editorial

DISCONTENT'S WINTER

LAST NOVEMBER — after Meech Lake had fizzled into recriminations, after Oka had dispersed in anger and disappointment, after "Free Trade" was closing Canadian businesses down and throwing thousands out of work, after 90 per cent of the citizens of Vancouver voted to oppose the Goods and Services Tax but $350 million was going to be spent by the federal government to institute it anyway, after government funds dried up for social services and cultural expression but could be found to support militaristic posturing (in a GULF, no less: apt word), and after official committees had been struck to gaze at Canadians' collective constitutional desires — rains inundated the Coast and Lower Mainland of British Columbia. Hundreds of people had their homes undermined, their livestock drowned, their roads washed out (likely as a result of upstream clearcutting), their ordinary expectations swept away by forces beyond planning and endurance. At one point, a dam in Washington State gave way, and the once-pent-up waters flooded north, directly through the Sumas border crossing, at one stroke closing the customs office and erasing the visible differences between the trails of two countries. It was hard not to read events at metaphor.

The September 14-20 issue of the *Times Literary Supplement* published Margaret Atwood's prescient poem "The Loneliness of the Military Historian" (it was reprinted, with different resonances, in the December issue of *Harper's*). "Confess," the poem opens;

> it's my profession
> that alarms you . . .

and goes on:

> especially at dinner,
> though I am good at what I do.
> My trade is in courage and atrocities.
> I look at them and do not condemn.
> I write things down the way they happened,
> as near as can be remembered.
> I don't ask why because it is mostly the same.

Wars happen because the ones who start them
think they can win.
In my dreams there is glamour.
The Vikings leave their fields
each year for a few months of killing and plunder,
much as the boys go hunting.
In real life they were farmers.
They come back loaded with splendor.

But the poem makes clear that such splendour is illusory, however much one sympathizes with the "boys" and the loneliness they dream of as duty or adventure. In "real life," their dreams of romance are less real than the banality of people repeating misconceptions. "I deal in tactics," says the military historian, with Atwood's muted eloquence; "Also statistics: / for every year of peace there have been four hundred / years of war."

Statistics. In November, when the recording group Milli Vanilli had a Grammy award taken away from them because they had lip-synched the hit that won them recognition, a Roy Peterson cartoon in the Vancouver *Sun* depicted Canadian leaders as a subspecies "Canadilli," with stars and stripes coming out of their effectively silenced mouths. Where is the real irony here: in the disparity between political dumbshows and cultural muteness, or in the ready applicability of American pop culture iconography to Canadian social dilemmas? Or is this choice too limited? Tactics.

It's not fashionable in criticism to talk about a Canadian Identity any more; for awhile I didn't even think it was necessary. But it's necessary all the more if people are on the edge of losing their sense of the worthwhile values this country has at various times stood for. If as a people we no longer have — or even think we have — the capacity to choose what it is about our past that we want to leave behind *and what it is we want to hang on to, to shape our collective future*, then we no longer have our own voice at all. We're simply inundated by another's flood; we're dandled on the ventriloquist's knee; we're opening our mouths only to let someone else's opinions fill them with dust and rhetoric and straw.

The Canada I admire is the Canada that places community before irrational unbridled individualism; the Canada that chooses peace and negotiated understanding over the peacock-strut of militarism; the Canada that celebrates variety and the possibilities of change rather than the uniformed neatness and emotional smugness of a simple-minded nationalism; the Canada that believes genuinely in equality of opportunity and that attempts actively to avoid the isms of discrimination; the Canada that eschews violence; the Canada that refuses petty reprisals; the Canada that values children and commits its resources to educating them for the future; the Canada that accommodates to social needs, that prefers universal caring systems and preventive medicine to punitive action and the special privi-

leges of profit and class; the Canada that takes a quiet pride in the fact that it *has* a culture and that doesn't see the need to shout its cultural distinctiveness or publicly hold its heart every time a flag or a soapbox swings into view; the Canada that puts people before political ego; the Canada that can tell the difference between common currency and common sense. But does such a Canada exist, and did it ever? I wonder. It's not the Canada we *see* around us now, riddled with envy, pettiness, emptiness, and spite. But it's maybe still within reach — IF. . . . IF as a community we refuse the many current invitations to disintegrate politically; IF we recognize that most separatist enthusiasms (of the east *or* the west) rely on the basest of emotional appeals to racist superiority and cultural "unity" and serve more fundamentally as ways of disguising arrogant aspirations for power; IF we admit openly that we gain from each other most when we willingly refuse to reject each other, when we compete without cruelty, when we dismiss the perennial appeals to reestablish cliques as our political masters, and when we accept the creativity of difference and no longer define it as an alarming sign of uncertainty or impending chaos. That's a lot of IF's. But it's also a lot of WHEN's. In other words, it tells of real present opportunities, not of pie-in-the-sky vagaries. And it tells of the need to sort out our social priorities, reaffirm who we collectively are, and distinguish between the opportunities we value (including the option of peaceably changing governments, of whatever stripe) and the illusions of crisis and management that opportunist politicians market in the name of desire and the hope of control.

Another relevant cartoon appeared last November, by Brian Gable, in the *Globe and Mail* of November 6th, just after one of several so-called "Citizen's Forums" was given the task of wallpapering a government's inadequate legislative imagination. The cartoon portrays a limousine, flags flying, with a committee drawing up to interview the citizens slumped in line in front of an *employment* (for which read "unemployment") *centre*. The interviewer asks: "First question . . . As a Canadian, is your greatest concern these days about (A) a flexible multifaceted constitutional amending formula? or (B) an operable veto provision enabling equitable regional representation throughout the legislative process? . . ." Of the many ironies this cartoon underlines, three stand out: (1) the recognition that economic survival matters more in most people's daily lives than does constitutional design, even when constitutional giveaways and constitutional takeaways are the subject governments are preoccupied with, the way weak office managers are preoccupied with the arrangement of furniture; (2) the recognition that a bureaucracy that is caught up in its own jargon cannot see the disparity between the language it uses in the name of clarity and the language that individual people in real economic and political relationships must use in order to be clear; and (3) the recognition that bureaucratic language has the power to be effective even if it isn't clear or doesn't adequately measure people's lives: that it has power both because it *is* the language of government and because disenfranchised, disempowered, dislocated, *slumped*

people are vulnerable. Such people are susceptible therefore to the gobbledygook of "efficiency," "order," "economic understanding," and "command," even when such language is empty of value and when it actively subverts the values for which the community has long stood. Recognizing the irony does not, of course, resolve the cultural disparities that cartooning exposes; indeed, such recognitions more often seem like invitations to despair. Despair, however, just works to entrench the power of those who would usurp community values. It isolates; it intensifies divisiveness; it encourages passivity; it must be opposed.

But how to oppose it? November seemed like a dispiriting month only until December dawned, with paper blizzards from all the bureaucracies, gale-force winds, power outages, and real ice and real snow in the once temperate outdoors. The ineffectuality of the Vancouver voters' gesture — and of the active opposition of the great majority of Canadians — was made manifest when the Goods and Services Tax was manipulated into law. In practice inflationary, this tax will also be discriminatory, not least because Members of Parliament exempted their own office supplies from it. But the rhetoric that brought it into existence reveals another misapprehension as well: in the name of business efficiency (distorting the phrases "good management" and "fair practice"), the law relies on a misleading and simplistic binary distinction in order to transfer national economic authority from "public" to "private" hands. In fact at least two additional variables function in this unquiet equation: the "state," whose bureaucratic commitment to structural power does not always serve the "public" to whom it should belong and with whom it is often misleadingly identified, and the "corporate," which must be distinguished from both public and private conceptions of organization. "Corporate" management seeks characteristically to use authority in its own favour, arguing in the process that *public values* — ecological management and social care, for example — can be set aside as unaffordable. The state, comparably, serves itself, and the "private" and the "public" are alike sacrificed to expediency.

Transparently, the GST law will benefit the well-to-do and punish those with limited expendable incomes; in other words, it will punish young people, small householders, small business people, women, children. In these post-Meech months, punishment seems the discourse of the day, apparent in the flood of petulant political jibes uttered against Newfoundland, Manitoba, Natives, and anyone else — 70% of Canadians: that's what polls have indicated — who refused the *politics* of Meech Lake, recognizing that (for all the attractiveness of the "unity" package in which it was marketed) this particular arrangement of hierarchies of power would in practice have re-established the Family Compact and the Château Clique as pre-emptive rulers of Canada. Why has there been so fierce a reaction to those who recognized its flaws? Angry attack, among other things, is an easy way to try to cover up a mistake: wars are declared for such reasons. The grim rhetoric of "crisis" thrives on anger and intensifies simplistic distinctions between *us* and *them*,

right and *wrong*. Clearly, there *are* gulfs in this country. But they will take more than a state (task) force to bridge. They will take trust, and tact more than ritual recrimination. Trust and tact, however, depend upon communication, and that's not always easy, particularly when, as history makes clear, the avenues of public and private communication — the avenues of resistance to crisis rhetoric, perhaps — can (like companies, like countries) be closed down.

Toronto's *Saturday Night* reached several times beyond Toronto during 1990 in order to warn that Canada's communications systems were in danger; in the September issue, Bronwyn Drainie oracularly warned: "if Canada disappears, so does the CBC. And vice versa." The publicly-owned Canadian Broadcasting Corporation is a unifying force within a potentially centrifugal country (*unifying*, not *uniform-alizing*). Because it is not immune to crisis rhetoric, nor free from bias, and because (as fall and winter progressed) no changes of any consequence could be perceived on the nightly TV screen, it even seemed as though the warnings of danger could be dismissed as overdramatizations. But then December struck. In December the government bureaucracy sliced $108 million from the CBC's budget, and summarily cut scores of jobs — at a time when citizens were collectively being told that there was "no limit" to the amount of money that could be spent on *military* exercises. More striking even than the sums and the ironic contrast in political priorities that is represented by the difference between one form of expenditure and the other was the nature of the cutting. For what was cut was "local production." This term is by no means as innocent as it looks — it describes an activity, not a quality, and using it to dismiss something for qualitative reasons (however vaguely) betrays the narrow conception of nation and culture that underscores all the political tensions of the nascent 1990s. It reveals that the "garrison mentality" is fundamentally a business model of social relationships: authoritarian in its defence of the corporate pyramid, willing to sacrifice whatever or whoever is deemed peripheral, without power, unlikely to stir resistance and "therefore" inconsequential. It is the Compact-Clique view of society, reinforcing the mutual exclusiveness of two (language-separate) "national" pyramids, and disallowing not just alternative perspectives but also the exchange of perspectives, perhaps because exchange might encourage some questioning of received versions of political reality.

The 108 million dollars' worth of cuts unilaterally cancelled all television production in western Newfoundland, cut English-language production facilities in Quebec, cut smaller-city productions in other parts of the country. The argument in favour of cuts involved expense; but even those programmes that were making consistent profits for the corporation were cut, which raises further questions about the rhetoric of reorganization. Cutting productions because they were "local" — not even "regional," to use the pyramid rhetoric — tacitly declared four things: (1) that "local" audiences need not be served by the public broadcasting system,

(2) that "local" programming would be of no interest across the nation, (3) that Toronto and Montreal were neither local nor regional but "central" (why aren't Winnipeg and Moncton also considered "centres" of anglophone and francophone expression?), and (4) that whatever programming emerges from Toronto and Montreal must therefore be "national" — and therefore of national interest and consequence. (Why? Because of its source? Or because of the particular filters that these "centres" *locally* employ?)

None of these "reasons" addresses the real problem of "national" communication: *exchanging perspectives.* When it's not readily possible in Quebec City to know what Winnipeggers and Vancouverites and Haligonians variously think about life, the nation, and the world — and not readily possible in Vancouver and Windsor to know what the others think, and so on, and so on — but only possible to know what the "central" filters permit people to know *and how they permit them to know it*, then we do not have an exchange, we have a corporate tyranny. We have a society more committed to pantomine than to speech, more committed to the *theatre* of "national crisis" and the *image* of "regional curiosity" than to community understanding. It is a frame of mind that permits "local" to mean "irrelevant," "local productivity" to sound like an oxymoron, and cuts in "local production" to be marketed as wise management. But it is precisely this frame of mind that encourages separation. Whether people openly attack others (in the name of virtue or with a claim upon superiority) or celebrate their own "martyrdom" in order to construct a politically workable version of "enemy," they diminish the value of exchange; and diminishing the value of exchange — even in the name of efficiency or unity — feeds the distrust of others, encourages petty authoritarianism, and so, fundamentally, fosters cultural disintegration.

The December news not just that the CBC was curtailed nationally but that $3 million of federal money was to be spent on a missile testing site in Esquimalt and that an *additional* $269 million of federal money was to be spent expanding Space Programme facilities in a Montreal suburb simply encourages cynicism. A purchased fidelity is a shallow commitment. While cutting back on regional voices will not do away with separatism, moreover, neither will the granting of absolute authority to every articulate "region" guarantee "national unity." It is necessary, instead, to allow regional access to the whole communications network, to let voices from all parts of the country speak to *and be heard* by the national community. Of these activities, the *hearing* is the most difficult to bring about: it depends upon a willingness to listen and the will to understand the validity of differences. And that, in part, means giving the public more credit for intelligence, for being able to appreciate the diversity, the integrity, and the value of their society, and more power, plainly, than the rule-makers who serve only bureaucratic statism.

The Australian writer Les Murray, in "The Quality of Sprawl," a poem dedicated to the Australian resistance to Cultural Authorities and Society Style, speaks

of "the rococo of your own still centre." This phrase resonates with "sprawl" — the vitality that denies categorical organization and constitutive binaries, and that delights in the unpredictability of human experience. In some respects this is what irony is all about: the willingness to treat authoritarianism with a health-giving disrespect. (It's one of the appeals of the satiric CBC programme *Double Exposure.*) Canadians have long used irony as a defence tactic, a technique for coping at rhetorical distance with misapprehension and discontent. Perhaps they have to learn to "sprawl," too, a little. For apparently they now need to use irony as political cartoonists do: as an active *voice*, a way of *engaging* with history, of refusing life-as-a-mere-statistic, of celebrating the power of common sense and clarity, and of actively exposing the agents of incompetence and misrule.

November and December drew to their dismal close in drizzle and deep freeze. Gulfs yawned and widened. Reading was about to be taxed, and so was heating fuel. No flood insurance was available to protect against political rhetoric, but if there were, that would be taxed too. Meanwhile, a variety of cultural order papers were still in abeyance: a revamping of legislation controlling political broadcasting, and a reworking of the copyright act that will influence the distribution of books. It seemed appropriate to ask, in such circumstances, how to greet 1991. And somehow it still seemed possible, despite all the tensions, to answer: *in hope*. Not naively, by any means. But determinedly, watchfully. And maybe with laughter — if looking beyond the anguish was possible — as a way of resisting the intricate, arrogant absurdities of those who would thrive on cultural warfare.

January had yet to begin.

W.N.

THE LOBBYIST

Mona Elaine Adilman

Most old timers are humble, affable characters
like superannuated Andy Gump drawings in the comics.
Dear God, please let me grow old cantankerous
and feisty like a Maritime oak bursting through
a crop of government-subsidized cabbages.