

Cruel and unusual punishment for Black?

In the interest of full disclosure, it must be said that your correspondent not only knows Conrad Black but - dare we say it? - actually likes the guy to boot.

It continues to amaze, given the number of jobs Black personally created over the years for Canadian journalists, that so many of those journalists are not even attempting to contain their glee at the apparent downfall of this one-time media giant.

But there you have it. Some people simply hate successful people. Others are put off by his lavish lifestyle and his public arrogance. If you know Black personally, that arrogance doesn't come across when you're with him. But there's no doubt that when cameras and/or tape recorders are trained on him, he can't seem to help himself.

That having been said, there is no escaping the fact that Black has been convicted of four criminal charges in a Chicago courtroom - that may change on appeal, but he's not likely to get all the convictions tossed out - and therefore his numerous enemies both within the media and outside the media can call him a thief and a criminal and whatever other epitaphs they chose without fearing that they would be subject to Black's legendary litigious response.

That's fair enough, one supposes. What clearly isn't fair, however, is all this talk - some of it from the overly-politicized U.S. prosecutors - that Black deserves to spend the next 30 years in jail without parole.

Please. He didn't kill anybody. And even if you accept the worst of the criminal charges against him, what he did was take money which should have been shared by other wealthy colleagues and put it in his own pocket and those of his few closest business partners.

This is no way excuses Black for the crimes he has been convicted of, but it's completely absurd to rank his crimes on par with say, the former Enron bosses, who set up phony companies and bilked billions of dollars from average working men and women who had invested in good faith. Many of these victims, unlike in the Black case, lost their life's savings.

All of Black's "victims" - such as they are - remain richer. They would have been just a bit richer had Black and friends shared the wealth, but they're hardly suffering. So let's not make these silly comparisons with Enron and other major corporate crimes.

Pending a different outcome from his appeals, as things stand, Black does indeed deserve to do some time, just as Martha Stewart did for her relatively minor fiscal indiscretions. A couple of years perhaps. But 30 years? Come on! He wouldn't get that if he'd murdered somebody. He is, despite the understandable hype over his trial, a non-violent first-time offender.

But quite apart from Black's convictions for his criminal acts, the former press baron - and brilliant author - also stands accused by many of his media enemies of another horrible crime, i.e., that he espoused views that were "not Canadian."

Two prominent writers - Lawrence Martin in The Globe and Mail and Linda McQuaig in the Toronto Star - were among others who used the occasion of Black's conviction to find him guilty of espousing an ideology, i.e. conservatism, which they clearly find offensive and extremely un-Canadian.

Think I'm kidding? Here's what Martin wrote of Black. "He stood apart from the Canadian mainstream, not only because of his wealth, lifestyle and power, but because he was an arch-conservative in a land where that breed is uncommon ... His views were an ill fit ... We hardly viewed him as one of our own. He was cut from a different cloth."

You will know, of course, that these views reflect the extraordinarily arrogance of the currently deposed Liberal Party of Canada, a party which sees itself as this country's "natural governing party," and which ran the last election (and several previous ones) on the basis that the Conservative Party did not believe in "Canadian values," another way of saying Liberal policies.

On that score, of course, Black is certainly guilty. Me too, along with the millions of Canadians who voted Conservative in the last election, more, lest we forget, than voted for the self-proclaimed "Canadian" Liberals.

It is true that Black disowned his Canadian citizenship in order to accept his British peerage, but he was forced into that by the petty-minded Jean Chretien, who, as prime minister at the time, decreed that a Canadian citizen could not become a British Lord without giving up his citizenship, a rule which had not been applied to many previous Canadian press barons, Lord Beaverbrook and Lord Thomson among them.

Celebrate if you must at the demise of an impressive businessman and biographer, but it says here that just because Black was by any measure larger than life, he still doesn't deserve cruel and unusual punishment because of it.



National Affairs

Claire Hoy

Saving the day or themselves?

Let's all cheer for the latest advancements in corporate citizenship!

But the skeptical among us (count me in that special group) could ask whether the power brokers are really saving the day, helping citizens, or contributing to the downward spiral of our very delicate social fabric. While I'm no expert, I'd vote for the latter.

Canadians, currently, are saddled with unbelievable, almost crushing debt. Individuals in this country collectively owe an estimated \$750 billion. I'm not an economist, but I'd guess a lot of this money is owed to banks and financial institutions. Sure, they've long been regarded as upstanding cornerstones to our society (pause for earnest reflection here), but one can assume they're partly responsible for this burgeoning debt load.

Most of us have credit cards and many have more than two. Here's a note I received from one of my friendly and altruistic banks recently:

"Even though you may already carry one or more other credit cards, you should not hesitate to accept this card. Your new **** card will bring you the financial flexibility of easily accessible credit ... And since there is no annual fee on this card, responding is absolutely free."

Talk about generous! I think this bank should get an award for the most blatantly shameless solicitation.

Financial experts, many of whom are employed by banks, know full well the picture of Canadians' personal debt loads. To suggest adding another credit card to one's collection is not only irresponsible but downright greedy, reflecting a total disregard for personal finances. It's an affront to common decency.

They will argue obtaining credit cards is a personal choice, but when they make it enticing, without even doing credit checks on customers, that's entrapment, plain and simple.

How about our friendly, neighbourhood mortgage lenders?

Wonderful souls, all. I'm sure those in the know keep track of economic indicators and the Bank of Canada interest rate. It is set like clockwork several times each year. Most financial pros can speculate on the bank rate's movement, well ahead of the scheduled release dates.

Shouldn't they be advising customers (mortgage holders) of impending changes to mortgage rates? Those who've chosen a variable mortgage would find this information very valuable and sometimes life-saving. I have yet to hear a mortgage specialist call and



Mark Pavilons

say "Mr. Pavilons, the Bank of Canada is likely to increase the rate by a quarter point next week, so in your best interest, I think we should lock in your mortgage now."

Instead, they call asking if I'd like to amalgamate my debts or take on a second mortgage. I can hardly contain my appreciation!

Too much power in the hands of a few.

But corporate self-indulgence isn't limited to the banking industry.

Grocery stores are ushering in an era of reusable shopping bags, and trying to take credit for helping to clean up the planet.

One well known chain is hoping to curb the plastic bags that end up in dumps by

1 billion, offering reusable bags. By being so environmentally conscious, they urge consumers to switch to them.

Wow, talk about ego.

Let's not forget who got us into this mess in the first place. I recall the days when we used paper bags, and it wasn't the consumers who rallied to make the switch to plastic - it was the chains themselves because (and let's pause for a moment of utter shock) they could save a few pennies with plastic. And so, the environmental plague began, albeit with our consent by default.

Many have offered bags, boxes, cartons, etc. over the years. But the initial cost was a detriment and consumers hoping to save a few bucks each week on their grocery tabs don't want to spend more. Also, convenience gets the better of us, and we continually give in.

The end of plastic is near. Many municipalities have banned plastic bags outright and others have levied a tax on them, to force shoppers into the proper course of action. Many outlets offer canvas bags and polypropylene fibre bags. But a lot of these efforts come from the grass roots, or are initiated by small businesses, not the large, wealthy chains.

If such giants want to be

seen as truly compassionate, they would offer their green bags for free or voluntarily pull the plastic bags.

But they at least deserve a crooked thumbs-up for trying, don't they?

The final issue producing some frantic head-scratching is the TTC's latest success.

Executives underestimated the success of changes made to passes, which have generated greater TTC use, but less revenue for the provider. One would have thought with the amount of brain power in Toronto, someone, somewhere would have mentioned that the current results were predictable.

The solution? They don't thank and appreciate rider enthusiasm, they penalize it, with talk of future fare hikes. Yes, that's the way to treat your citizenry. Encourage the use of public transit; make it more affordable, and then whack them in the knees with a lamppost. Makes you feel all warm and fuzzy inside, eh?

There's word of cutting routes, subways and buses because the city is pretty much broke.

An aware and educated consumer is a wonderful thing. Too bad we're seen as threats to the corporate elite, who've cornered the market on spin-doctoring.



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A special acknowledgement to the members of the Dinner Committee for making this year's event a night to remember!

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