

The Terrace Bay - Schreiber News is published every Tuesday by Laurentian Publishing Limited, Box 579, 13 Simcoe Plaza, Terrace Bay, Ont., P0T 2W0 Tel.: 807-825-3747. Second class mailing permit 2264. Member of the Ontario Community Newspaper Association and the Canadian Community Newspaper Association

Single copies 50 cents incl. GST. Subscription rates: \$18 per year / seniors \$12 (local); \$29 per year (out of 40 mile radius) \$39 in U.S. Add GST to yearly subs.

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The great unity quest

For Canadians the story to watch in 1991 was to be the success, or failure, of the many and varied commissions that are studying the problem of national unity.

Well, the war in the Persian Gulf has, for the moment, swept the great work of these commissions to one side.

The leaders of Canada failed to get their idea of a united Canada accepted when the Meech Lake Accord was stopped by Elijah Harper and Clyde Wells. Canadians, these leaders realized too late, did not appreciate having decisions on their country's future made in back-rooms behind closed doors.

Canadians cried out for more input into the process of refining their Constitution.

Well, we have been given our opportunity.

The Belanger - Campeau Commission is busy looking at Quebec's future role in Canada. There is a commission in New Brunswick looking at that province's role in the country. Similarly, there is a commission in Alberta and some form of opinion gathering going on in Ontario.

The federal government has front man Keith Spicer organizing a much publicized forum on national unity that is supposed to be informal and easily accessible. However, the Conservatives also have a bunch of backroom intellectuals coaching a parliamentary committee in the investigation the same problem. This committee, of course, will deal with the highly technical mumbo-jumbo that is necessary for a proper constitution.

There is one more group ready to probe Canada's national dysfunction. The Business Council on National Unity has sponsored a "constitutional brainstorming exercise" with more backroom scholars.

So, how will all of these high-profile, high-thinking commissioners communicate with Canadians? Well I think it will work something like this. Canadians will be asked to send in their thoughts feelings and ideas about Canada, their country, in the form of a written brief. A cross section of these views will be selected and the proponents asked to appear before the commission to present and support their views.

The commissioners will hear what they want to hear, count that as public input and discount the rest. Governments might act on the commissions' recommendations - if they like them.

It must be said in all fairness that Mr. Spicer's forum is not following this course. I think you might find its members paddling the waterways of this land looking for that wonderful healing herb, grass root.

They will all miss the point.

Where should we be looking for that great cup from which all Canadians can drink beer as one nation?

In the small communities that are the very essence of this or any other country. These small cities, towns, townships and villages are under increasing pressure to financially support, from property taxes alone, legislation that comes down from on high. Environmental, police services, freedom of information and protection of privacy legislation are just a few examples.

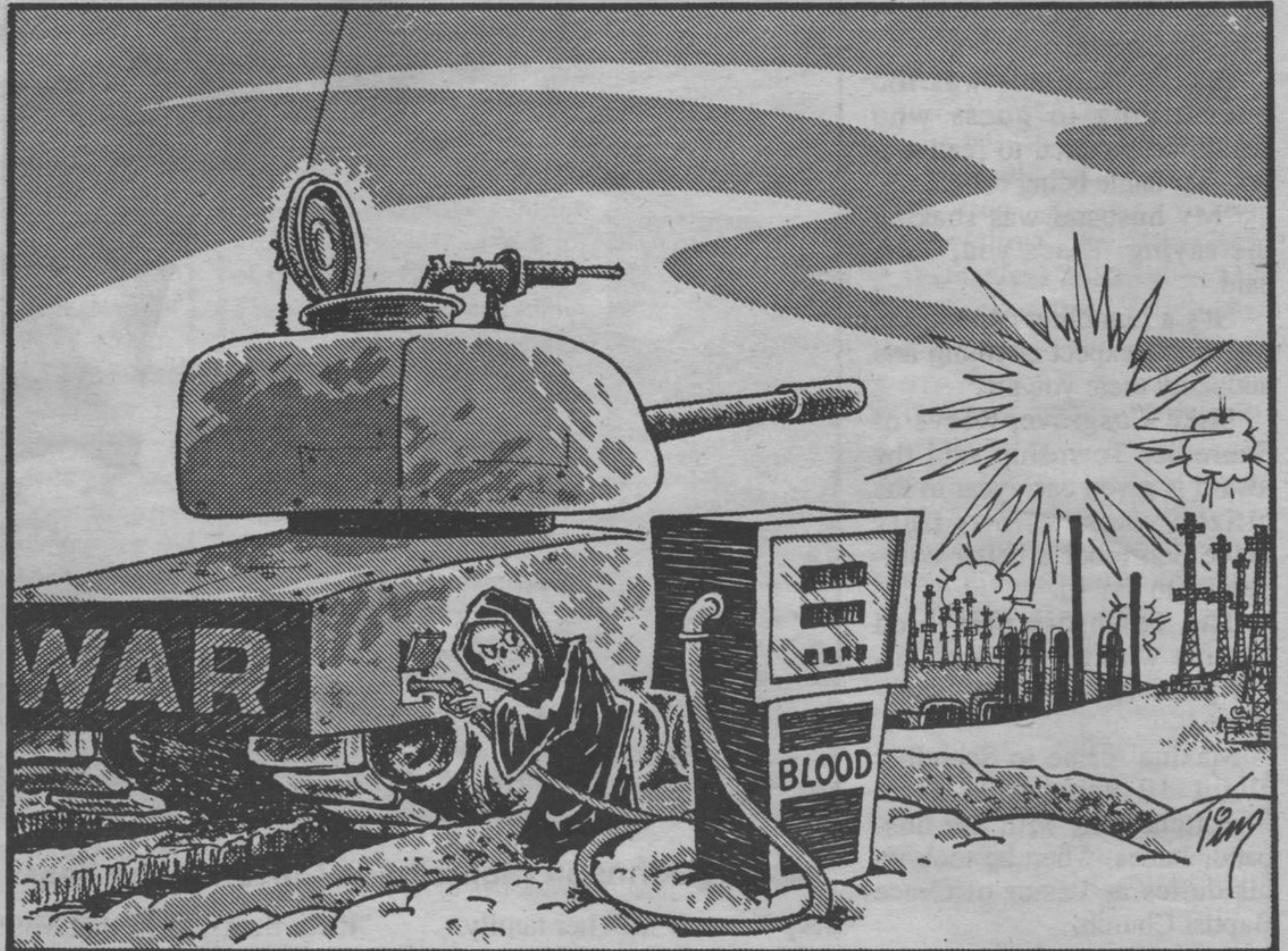
The municipalities are required to abide by these rules but are given very little, if any, financial help to do so. As a result the people are too busy trying to maintain municipal services and a sense of community to look very far afield.

These communities are also losing their connections with the country as communication and transportation links are removed, again by higher levels of government.

Canada is geographically large and economically diverse. Each Canadian must have a sense of this size and diversity. They must also have the time, desire and means to interact with it before common values, hopes and interests can grow.

The unity of a nation is nothing more than the outward growth of the unity of a community. In Canada, that outward growth is being restricted both financially and culturally.

Robert A. Cotton



Plastic reindeer in Canada

I imagine when it comes to the next prayer book they won't write He, meaning Him with a capital "h". God will be written in the lower case to banish any lurking sense of inferiority his worshippers might feel.

Alan Bennett, The Old Country.

You had a good Christmas, yes? Me too. So did pretty well everyone I know.

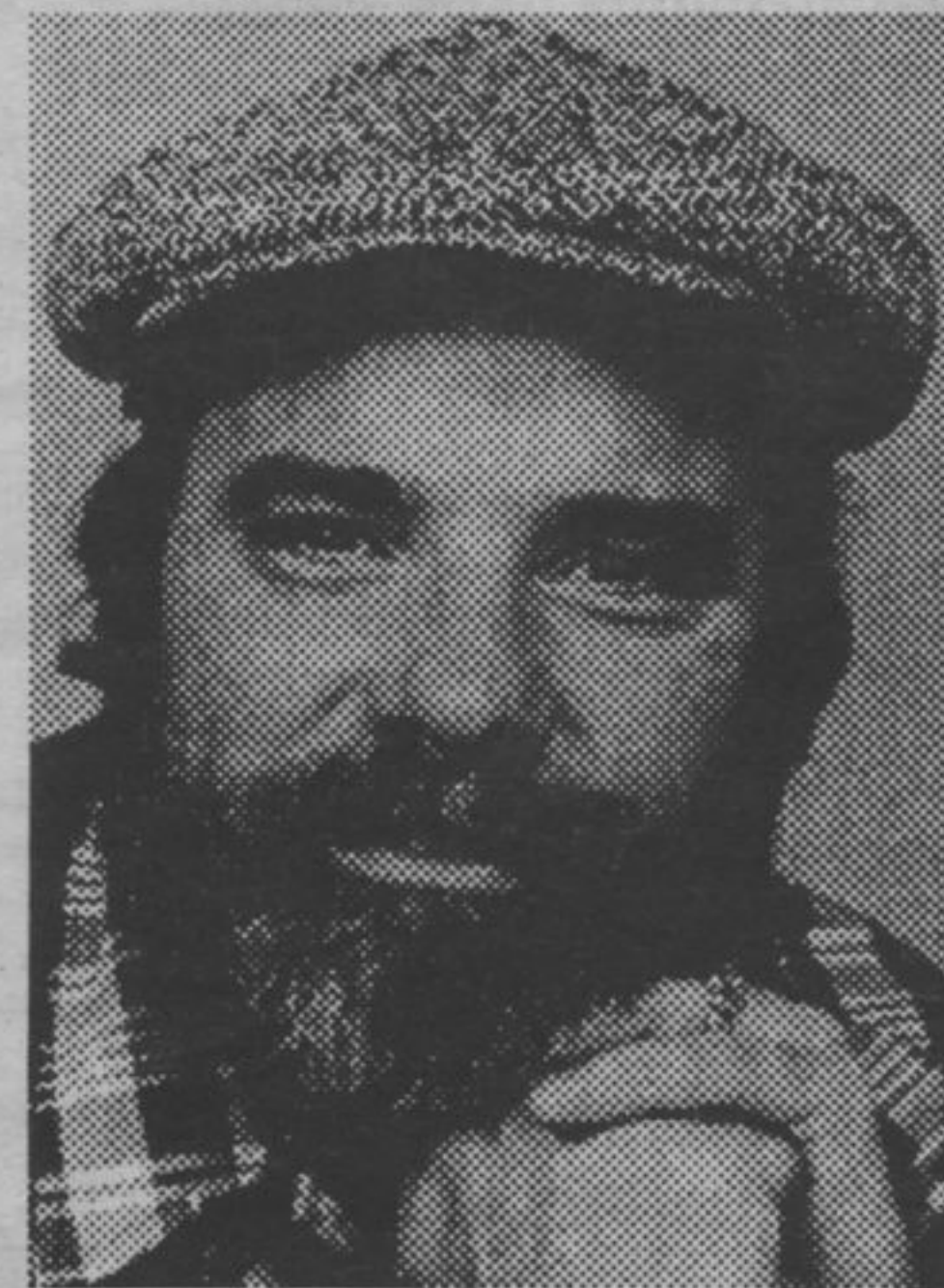
But then I don't have friends living in Monterey, California.

For Montereyans, Christmas 1990 was a little grittier than most, thanks to a lawsuit launched by the American Civil Liberties Union. Purpose of the lawsuit: to get Jesus off the lawn. The Monterey City Fathers had erected a Nativity Scene in front of City Hall. ACLU claimed the Christmas panorama amounted to state endorsement of religion and as such, must be removed from public property.

The Union doesn't just sic its lawyers on Christians. It also goes after Jews who have the temerity to be religious in public. A large Menorah, the ceremonial Jewish candelabra, stands in a municipal park in Beverly Hills. ACLU is suing to have it removed immediately.

Idiocy is everywhere. Recently in Cincinnati a federal judge ruled that a Menorah could be erected beside a Christmas Tree in the Town Square. This in turn brought members of the Ku Klux Klan out from under their rocks. The

Klownsmen demanded the right to burn a cross in the square. Nervous city fathers went into a huddle, then announced that the KKK could appear in the square providing they didn't wear their trademark hoods or ignite their cross. The KKK threatened to sue local Santas for wearing beards(!) and the whole sorry



Arthur Black

scenario degenerated into a fist-shaking rock-throwing brawl in the town square, just three days before Christmas.

Needless to say, all involved parties had God on their side.

Believe it or not, this nonsense had percolated all the way up to the U.S. Supreme Court. A couple of years ago the American Civil Liberties Union launched a similar lawsuit over a nativity scene Christmas display in Rhode Island. The Supreme Court ruled that it was okay to show the baby Jesus in a cradle in public -- as long as he was surrounded by one Santa Claus, two snowmen and three reindeer.

I'm surprised they didn't insist

on an American Express Gold Card too.

Insane or not, the Plastic Reindeer Rule is now the informal yardstick which all American civic officials apply to any public displays on municipal property at Christmas time -- which means that future generations of Americans will probably grow up believing that the birth in the manger was attended by Rudolph and Frosty the Snowman, not to mention Sneezzy, Grumpy and Pinocchio.

The Supreme Court doesn't even call it Christmas anymore. It refers to it as "the winter holiday season".

It would be hilarious if it wasn't so pathetic. Christmas has already been thoroughly bastardized by the whirl of cash registers and the carny barking of retail hucksters urging us to buy more and ever more.

You'd think there'd be room in some tiny, un-consumerized corner for a simple, non-commercial manger scene or an unpretentious Menorah -- such as Jews have been lighting at Chanukah for more than 2,000 years.

I haven't heard of any legal moves to adopt the Plastic Reindeer Rule on this side of the border, but no doubt it's coming. Canadians have always been eager suckers for sleazier, less palatable U.S. imports.

I think I'll start my Christmas shopping early this year. I'm looking for a figurine to grace next year's "winter holiday" display in the lobby of ACLU headquarters.

A plastic Mickey Mouse.