

A Measure of Defiance

Mike Harcourt with Wayne Skene.

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By Daniel Gawthrop, *Vancouver*

ONE YEAR AGO, THE FIRST book written about the Mike Harcourt NDP government was met by some of BC's leading journalists with less than glowing reviews. *Highwire Act: Power, Pragmatism and the Harcourt Legacy* struck Peter C. Newman as "pseudo-academic" and Stephen Hume as "pedestrian." Brian Kieran objected to its "media conspiracy theories," while *Financial Post* reporter Keith Damsell called it a classic case of "an authorial Stockholm Syndrome" taking effect.

As the author of *Highwire Act*, I can honestly say I was prepared for such a response. Because the book challenged the unexamined biases of the media's political coverage, it was bound to infuriate a pundit like Kieran, whose own bellicose brand of "agenda journalism" had come under heavy fire in its pages. Perhaps more surprising is the extent to which Harcourt echoes my argument in his recently published memoirs. Apart from quoting or paraphrasing several passages from my book, *A Measure of Defiance* goes much further than does *Highwire Act* in criticizing the media's troubled relationship to the NDP. Harcourt's premise is that the NDP's achievements in its first term far outweighed its weaknesses but that the media's deep-rooted antipathy towards democratic socialism obscured the party's record while downplaying its leader's contribution as a conciliator.

Moderate politics and a consensus-building style did serve Harcourt well

at Vancouver city hall in the 1980s, when council was divided between the Harry Rankin-led Committee of Progressive Electors (COPE) and the right-wing, developer-friendly Non Partisan Association (NPA). True to his word, the young mayor displayed his conservative side by crossing a picket line during a municipal strike but pleased the Left by opposing such Socred "megaprojects" as Expo 86 and SkyTrain.

Harcourt's moderate pragmatism also made him politically suspect among fellow New Democrats. As recently as the summer of 1984, he was touted by the federal Liberals under then Prime Minister John Turner. After his 1987 coronation as NDP leader, the party's table officers blocked his appointment of the provincial secretary. Meanwhile, some of the "older, well-meaning ideologues" — or "hardrocks" — criticized him for failing to engage in partisan name-calling in the legislature (p. 58). Harcourt does not shy away from dismissing such critics throughout the book, but he is reluctant to step on party toes by naming names. He is less reticent when it comes to the media. Unlike the desperately posing Bill VanderZalm, Harcourt is not out to scapegoat reporters for all his woes. He accepts, for example, at least part of the blame for his handling of the Charlottetown Accord debate. He also acknowledges the unwarranted optimism of his pre-election debt-reduction strategy and the folly of his

“chairman-of-the-board” approach to decision-making before the dramatic Cabinet shuffle of 1993.

Harcourt’s point is that BC’s major media outlets underplayed genuine NDP achievements in health care, the environment, labour relations, and job creation while, with petty vindictiveness, frequently overplaying the party’s mistakes. He remembers, for example, returning reporters’ phone calls from Victoria while in Brussels, where he was addressing the European Parliament in an attempt to defend the Clayoquot Sound decision and so avoid an international boycott of BC lumber. “The Big Story on their minds was not how BC was faring in the turbulent international environmental and trade waters,” he recalls. “It was whether I thought Robyn Allan, the head of the Insurance Corporation of British Columbia, had too many demerit points on her driver’s license, and whether this should disqualify her from her position” (p. 107).

In a chapter devoted entirely to the media, “The Scrum of the Earth,” Harcourt offers a thoughtful critique of what he calls “testosterone politics”: a model of leadership in which cruelty is valued above decency and aides and ministers are sacrificed for the sake of a “good story.” Interestingly, he draws from a broad variety of American sources to condemn the Victoria press gallery. Among others, he quotes the *Columbia Journalism Review*, the *New*

Yorker’s Janet Malcom and Adam Gopnik, Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman’s *Manufacturing Consent*, William Greider’s *The Betrayal of Democracy*, Paul Weaver’s *News and the Culture of Lying*, and James Fallows’s *Breaking the News: How the Media Undermine American Democracy* in order to demonstrate how blatantly slanted coverage can discourage well-meaning citizens from running for office. “Their logic reverberated like a Kafka novel,” says Harcourt, in reference to the *Vancouver Sun’s* coverage of the Nanaimo “Bingogate” affair. “You are openly condemned by them, but they claim you are not. You want to set the record straight — clear your name — but they refuse to print your defence” (p. 169).

A Measure of Defiance was inspired as much by a sense of injustice surrounding Harcourt’s resignation as by any pride he may have felt for his many achievements. The fact he released this book within a year of leaving office — while events surrounding his departure remain fresh — suggests that his need to “set the record straight” outweighed whatever benefit his story may have gained from retrospect. Nonetheless, Harcourt and co-author Wayne Skene have produced the most constructive, well-written, self-critical, and humorous book of memoirs yet written by a former BC premier. Sadly, there have been only two.