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## COMMENT

# Postmedia let down readers by dictating election endorsements

**By John Honderich**

Chair of Torstar's Board of Directors

Never before in a federal election, in my memory, have newspaper endorsements become so controversial.

Topping the list unquestionably was Postmedia CEO Paul Godfrey's dramatic order to all 16 major Postmedia papers across Canada to support Stephen Harper. Each paper was allowed to write its own editorial, but the conclusion was preordained.

"Since God made babies, I think (endorsement editorials) were always made that way," longtime Conservative Godfrey explained later, reacting to the uproar. "If anyone thinks otherwise, I think they were dreaming in technicolour."

Really, Mr. Godfrey?

You might want to examine the policies of other newspaper chains that tell an entirely different bedtime story of the so-called "proprietor's prerogative."

No one can dispute the tradition of an individual publisher or owner calling the election shots for their local paper. Godfrey did that regularly when he was publisher of the *Toronto Sun*.

But to dictate the choice across an entire chain—and nation. That is an entirely different tale.

Consider the previous owners of Postmedia papers, the venerable Southam family.

It went to great lengths to emphasize individual publishers in each city were responsible for all editorial content, including election endorsements.

"It was even in my letter of engagement," remembers veteran Southam Publisher Clark Davey. "It said what appeared in the (Vancouver) *Sun* rested on my conscience."

The reason, of course, was self-evident. What was important or relevant to readers in Vancouver might not be so in Montreal, Ottawa or Windsor.

Owning a newspaper, in my view, is a privilege, not a right. Nor is it the same as owning a pizzeria or car wash. Newspapers are an essential informing part of the democratic process and their first responsibility must be to the local readers they serve.

The old Thomson chain in Canada, owned by the richest family in the land, had a similar practice of non-interference

in local editorial issues.

South of the border a similar tradition has existed for decades. In the last presidential election, America was a patchwork quilt of competing newspaper endorsements.

The huge Gannett chain states that "diversity is strength. By encouraging and expressing a mix of opinions, backgrounds, stories and ideas, Gannett improves results."

An executive for the large Knight-Ridder chain put it more pithily: "We bought them (newspapers). But we don't own them."

In the interests of transparency, it must also be declared that editorial independence has always been the official policy of the Torstar newspaper group.

While the proprietors and publisher of the *Toronto Star* are involved in the *Star's* election endorsements, Torstar's Metroland Media, which includes the *Hamilton Spectator*, *Waterloo Region Record* and more than 120 community papers (including this one), can all decide for themselves.

So in the 2011 federal election, *The Star* supported Jack Layton's NDP, while virtually all other Torstar papers endorsed Stephen Harper. In 2015, all the dailies came out for the Liberals under Justin Trudeau, while this paper chose not to endorse (a stance adopted two years ago).

These aren't dreams. They are black and white realities reflecting a long-held common tradition among North America's major newspaper groups.

Godfrey, soon to be installed in the Canadian News Hall of Fame for his contribution to Canadian journalism, clearly has a different perspective.

Yet, the firestorm of criticism on social media, the rumours of discontent in Postmedia newsrooms and even a damning story in Britain's *Guardian* newspaper all reflect a pervasive discontent.

Even more worrisome is the negative impact this affair is having on the newspaper industry in general. At a time when the relevance and impact of newspapers are under attack, this doesn't help.

Ultimately, though, it is readers who matter most. And surely those in Postmedia communities deserved far, far better.

*John Honderich is a former Publisher of the Toronto Star, and is Chair of Torstar's Board of Directors.*