocal men and women represent that looms so ominously and so indefinitely. Is it real and substantial? Or is it just a paper tiger? What *does* the public feel? Too often it is only the voices of the bigots that speak out, and in the silence around them they are loud enough to start the chain reaction that first scares publishers and administrators, in turn creates insecurity among editors and producers, and in the end threatens the integrity of the individual writer or artist.

If Mrs. Grundy wins, part of the blame will lie with those of us who believe in freedom of choice, in the liberty of opinion and expression, yet never speak up to defend it. The reason for this comparative silence of the supporters of artistic freedom is obvious; they are often creative people whose lives are fully occupied, while the bigots are usually drawn from the ranks of the frustrated and the unsatisfied. But the hands of the bigots are strengthened whenever their opponents fail to voice approval of an intellectually or artistically daring piece of work or fail to make a counter attack when the ban-the-book squads get to work. Let us make our voices heard. We alone can exorcise the spectre that is haunting Canada, the spectre of Mrs. Grundy.