

# Opinion

## The horror, the horror...

Back in the good old days, when the Russians had political prisoners, they sent them to Siberian concentration camps. If they were particularly out of favour they were incarcerated in an insane asylum.

Now those same Russians, reformed though they are, do something much less humane to those people ill-favoured by the regime. They send them to North American malls.

There is method in their madness. The mass confusion and greedy capitalistic slaving are displayed to the hapless exiles to forever dispel ideas that the western world is in any way preferable to Mother Russia. Also, the sad exile cannot return to his home and take up a life of enlightened, toilet-paperless Marxism.

In this most fiendishly perfect plot, the exile of greedy Russians also adds to the general physical and linguistic confusion. Things are confusing enough on packaging in this country. Have you ever searched a package for the English explanation of ingredients, turning it over and over in your hands only to find French, or braille, or Egyptian hieroglyphics? One more language echoing off the walls of our suburban bastions of English is guaranteed to make Christmas shopping just that little bit more hellish.

**A Bold Prediction:** Saturday, Dec. 23, 1989 will be the single worst day to shop in the history of mankind, save only the day of the original fire sale by the Neanderthals.

With the elements of international intrigue, language horrors, hordes of violent and only half-civilized homo dineros trundling store to store in packs, Christmas 1989 is looking more and more like an out-take from *Apocalypse Now*. I was wandering through the Burlington Mall, only to see some guy with war paint on his face and a conspiratorial look surface from a large trash container. Then a large man in front of me said, "I coulda been a contender," and, "The horror... the horror," with a thick Russian accent.

That was my tip off. The plot was unravell-



**Reaume  
With a View**  
with BRAD REAUME

ing right in front of me. There was nothing I could do but watch. I was frozen in horror. Beads of sweat formed on my brow and began to trickle down my face, the rivulets forming a stream near my chin and the streams joining together on my chest to make a giant river of sweat which ran down my legs and into my shoes. As my shoes filled up with my own perspiration the excess flowed over in a wave reminiscent of the drowning of Atlantis.

I looked down to my feet, expecting only the tops of my shoes to be showing above the rising tide, but the floor was dry. I glanced back to the trash bin and it was empty, yet a trail of small ice cream footprints snaked away east.

I put the hallucination down to the mall's noise, heat and overcrowding by the sloppy denizens of south Halton. You've got to be crazy to go to a shopping mall at the best of times, but on the last few shopping days prior to Christmas it's nuttiness of epic grandeur. "Frankly Ethel, I don't give a damn. I'm going to the mall."

So with Atlanta burning in the background, I'll stand off-centre to the camera and announce the fire sale to a shocked nation. "Today will live in infamy as the nation's retailers were viciously and deliberately attacked by crazed, money-toting holiday shoppers..."

Mind you, the swirl of sound and motion and the frantic pace of pre-Christmas is part of its appeal, part of what makes the holiday season special and different. I suppose I can brave the stores for one more year but next year, I swear, I'll start shopping in May. Just as soon as I've paid all of this year's bills.



## News - You be the judge

Earlier this week, I was watching the TV news during the evening. While playing the great Canadian game of channel flipping, I happened to see the same news item on two different stations.

At least, I think it was the same news item. The principals were the same and the event that was mentioned was identical, but nothing else seemed to match at all. The two readers were talking about the recent auditor's report prepared to examine Patti Starr's (yes, that Patti Starr) two years as the chairperson of Ontario Place.

Station A recounted how Ms Starr had reduced the deficit of Ontario Place by approximately \$1.5 million and had taken very little money for her services, despite the fact she was quite entitled to a great deal more.

Station B discussed how her management style had caused a large turnover in staff and the fact that some restaurant equipment purchased during her tenure was sold a year after its purchase at a loss. To be entirely fair, the first station did mention her management problems and neither station said anything untrue. However, the same set of facts produced two different stories, one negative, at least from Ms Starr's perspective, one positive.

After getting over my astonishment at the two quite different stories I began to think about how we all get out "facts." As an MPP I am lucky enough to get about 20 per cent of my information first hand and another 50 per cent second hand.

Unfortunately, this means about 30 per cent of the "facts" I must use when coming to a decision are filtered through three or more people. Anyone who has played the old party game of starting a story at one end of a room and having each person relay it to their neighbour will realize that the accuracy of any story is inversely related to the number of people it passes through on its way to you.

The ideal solution would be to go out and get all the information about a subject for myself. Unfortunately, anyone who has ever worked in a large and busy business will realize that time simply does not permit this. The best that can be done is to check the main parts of pertinent questions myself. Failing that I get someone I trust to do it. When you consider the fact that I get a pile of information at least six inches deep in my office everyday, you can begin to see the difficulty.

The general public has an even worse prob-



**Queen's  
Park Report**  
with WALT ELLIOT, MPP

lem. My job is to assimilate large amounts of information and then try to make decisions that help my constituents, directly or indirectly. Your job may be anything from selling insurance to driving a taxi or teaching school. Believe me, as a former teacher and business owner, I realize working all day and spending time with your family leaves you little time for information gathering, if you want to get any sleep at all.

The best approach that can be taken in these circumstances is the critical approach, and I mean critical, not negative. Critically examine all the information you get regardless of whether it comes from your friends, the newspaper, TV or one of my Queen's Park reports.

If what you are hearing does not sound logical, reasonable or probable, then ask your politicians. Regardless of what you may have heard we are not here just to think up new and creative ways of spending your money. No politician should be afraid of criticism, but complaints based on a 45-second news clip are not really all that useful most of the time.

Reporters do their best to be objective and honest but it would be a poor reporter indeed who had neither ideas nor beliefs. What you read in the paper and hear or see on the radio or tv may be only part of the story.

If your government is not explaining things clearly, then let us know so we can do a better job of getting you the facts. Big business has lobby groups. Doctors have lobby groups. Daycare advocates have lobby groups. Even garbage dump operators have lobby groups.

But you have only yourself. Rather than being a weakness, I think this is a strength. Your message is not filtered through other people, but can be delivered exactly the way you want it.

Every few years I have to seek a formal vote of confidence from you. Every day I need to know what you are thinking. At the bottom line, I can't help with problems if I don't get your information.

## Table talk opens a dialogue

Although it hasn't received any notoriety, a recent study from Southern Illinois University is pretty scary reading.

Researchers found that parents and children don't talk much to each other. When they do talk, parents are usually demanding something, while children are typically disruptive, upset or distracted. The idea that a family sits together and talks at the dinner table seems to have left us with *Leave It To Beaver*.

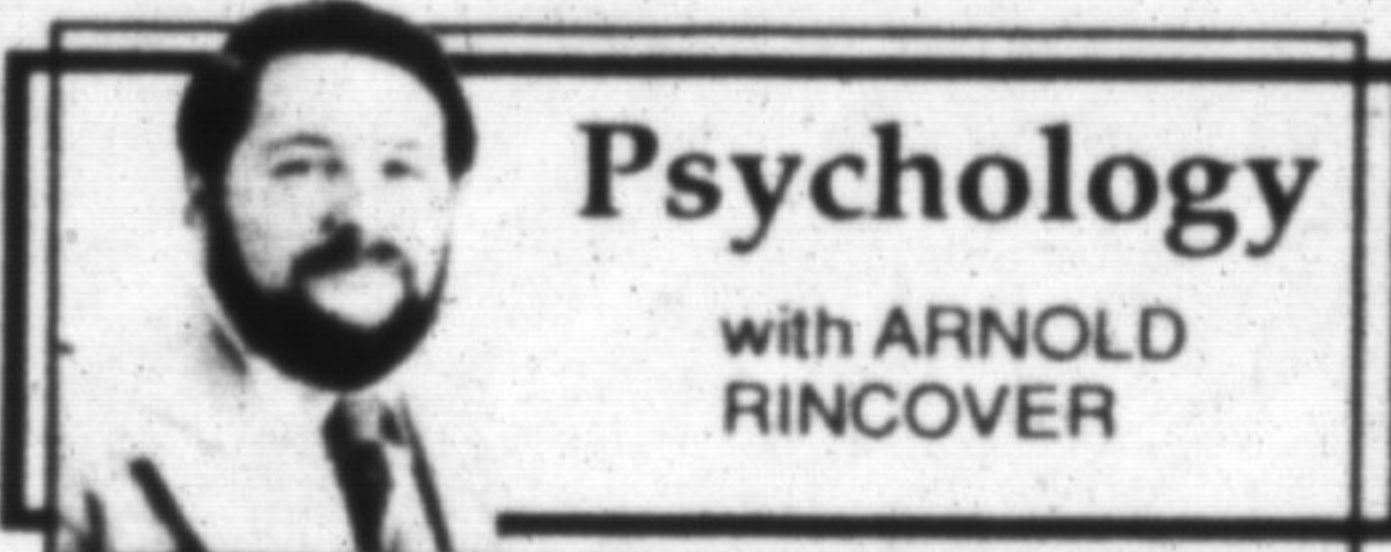
Many troublesome everyday situations in family life (going out for dinner, getting kids ready for school in the morning, shopping excursions) present natural occasions for enjoyable interactions, yet they typically contain a lot of friction between parents and children.

Children do often misbehave in these situations, and parents typically react in a coercive manner. Dinnertime, for example — at home or (particularly) at a restaurant — is often mundane or hectic; rarely is conversation shared among family, rather it is dominated by adults whose attention to children is generally brief, perfunctory or a series of demands.

Studies are available showing how to handle each of these troublesome situations, to make them more enjoyable (and educational) for parents and children. The program for going out to dinner is particularly interesting and a good example, as it is simple, effective, and usually requires no special training or "therapy." Also, this situation is a concern to many parents, as they worry about how to handle children in public situations.

The researchers devised simple "placemats" (they could just be pieces of paper) which contained a series of questions, pictures and games, which they called "table-talk" placemats. Each would contain about six questions, varying according to the age of the children using them.

Questions would be along the lines of: "What kind of work does mom do? And dad?"



**Psychology**  
with ARNOLD RINCOVER

What would life be like if they changed jobs? Find as many objects as you can in the restaurant the shape of a circle (triangle, square). What would you buy if you had a zillion dollars? Would you share some? With who? Let's take a walk through a magic forest where elves live and work. What do you think they do all day? What is magic? Have you ever seen magic?

The effectiveness of table-talk placemats was compared with other types of placemats — the ones available for children (mazes, puzzles, riddles) and the traditional (blank) placemats.

Of particular interest was the effect these had on children's disruptive behaviour, parental coercive statements (warnings, threats, arguing, swearing, stopping a child), and the amount of educational or social conversation between parents and children.

The results were dramatic. The currently available children's placemats were only slightly better than blank placemats, presumably because they were too brief (it's over when the riddle is solved, the maze finished) and they did not foster discussion.

The table-talk placemats, on the other hand, reduced parental demands by 90 per cent and increased family conversation by five or tenfold. Most importantly, virtually all families participating reported that it was a terrific new experience — the family was engaged, children were involved and better behaved, the atmosphere was much more pleasant.

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