

# A few modest proposals

*If the Liberals really want to “help” publishers, why stop at cuts to PAP?*

BY SCOTT BULLOCK

It's a complete coincidence, but just one day after Rogers resident postal expert, Michael Fox, delivered a virtuoso October performance on the cuts to the Publications Assistance Program, *Saturday Night* turned off the lights.

As always with a Fox-led seminar, the approach was completely business-like. He maintained his humor; bent over backwards to provide disclaimers and acknowledged his professional and personal biases, worked overtime to be an honest broker and a polite host to assembled guests from the Department of Canadian Heritage and Canada Post.

An undercurrent of righteous indignation, evidenced by both Magazines Canada CEO Mark Jamison's and Michael Fox's carefully chosen words was like the sound of two burning fuses. A projected PAP shortfall of \$7 million has a way of upsetting even diplomats.

At the emergency “PAP Attacked” session in Toronto, Jamison described how Magazines Canada was blindsided by news of PAP's reductions, which arrived on the Friday before the Labor Day long weekend, giving a mere 60 days of notice till the point of impact. Clearly, the suggestion was that this was not only a betrayal, but was a particularly cowardly way of handling a betrayal.

DCH rep Gordon Platt attempted to defuse the situation by talking about “limited funds” and federal programs not “indexed for growth” and policy being “consistent with weaning the industry of dependency.”

Funny how funds seem to be limitless for so many others—groups the Liberals would never dare talk about weaning, especially at election time.

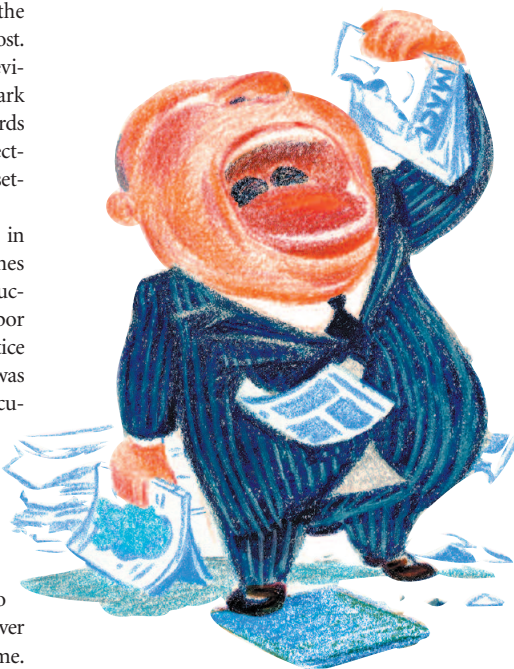
Why are the Liberals issuing marching orders to claw back money, at a time when the government enjoys huge operating surpluses, overspends by \$1 billion on a gun registry, finds \$4.5 billion for Jack Layton's agenda, and can afford David Dingwall's expense account and generous severance package? Obviously they think they can—with no consequences.

An election is on, and the Liberals are vulnerable. Let's face it, our government has still not made good on its promise to Magazines Canada to scrap the GST on reading. If publishers were stomping mad at the Conservatives for putting the GST on magazines in the first place, why are we not equally angry that the Liberals have not lived up to their commitments to kill it?

Jonathan Swift's satirical response to the government's position on child poverty and hunger in Ireland was to eat the children. Our government seems to be suggesting that the way to help

Canadian magazines is to starve us, then stand back and watch as we bicker and fight over the table scraps, before eventually amputating our magazines, mutilating our staffs, or eventually committing suicide by going out of business.

Fox foresees some rather nasty possible outcomes publishers may face as a result of the shrinking PAP subsidy: slashed freelance budgets, reduced editorial pages, reduced frequencies, cancelled marketing initiatives, layoffs and outright closures.



If the government really believes its policies are good for magazines, why stop at undermining PAP? Why not a few other modest proposals?

If the GST on reading magazines is good, why not increase the tax to 10%? This will help wean the population off an outdated way of getting information and force kids to spend more time on useful activities like surfing the Internet, watching TV, and playing video games.

The government, in its wisdom, stripped magazines of the revenue we earned from tobacco advertising in the 1990s while continuing to collect billions in annual sin taxes for themselves. So, if this is not hypocritical and unfair, why not prevent magazines from running ads for booze? After all, the health care system foots a huge bill to deal with the consequences of drinking, too.

Once the government has stripped us of our dependency on tobacco and beverage alcohol cate-

gories, why not prohibit us from running ads from the automotive category? SUVs are evil, aren't they? Fouling the environment and contributing to rising health care costs and global warming. A ban on magazine ads for SUVs and other environmentally naughty gas-guzzlers makes sense, too. Useful public policy, a real vote-getter, and magazines will surely find ways to adapt.

And once magazines have been weaned off our dependency on tobacco, alcohol, and automotive advertising categories, it's time the government levied a special tax on pulp and paper to help citizens kick the habit of consuming magazines. People will surely understand the importance of taking up Rick Mercer's one-tonne challenge to help meet our Kyoto commitments; what better way than to stop reading magazines?

As the government has helpfully suggested with respect to PAP cuts, we can always just increase the cost of a subscription to offset our losses from tobacco, beverage alcohol, and automotive ads, too. No problem.

When casting your ballot, recall David Dingwall's eloquent words of wisdom, when he reminded all Canadians that he is entitled to his entitlements. Ding Me's expense account could fund countless Canadian magazines.

The serious question is: what will our response be to the Liberals' decision? They're counting on us to do nothing but grumble and hold an information-sharing seminar at a downtown hotel.

When *Saturday Night* died a fourth death, the national media devoted airtime and ink to mourn its demise. My fear is that very little attention will be paid when Fox and Jamison's predictions of cuts and closures unfold at magazines both big and small if the Circulation Management Association of Canada and Magazines Canada fail to act boldly in reaction to this round of cuts to PAP. Otherwise you can be sure the hits will keep coming from this government, at your magazine, and eventually at you. **M**



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