Mel Hurtig Essay, Research Paper

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Mel Hurtig was a Canadian nationalist with very strong pro-Canada feelings. He felt that our government was selling us out. That our government was simply trying to

turn us into the fifty first state of the United states. In his book At Twighlight in the Country, he shares many of these views. He fought very valiantly against the free trade agreement, speaking out against it whenever possible. Urging government leaders to reconsider what we were giving the United States and what little we would be receiving in return. He also continually spoke out about how our culture continued to disappear and become more like that of the United States. How soon our culture could be undistinguished from our southern neighbors. He completely believed that we simply sold out our country and the politicians should be ashamed.

One of Mel Hurtig’s mentors was George Grant. Foresaw the selling out of Canada and spoke about in his book Lament for a Nation which was published in 1965. He said as Mel quotes him in his own book:

Canada has ceased to be a nation, but its formal political existence will not end quickly. Our social and economic blending into the American empire will continue apace, but political union will probably be delayed. (p. 434)

Grant foresaw what Mel would begin to see and greatly foreshadowed exactly what would happen in Canada. Grant felt that the wealthy, the ruling classes, Liberal party and the elite of Montreal and Toronto, were responsible for selling out of Canada. Mel shared these views and especially later in life the views of the liberal party which he had previously been

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a part of. Later these views carried on to the Mulroney led conservatives who in Mel’s mind finished the selling off of Canada for good. Mulroney had said that he was not even interested in free trade when he was first elected but quickly changed his mind thanks to his good friend American president Ronald Reagon.

Hurtig was furious over the free trade agreement. He could not see any advantage of this agreement. Plus as he pointed out much of the Canadian public opposed such a deal with the Americans. Free trade was never a discussion during elections so the people of Canada never had the chance to decide on the outcome. In a press release Mel pleaded with Canadians to demand a federal election by saying:

If necessary, the liberals and NDP members of the House of Commons must disrupt the business of the house and force an election, as Conservative leader Robert Borden did before defeating Wilfred Laurier in the reciprocity election of 1911. Brian Mulroney has no mandate from the people of Canada to take this unprecedented step. When he campaigned for the leadership role of the Conservative Party he spoke out strongly against free trade. He was not elected to sell out our country … few Canadians understand what the government is doing. This is no free trade agreement this is a giant step towards union with the US… It’s a “leap of faith” into oblivion for Canada. (p. 296)

As Mel himself states many times in this book, Canada’s relationship with the United States is too close and it was only made closer through the signing of this agreement.

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Another of Mel’s friends was Walter Gordon. Walter was a friend of Lester Pearson and when he became Prime Minister, Walter became minister of finance. He believed that the problem with foreign ownership could be solved with a simple measure, a thirty percent takeover tax. He was however forced to remove it from the budget because of the huge uproar it caused from big businesses. Many of which were owned by Americans or had American interests.

Mel believed this was a good idea because he could see that foreign ownership was a big problem. Foreign owned firms has most of Canadians wealth but created a large number less of new jobs for Canadians as opposed to Canadian firms. No wonder there is such a large number of unemployed in Canada when the biggest corporations are producing the fewest jobs. While the majority of funds donated to a political party come from these companies it’s no wonder that changes are not made. If changes were made then these companies would pull their contributions and the parties would not have any funds.

It’s hard to understand how the government can be so naive, especially when most economists and reporters could see what was happening. In the Ottawa Citizen, an editorial called “Mortgaging Our Future”, states:

The truthfulness of the American ambassador to Canada, which Mel Hurtig of the Committee for an Independent Canada says is open to question, is not as important as the federal government’s response to the continuing problem of foreign investment.

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The Trudeau government has not come to realize what a threat the continued influx of such capital is to the country. In fact, the government is a willing participant in the process of mortgaging Canada’s future. It has been a fundamental tenant of liberal policy since the days of C.D. Howe that Canada’s road to prosperity lay in opening the country to unlimited foreign investment. Canadians sold to willing buyers. It’s not the Americans who are to blame, but the Liberal governments and Canadian businessmen.

The decision of United states’ multinational corporations could now bankrupt Canada. A renewal of economic difficulties in the US could force plant closings here. Canadian markets could dry up. The house of cards could crash.

It makes you wonder how with George Grant’s predictions in the 1960’s and this prediction in the 1970’s, how Canada could agree to the free trade agreement with the United States and then the North American Free Trade Agreement.

Today our culture is almost identical to that of or southern neighbors. We watch their television, listen to their music and buy virtually all the same brand names and products. America has not declared war on us and yet they are slowly taking over us through their vast amount of influence. By simply threatening us with removing some industry or some benefit our government will do whatever the US wants us to. It’s not that Canada is becoming the fifty first state, Canada is becoming slave labor under the hand of an evil tyrant the United States of America.

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Mel Hurtig’s first experience with politics came while he was beginning to open his bookstore. Many people in Alberta were unable to buy books except in department stores. Mel found this to be quite a difficult experience so he decided to open his own bookstore. In the beginning he was amazed that very few publishers actually published books by or about Canadians. He was also disturbed that unlike the United States, books by authors from different cultures were not produced here in Canada. These books were simply shipped here.

Mel’s bookstore Hurtig books became a great success. He created a relaxed atmosphere where people could come in relax, have a cup of coffee, read a book or talk to friends. Mel tried to work up at the front quite often and he was able to meet many interesting and friendly people. Many of them were politicians or Canadian nationalists. Many of these people became Mel’s good friends and help him in his other endeavors later on in life.

After a while Mel began to publish books. As a publisher he began to publish Canadian books. He became a great success at this because the market was wide open for this because of the lack of interest in publishing books by or about Canadians. Mel changed the market and for the first time people were able to learn about Canada from the perspective of Canadians. He created mainly non-fiction books and they were about Canada and Canadian interests. His biggest project was the biggest publishing project ever The Canadian Encyclopedia.

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This project created a lot of excitement across Canada for obvious reasons. This was the first time that such an endeavor had ever taken place. This encyclopedia was to contain information about Canada, Canadian culture and other various topics. But most importantly it was to be from the perspective of Canadians.

Despite various offers to buy the project and different finance problems of almost every kind the encyclopedia was a great success. Every Library and school across the country wanted a copy proving that Canadians truly do love their country and have an interest in learning as much as possible about this great country. A short while later Mel decided to print an updated version and to place the encyclopedia on cd rom, both great ideas. Unfortunately his Junior Encyclopedia of Canada did not do so well but those who did read it were both pleased and excited.

The reviews were amazing for the Canadian encyclopedia, the Globe and Mail stated:

Mel Hurtig and company have captured a nation in a nutshell. A reader quickly gets the feeling this is an encyclopedia one can trust. It covers just about every conceivable aspect – and some inconceivable ones – of Canada and Canadians, past and present. The slipcase should carry a warning that those who enter here do so at their own risk; they may disappear for days, and search parties may be required. (p. 221)

This was just one of the many enthusiastic responses he receive. In a letter from Pierre Berton he stated:

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I cannot control my enthusiasm for the Canadian Encyclopedia, a copy of which I now have thanks to you. It’s an absolutely first-rate work and the best thing I can tell you about it is that in the first three days that it’s been in my office I’ve used it about a dozen times. I think you ought to be congratulated for you dedication and hard work. I have a nodding idea of much this must have taken out of you.

(p. 221)

This type of praise shows just how much dedication and love for Canada Mel has. He always tries to do what is best for Canada.

Mel Hurtig was a Canadian nationalist and as such he saw the problems the government was having in regards to making policies that benefit Canada as a whole. So Mel joined the Liberal party in the hope that he may be able to make a difference. In the prairies the Liberals were right wingers and Mel was getting fed up with them and in an article in the Toronto Star he wrote:

The Liberal on the Prairies, for the most part, are not liberals at all, nor even Liberals. No real alternatives for the voters, but simply more Conservatives under another name. Most of them have failed to fight for Medicare, failed to interpret government polices to their constituents and failed to think and act in terms of the national interest.

Pierre Trudeau’s inability to democratize the structure of the Liberal party is his single most significant failure since his election. (p. 58)

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While he was running for office he came out against Pierre Trudeau often. Prompting Trudeau to call him a pain in his side. This gave Mel a boost in the ratings. However because many people in his riding simply could not vote Liberal because of it’s leader Mel lost. After a little more time with the party Mel decided to leave because of differences in opinion between him and the party leaders.

Mel was also very involve in nationalist pressure groups. The first he served with was The Committee for an Independent Canada or the CIC. Walter Gordon was the first honary chairman and he intended to focus on one major issue, a tough screening agency whose impact would be to stem the growth of foreign ownership. Mel had hopes that it would become a broad-based nonpartisan patriotic organization. Meaning he hoped that people from many different political parties and backgrounds would get together and work for a common goal. Eventually Mel was elected chairman and later on he became honary chair, but like most things it could not last forever and they had to disband paving the way for the COC.

The Council of Canadians, was an idea of Mel’s. He wanted to put together a pressure group to help oppose free trade. The COC was very successful in opening the publics eye’s as to what this new agreement meant to common Canadians. They also supported arctic sovereignty, especially when the United States began sending ships through the arctic straight without permission. They also supported that Canada work for the United Nations and help support weaker countries that need help or to work as peacekeepers.

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The COC put an emphasis on supporting Canadian businesses and stopping foreign ownership that would surely happen after the free trade agreement was signed. Besides opening the public to what the government was truly doing the COC was still fairly unsuccessful causing Mel to consider starting his own political party the Nationalist Party of Canada.

The Nationalist party was a good idea but it failed because of an political infighting. The party was formed and ran for office after just eleven months in existence. After a successful first campaign political infighting with a rival forced Mel to disband the party. The ideology behind the party was quite good with their nationalist policies and their wish to end NAFTA and focus more on Canadian interests.

Mel Hurtig was a nationalist who was not afraid to speak his mind and to fight for what he believes in. Mel was not afraid to stand up against people, like Prime Ministers, when he knew he was right. By standing up for what he believed and for what was right for Canada Mel Hurtig is a Canadian hero who should be in charge of running Canada.

Mel Hurtig: At Twighlight in the Country

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