



FASTFACTS



Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Mb • 309-323 Portage Ave. • Winnipeg, MB • Canada R3B 2C1
 ph: (204) 927-3200 • fax: (204) 927-3201 • ccpamb@policyalternatives.ca • www.policyalternatives.ca/mb

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Freedom of the Press?

American journalist A.J. Leibling once famously observed that “freedom of the press belongs to those who own one”. Those who own one too often use it to serve their own narrow interests, rather than as a means to promote the informed public discourse that is essential to democracy. Sometimes they treat their obligations to democracy, the idea of the newspaper as a ‘public trust’, rather disdainfully.

There is an interesting example of this now occurring in Brandon, Manitoba.

Contending Views

The Brandon Sun is a self-proclaimed right-wing newspaper. The Sun itself recently said: “Yes, editorials are right-of-centre”, although they added, “...but reporting is fair and balanced” (Dec.24, 2004).

Errol Black is a left-of-centre Councillor. This is evident in what he says and writes, and in the policies that he promotes as a City Councillor, and is consistent with the fact that he represents a ward

that has for many years elected and re-elected left-of-centre representatives.

The result of their differing views ought to be public debate about important issues, leading to a better-informed public, and better public policy decisions.

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Cuba Comes to Brandon?

In an editorial dated December 18, 2004, *The Sun* said that if people living in Brandon were to adopt Councillor Black’s ideas, Brandon “...could become a very cold and snowy version of Cuba”. The editorial was titled: “Black hopes to create little Havana north”.

The immediate cause of this extraordinary charge appears to be Councillor Black’s opposition to the sale



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of the publicly-funded Keystone Centre's naming rights. *The Sun* (12/15/04) quotes him as saying that: "...selling the name of important community places cheapens the heritage of a city and provides one more public place where people are overwhelmed by commercialism". Many others, including Naomi Klein in her internationally acclaimed *No Logo*, have expressed similar concerns about the commercialization of public space.

The Sun (12/15/04) responded by accusing Councillor Black of "tired socialist rhetoric", and of being "an embarrassment to forward-thinking members of the community", and by attacking his supporters, calling them "a farm team of Baby Blacks...dog-eared copies of *Das Kapital* in hand". The implication is that Councillor Black's position is extreme.

The Sun editorialist then added, ironically, that: "We actually like the sound of the Sobey's Centre, or Simplot Centre, or even, 7-Eleven Centre (aka Slurpeeville)". To *The Sun's* editors it would appear that everything is for sale and public debate should be limited to simple dickering about the price.

Trash Journalism

One response to this is simply to laugh. It is juvenile. Where do they find these people?

But there is more going on here. This is aggressive trash journalism, and it is directed at an elected City Councillor with a long list of accomplishments to his credit. What accounts for it?

One has to wonder if the answer is: Councillor Black is articulate and forceful in advancing ideas that are contrary to the right-wing views of *The Sun*, he has the strong and enduring support of his constituents, and he is an effective civic politician. His efforts produce results that *The Sun* does not like. In the past six years Councillor Black has, among other things, successfully initiated the plan by which social assistance recipients in Brandon can ride the buses free of charge in off-hours; led the struggle to ban smoking from public places on the grounds that it is a public health hazard; and taken steps to open up the political process at City Hall, for example by pushing for the appointment to Boards and Commissions of people from all walks of life in Brandon, so that Boards and Commissions and the decisions they make reflect the community as a whole, rather than

just the view of the local business community. These kinds of measures reflect Councillor Black's philosophical preference for government that is open to, and government policies that reflect the interests of, all people, including working people and the poor.

Many people seem to support these 'extreme' ideas. Could this account for *The Sun's* hysteria?

Fear of Ideas

Speaking at a conference in Winnipeg in 1982, Tom Kent, who chaired the 1981 Royal Commission on Newspapers and is himself a former newspaper man, pointed out that because Canadian newspapers are owned by a handful of the country's wealthiest business people, and because they derive most of their revenue from advertising paid for by the business community, "...the business incentive for journalism is to comfort what is established in the community, to challenge no widespread ideas...."

Unwilling, perhaps unable, to challenge Councillor Black at the level of ideas, *The Sun's* editors have descended to juvenile name-calling and trash journalism. They have cheapened public discourse in Brandon, and insulted the intelligence of the city's residents. Brandon deserves better.

- Jim Silver

Jim Silver teaches Politics at the University of Winnipeg and is a CCPA-MB Board member.

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