

A Comment on Alan C. Cairns' "The Study of the Provinces: A Review Article"

In his review of the political literature on the Canadian provinces in the summer 1972 edition of your journal, Alan C. Cairns devotes considerable space to an article I wrote several years ago surveying British Columbia's politics. Since the rest of the Cairns review deals primarily with the book literature on the various Canadian provinces, I am pleased, and honoured, that he sacrificed so much space, and possibly time, to reviewing my article, written before I commenced work on my two volume political history of British Columbia. That it should receive such prime and zealous attention rather surprised me since what I intended was a very brief sketch of the bare bones of a subject subsequently explored in a more thorough way.

Professor Cairns cites his reasons for the favoured attention. In the absence of paradigms, models and theories on B.C. politics, he is fearful that my "interpretation" might be accepted as gospel by the innocents of Corner Brook and St. John's who don't know any better, and that a new monopoly might take root in British Columbia, alongside B.C. Telephone and MacMillan Bloedel; a Martin Robin monopoly. Hence, the good professor's noisy anti-monopoly crusade to protect the minds of Corner Brook, and defend the holy grail of scholarship.

As to this monopoly matter, Professor Cairns need have no fear. Like him, I am an inveterate anti-monopolist and my writing on the labour movement and the political history of B.C., hopefully bears this out. I have no intention of foisting a monopoly on anyone, least of all Corner Brook. Besides, there are competing interpretations of British Columbia politics, notwithstanding Cairns' protestations, including the version expressed in Margaret Ormsby's general history.

But I am surprised that Cairns, at the outset of his review, even acknowledges the existence of an "analysis" and "interpretation," since the whole burden of his explication is that the article was a phantasmagoria of phrases and errors devoid of any redeeming qualities of intuition, interpretation, insight, analysis, or whatever. Cairns doesn't prove this.

He merely asserts it; unctuously. It is not enough for Cairns to roll along for paragraphs on end (pages 81-82) paraphrasing and stringing quotations around words or passages which irk him. He does not analyze them logically or empirically. He does not like "negative community," "narcissistic idolatry," "company province," "economic buccaneers," etc., etc. Pity. Are these formulations inaccurate? Inapplicable? Huh? I am prepared to defend them if Cairns would only say what is wrong, besides the fact that they are "loaded." If he dislikes them because they may have been culled from Roget's *Thesaurus*, let me assure him that I have never had occasion to use it. I don't own a copy, although my wife has promised me one for New Year's. The objection here seems to be literary. If this is the case, if his personal taste is offended, perhaps by a lack of the jargon which litters the pages of professional journals, then let him object in a way literary critics are supposed to do. Wrapping quotes around objectionable words and laying them out seriatim is no substitute for analysis and criticism.

But perhaps I am being unfair. He does, after all, find some general intention, or interpretation in the article. Behind the verbiage, he discovers an obsession with the struggle between the children of light and the angels of darkness. He perceives, in a brief article on B.C. politics, tucked away in a Prentice Hall volume, a religious tract written on behalf of the "people." This is nonsense. The article was intended as no more than a low-keyed explicatory piece. I do, of course, believe that the labour unions and socialist movements have something in common, I do see economic classes as existing, I do assert there are differences and fights between classes, I do feel that companies in British Columbia and elsewhere have bought governments. If Cairns objects to all this, let him say why and how. It is not enough merely to assert that I am biased and partisan. I suspect that had there been a profusion of the usual sort of on the one hands and on the other, that pall the mind, Professor Cairns might have rested more content.

Of course, it is not only my religiosity that Cairns objects to. He baldly concludes, from the weighty evidence of an article, that I am a demagogue, more concerned with dramatic effect than truth. If what he really means is that I seek to please people by writing in an interesting way, unlike most Canadian political scientists who seem to want to bore people to death, I admit to this defect. Whether I have succeeded, I cannot judge. Evidently, Professor Cairns doesn't think so.

Finally there is the matter of the minor factual inaccuracies cited which, like the alleged faulty analysis, are traceable to some deep infirm-

ity which drives me to ignore reality. Let me grant at the outset, that the article is negligent in places and that, as author and editor, I must assume responsibility for the slips which appeared just as, for instance, Professor Cairns should assume responsibility for the garbled grammar, confused sense and incomplete sentence structure, found in lines 21-24 on page 80 of his work. I do maintain, however, that virtually all of the instances cited are of a minor sort and do not disqualify the general interpretation of the political structure, or the outline of the flow of events, which were my main intention in writing the article. And it is precisely this — the analysis of the B.C. system from a social, economic and political viewpoint — that Cairns steadfastly avoids coming to grips with in his review. It is evidently not his intention to discuss; only to discredit, by whatever means possible. He seems more interested in my psychology and character, than in the politics of British Columbia and its treatment. It is a strange effort, coming from someone who worships so loudly at the temple of Social Science.

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A Reply to Professor Robin's Comment

Professor Robin accepts responsibility for the errors which litter his article, but suggests they are “virtually all . . . of a minor sort” which do not detract from his outline or interpretation. I disagree. If he wishes his general interpretation to be taken seriously he should not destroy his own credibility by careless research.

He proposes a totally unacceptable division of labour between authors and reviewers. Apparently it is my task as a reviewer to say what is wrong with his “formulations” and then he will defend them. It is my responsibility, rather than his, to “analyze . . . logically or empirically” the vague, unsupported interpretations and descriptions which abound in his article, and to which I took exception. This is a ridiculous suggestion that I should do the work of the author. One illustration will suffice. British Columbia, he states, is “peopled by a mass of individuals who have escaped from communities from which, for one reason or another, they had become estranged.” (p. 37) I find this assertion incredible. Where is the evidence? Is it my task as a reviewer to do the research necessary to justify disagreement with his unsubstantiated statements? If he had bothered to explain, support, or defend his idiosyncratic observations in the first place then we could have had a mutually beneficial discussion. The failure is his, not mine.

Professor Robin and I differ on the nature of academic discourse. He is explicitly opposed to the carefully qualified statement, the “on the one hands and on the other, that pall the mind.” I disagree with him. Effective interpretation often depends on subtlety and nuances. I am confirmed in my belief by a reading of his article.

He feels that I was more interested in his psychology and character than in B.C. politics. On the contrary, my critique of his article was due to my interest in B.C. politics. Regrettably, articles and their authors are so intermingled that comment on the former implies judgment of the latter: indeed, his reply to my review reveals the difficulty of separating writings and writers.

He asserts that my review suffers from a failure to grapple with "the analysis of the B.C. system from a social, economic and political viewpoint." True. It was, after all, only a review which was confined to noting his failure to provide such an analysis. At some future date I hope to oblige him.

There is an implication in his reply that I was unfair to spend so much time and space on an article which was written "several years ago," as "a very brief sketch of the bare bones of a subject," and is "tucked away in a Prentice Hall volume." Perhaps I took the article more seriously than he intended. However, it is 42 pages long. It appears in a book published in 1972, for which it was expressly written (see the preface), and it cites events as recent as Barrett's accession to the N.D.P. leadership. Nevertheless, it is obvious that Professor Robin's contribution to B.C. studies will be determined, not by his previous articles, but by his two volume political history of B.C., one volume of which has recently appeared. This major publication should receive the closest attention.

I have reread the sentence on p. 80 of my review which he suggests contains "garbled grammar, confused sense and incomplete sentence structure," and I fail to understand his objections. Any readers of this exchange interested in the matter are invited to exercise their own judgment by consulting the original.

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