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gone or growing?

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Special Edition: Cuba on the Verge



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A different friendship

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Havana and human
rights

CubaCult: Punching over
its weight in the global
cultural arena

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Letters & Responses

Dear Editor

John Gray had a chance to do something interesting (“Ottawa’s Boy Scout,” September 2005). He could have reviewed William Johnson’s biography of Stephen Harper in the light of his own experience of writing a biography of Paul Martin, and perhaps provided us with some illumination about the biographer’s craft. Instead, he used up his space venting his personal opinions about Harper.

I’ve never understood how reporters, whose trade is the manipulation of words, feel justified in passing sweeping judgements about the competence of people who actually do things, such as leading political parties. Rather than waste more time on Gray’s words, let’s look at Harper’s deeds. *Im Anfang war die Tat!*

After winning the leadership of the Canadian Alliance in 2002, Harper reunified the Alliance by bringing back the caucus members who had left for a temporary flirtation with Joe Clark’s Progressive Conservatives. In 2003, he brought about a merger of the Alliance with the PCs, something that all other leaders on the right had talked about but had never been able to carry through. Then, with almost no time to prepare, he led the new Conservative Party to substantial progress in the 2004 federal election, increasing its seat total from 73 to 99 (including 24 in Ontario) and bringing the Liberals down to an unstable minority.

Along the way he multiplied the fundraising potential of the Conservative Party. Whereas both the Canadian Alliance and the Progressive Conservatives struggled with financial difficulties, Harper’s new party is beating the Liberals at the fundraising game. The Conservative Party raised \$4.9 million from 46,119 donors between April and June of this year, whereas the Liberals raised \$1.4 million from 8,521 donors in the same period of time.

What about the polls, where, according to Gray, the Conservatives are languishing? The most recent national poll I have seen is from Environics, with a sample size of 2,022, released July 28, 2005. In that survey, the Conservatives had 31 percent of national support, compared to 34 percent for the Liberals—not bad for the opposition in the middle of the summer.

Gray thinks Harper should be doing better. Maybe Tiger Woods should have won the U.S. Open and the PGA this year in addition to the Masters and British Open. Maybe Gray’s biography of Martin should still be on sale in my local Chapters. Who knows? The only certainty is that journalists, like political scientists, are better equipped to write about what did happen rather than what didn’t.

That’s exactly what William Johnson has provided in his book—a careful, well-written account of Harper’s career to date. Anyone who wants to know more about Harper and how he derailed Paul Martin’s “juggernaut” (a term from another Martin biographer, Susan Delacourt) should read this book.

TOM FLANAGAN
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Dear Editor

I make three points in response to Keith Ambachtsheer’s review of *Pension Power: Unions, Pension Funds and Social Investment in Canada* (“Duelling Pension Manifestos,” July/August 2005).

First, he argues that pension plans cannot meet two policy goals well, i.e., provide pensions for beneficiaries and invest in a socially responsible manner. I disagree: the pension promise is crucial but so is sustainable economic growth in the long term to deliver the benefits. Indeed, the largest pension plans invest in economic development—the Dutch ABP pension scheme and CalPERS, the California pension plan.

As for members of pension plans, a recent UK survey showed that 95 percent cared where their money was invested; most disliked investment in companies exploiting labour and oppressive regimes. In fact, it could be argued that all investments are embedded in social values—some explicit and others implicit, and some responsible and some of questionable responsibility. Essentially Ambachtsheer is arguing that one social value should govern investment—the rate of return; I argue that in addition to the rate of return, other values are of importance.

Second, Ambachtsheer seems to suggest that where unions are involved in pension governance, disaster follows. This view is unfair and prejudiced. Unwise investment strategies, particularly in the post-9/11 world, have brought down (or seriously injured) employer-run pension plans such as United Airlines. Fortunately for thousands of Canadian pension plan members, negotiations by their unions—the International Association of Machinists, the Canadian Union of Public Employees and the Canadian Auto-workers among others—saved their Air Canada pension plan. Safe to say, all pension plans have had to reassess investment, governance and financing strategies in the face of persistently low or negative returns.

Third, I am not suggesting a revolutionary workers’ takeover, as Ambachtsheer seems to believe, but a more diverse representation on pension boards. British Columbia workers in municipalities, schools, community colleges and public services have won direct representation on pension boards. The Ontario Teachers and the OPSEU Pension Trust are also jointly trustees. Indeed, the Canadian Association of Pension Supervisory Authorities proposes that members of plans should be represented on their pension boards.

As to pension co-operatives, I think that Ambachtsheer is a bit confused. Co-operatives are not run by “arm’s-length” people, as he suggests, but rather by their members. In that regard, co-operatives are much like unions, so perhaps his views are not as extremely different from mine as he makes them out to be.

ISLA CARMICHAEL
TORONTO, ONTARIO

Dear Editor

Nominally a review of David Stouck’s biography of Sinclair Ross, W.J. Keith’s “A Slippery Story” (September 2005) mostly vents its frustration

over deviant interpretations of Ross’s first novel. My own essay educs Keith’s disgust over “quite improper” homosexual conjectures. He seems to imagine that in accusing me of “prodding” a sick old man into dubious “anecdotes,” who was “retaliating” against my callow “gullibility,” he has managed to parry the malign and “revisionist” influence my memoir has had on later “intellectual cranks.”

You get the impression Professor Keith is not someone who’d wear sandals to a symposium. Or an earring. In dissociating himself foursquare from all “insidious” and “bizarre” subtexts he rises in his brogues to speak up for “what is clear and non-controversial” in literature since Sophocles. And while he’s grateful to Professor Stouck for being “impressively circumspect” in handling the “sexual aspects” of Ross’s life, he’s determined to defend the virtues of Ross’s famous novel without which the “biography would never have been written.” Can it be in his having found Stouck’s last life (of Ethel Wilson) critically deficient, Keith wishes to overlook any similar deficiency in this one and to point the critic’s lance himself? (I wonder at what he must have regarded as Stouck’s “bizarre” interpretation of *As for Me and My House*—“evoking a bisexual projective fantasy” evidently involving “a homosocial/sexual connection.” Loyal, he refrains from mentioning it.)

It might actually surprise this knight errant to learn I agree with him about one thing. “Interpretation along homosexual lines,” as he puts it, “detracts from an appreciation of the novel’s artistry.” Exactly. The novel’s failure to acknowledge an underlying homoerotic sensibility leads, in my view, to an artistic weakness. The body of this landmark novel knows more than its author will allow it to know in the conventional atmosphere of the false-fronted town it flouts yet finally submits to. Its language is glorious—sometimes even celebrated for the right reasons—while the drama of the story is, to my mind, compromised. In perpetuating a false front of its own, the novel (as I wrote) “has tricked critics into believing its story lies in the narrator rather than in the narrator of its narrator. (It is *he* who is unreliable.)” And so on.

Keith is not convinced. He thinks that because not “so much as a hint of the existence of a homosexual subtext” arose 15 years ago in Stouck’s symposium of critics on the novel, “this fact remains significant.” Say what? Indeed—he goes on to claim following a muddled comparison to Proust—because Mrs. Bentley’s narrative “is an artistic tour de force of a high order” it “even has the added possible advantage of discouraging homosexual speculations.” Huh?

I can’t speak for whatever bent speculations after mine might have got Keith’s goat and skewered it—I haven’t read them. But based on his waspish tone I’m not surprised by his straw-man reading of *As for Me and My Body* (nor its sway over his review) when Professor Stouck’s apparently corrective biography is praised for discharging its “delicate assignment.”

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