

*The Dalton  
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WINNING ESSAY BY

Kurt Peacock

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The Decline of National Reporting in Canada

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BY KURT PEACOCK

THE TINY NEW BRUNSWICK VILLAGE OF CAMBRIDGE-NARROWS, A LOVELY PLACE WHERE DALTON CAMP SCRIBBLED DOWN SOME OF HIS BEST OPINIONS ON POLITICS IN CANADA, HAS A POPULATION OF LITTLE OVER 600 PEOPLE. IF CAMP HADN'T MAINTAINED HIS KINSHIP FOR THIS HAMLET WHILE WRITING FOR SOME OF CANADA'S LARGEST DAILIES, IT IS LIKELY THAT NO ONE OUTSIDE OF SOUTHERN NEW BRUNSWICK WOULD HAVE EVER NOTICED IT EXISTED.

This is sad, because Cambridge-Narrows – just like hundreds of small communities across Canada, from Nanaimo to Moose Jaw, Wawa to Dildo – is filled with engaging opinion-makers, compelling stories, and fascinating debates on politics both local and national in nature.

These communities are not Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal, Calgary or Vancouver. But they are vibrant, and they are as willing to participate in any national dialogue as the big (and growing) metropolises. They are too often ignored by the national media, and as a consequence they are considered irrelevant by a national government whose leadership is increasingly beholden to the opinions of the big urban thinkers.

This is not to lament the decline of small-town Canada, or ignore the economic and cultural importance of Canada's cities. (I myself live in the dynamic city of Saint John, which has always been one of Atlantic Canada's most important urban centres.) This essay is instead meant to protest the way in which Canada's national media has ignored the daily news coming out of entire parts of Canada, a process which has, in effect, turned our country into one of a hollow central federation made up of many mutually suspicious solitudes.

A national media that only pays attention to the outlying regions, the secondary cities, and the seemingly sleepy towns whenever something horrendous (such as a random crime, or destructive weather pattern) or bizarrely trivial (religious imagery at a Tim Hortons) occurs is not a national media at all. It is instead a media of a few secondary metropolises in the Northern half of this continent, dependent on press releases from the Toronto Board of Trade and copy from the American news wires and a few overworked CP stringers to fashion together what is called Canadian news.

While such a description may seem stark, consider how my home province of New Brunswick has recently been treated by the country's three most important dailies: The Toronto Star, The Globe and Mail, and the National Post. Over the past year, these 'national' papers had

little to say about New Brunswick politics – with the exception of lazy horse-race reporting over which NB Premier will eventually become Canada’s Prime Minister – or the changing shape of the provincial economy. Instead, these papers found that New Brunswick was truly newsworthy only in the case of the second-language student at UNB who faced expulsion over giving orders to his guide dog in French.

This bureaucratic snafu, which was quickly corrected by UNB officials, nonetheless captured the imagination of central Canada’s media. So bizarrely stupid was this story – not unlike the years-ago holiday brawl over Elmo at a Fredericton Walmart – that you could almost see Toronto editors yelling: “Stop the presses! Someone in New Brunswick did something weird! Let’s run it instead of that story on Iraq!”

A quick internet search of New Brunswick-themed articles at the major papers suggests that UNB should abandon its academic programs entirely, and focus instead on performing stunts for the benefit of news-starved Toronto reporters. The fact that the UNB rugby team running naked on a field (November 2004 edition) is apparently more newsworthy to the *Globe and Mail* than the pioneering work UNB is doing in early childhood development shows just how often New Brunswick is thought of in the country’s most rigorous news rooms.

The *Toronto Star*, perhaps the most Toronto-centric of the major dailies, at least attempts to publish a story about NB every once in a while through the writings of their Atlantic bureau. But their Atlantic columnist, the Halifax-based Kelly Toughill, plays to prejudices already well-bred among many central Canadians: specifically, that Maritimers care about little else than an alphabet soup of federal programs, from ACOA to EI. A late September 2004 column by Toughill, simply titled *Atlantic Premiers Protest*, tells a lot about how Toronto’s media looks at Maritime politics. Our leaders whine, are wine and dined, and then handed a cheque from Ottawa. No need for nuance there.

According to a large segment of Canada’s print and digital media, the Maritime provinces are deemed to be about as significant to any national debate as Delaware and Rhode Island are to the United States. At least our cross-border cousin, the state of Maine, has L.L. Bean and a decent university hockey tradition to appease the American press. To most of Canada’s scribes, Atlantic Canada is known chiefly for our lobster, our snowmobile accidents, and the odd Christmas toy tussle at Walmart.

The central Canadian media appears to have changed little from the ill-informed, rowdy body that Dalton Camp had the misfortune to herd in the 1957 election, and later write about in *Gentlemen, Players and Politicians*. The myths still exist, easier to allude to in a lead sentence than to challenge in a truly investigative piece. Never mind past New Brunswick exports like Dalton Camp, Alden Nowlan, the hobbit-like Churchill confidante Max Aitken, or Sussex ginger ale. Ignore the Atlantic co-operative movement, the region's anti-nuclear movement, or the fact that the Atlantic provinces are now more urban and diverse than at any time in history. Focus instead on the old news staples of blighted potatoes and dying fish, parish-pump patronage and colourful premiers.

But this is not a Maritime complaint. The same characterizations can be directed toward the way the national media treat rural Quebec, Northern Ontario, the Prairies, and the Northern Territories. To most of Canada's media, the real action is in Ottawa and Toronto, with some juicy stories to be found in Calgary, Vancouver or Montreal. Every other part of Canada is just a few acres of snow.

Given the demographic trends that exist in Canada, the media focus on the big five cities is perhaps inevitable. But this does not mean that it is proper, and it certainly does little to improve the quality of democratic discourse in Canada.

By ignoring (or worse – trivializing) entire parts of the country, the national media is in effect encouraging the national government to do the same thing. Important national files – like immigration – are handled through the lens of opinion-makers in Toronto, Vancouver or Montreal, where local governments are feeling the pressure of too many new settlers. In the rest of Canada, meanwhile, the immigration totals of the big cities are envied, and a number of smaller communities are keen to implement ambitious settlement strategies. Their unique ideas are too often dismissed in Ottawa, in large part because immigration is considered a file that is only relevant to Canada's big three cities.

Similar distortions can be found in the way the central government handles economic issues – and how the Canadian media covers these issues. In the last decade, the oil sands of Alberta, the auto factories of southern Ontario, and the aerospace plants of Quebec have all received significant government investments (some would say bail-outs). The rest of Canada generally isn't so lucky. In smaller Canadian communities,

various bureaucratic agencies are created to maintain the livelihood of farmers or fishermen, or prop-up dying industries – these programs generally receive a great amount of scrutiny and ridicule. In actual fact, they are little more than table scraps, handed out by Ottawa after the real economic decisions have been made in favour of vote-rich provinces.

But all is not lost. Some elements of Canada's media – such as CBC's *The National*, with its ever-changing line up of *Road Stories* – do indeed attempt to remind viewers that Canada is a massive country, with thousands of different communities that are ready to contribute to a national dialogue. Local papers and radio stations – which often cover their little section of Canada in a much better way than any reporter in Toronto covers theirs – can now be found through the internet. And thanks to the ease of desktop publishing, neighbourhood papers – in some cases glorified zines, found at the local coffee shop – seem to be proliferating. All of this suggests that a person can find out a lot about Canada by looking at its media, but only if they are ready to start small, visit lots of coffee shops and have a good dial-up modem.

We've regressed a good deal from the time that Confederation was debated on the front pages of the *Saint John News* (or any other of Saint John's multitude of nineteenth century newspapers). We're nowhere near the sort of national debate that was once generated by J.W. Dafoe's *Winnipeg Free Press*. And there is no question a great deal of work has to be done before the Canadian media becomes truly national in scope.

But let's aim for it, at least. Reporters won't necessarily have to know the difference between Saint John, New Brunswick, and St. John's, Newfoundland. They'll just need to know that for Canada to work, both communities should matter.