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Circles of Power: The Canadian Elite

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Traditional readings of nineteenth century Canadian history are rich with tales of robber barons, financiers and politicians who combined their predatory talents, often without regard to the appearance of impropriety, in the building of industry and empire. From the creation of utility monopolies to the building of the transcontinental railway, specific constellations of social forces combined to create a unique vision of Canada. The foundation of the country's mercantile system in the nineteenth century, for instance, rested on an alliance between the merchants, the colonial ruling class, the Church and the land-owning elite. The Family Compact of Upper Canada¹ and the Clique du Château of Lower Canada involved the co-operation and collusion of the provinces' top families in the regions' political and economic endeavours (Clement, 1975: 50). While the actions of such an elite have not been denied, there is a popular notion in Canada that we have managed to escape both the rigid class structure of Britain and the class and racially based inequality of the United States. Neither the wrenching poverty of many areas of the country nor the excesses of the nation's affluent seems to indicate to many Canadians that we have anything but a "middle class". The paucity of studies conducted of Canada's elite seems to confirm this popular mythology. The Family Compact may have disintegrated in the 1900s, but the model it provided for a cohesive

circle of control has apparently prevailed throughout the latter portion of the twentieth century. Since the 1970s, Canadian capitalists have not only increased their centralization and concentration of assets, through a series of takeovers and mergers, but they have also rearranged the links between capital formations and created new sets of coalitions. This study will attempt to identify some members of Canada's elite, their role in the global political economy and the ties that bind them – economically, socially and ideologically.

Perhaps the earliest and most systematic investigation of the Canadian elite was John Porter's *Vertical Mosaic*, which tried to determine the association between social stratification and background, education, ethnicity, etc. While Porter attempted to paint a fairly comprehensive picture of Canada's elite by using a number of variables, he was nonetheless working within a pluralist tradition. Wallace Clement, following in the footsteps of Porter in the 1970s, began to investigate the growing transcontinental influence of the United States on the Canadian economy and the formation of a comprador elite in Canada. While there has been some work in the 1980s that investigates the concentration of capital in Canada and the degree of corporate interlock between Canadian and American corporations, there has been very little research on the nature of Canada's elite in an era of increased globalization. Segments of the elite have always been global to some degree, but Canada's elite has become much more globalized than the early literature would suggest. Canadian banks, utilities and mining companies have had a long and lucrative history in

the Caribbean and South America. In addition, there has been Canadian representation on the boards of powerful, multinational companies and on the advisory panels of international policy-making organizations. Instead of viewing Canada's dominant corporations and corporate elite as captive agents at the mercy of foreign multinationals we should view them as members of a global elite that both respond to, and act upon the global economy. Such a re-examination of the nuances of power, both political and economic, will be paramount in understanding who rules in this country, and how it is done.

In order to more fully understand the power that is exercised by members of Canada's influential inner circles, we must shift the debate from the pluralist model of the 1950s and 1960s and adopt a neo-Gramscian approach. Such an approach would free us from the assumptions associated with the "captive bourgeoisie" thesis and provide us with an understanding of how power is constituted and exercised. In addition, it would also allow us to examine how ideas are transmitted, and identify the key carriers or "organic intellectuals" of this transmission. It is useful here to employ a Gramscian notion of hegemony, which is a historically constructed organization of consent, with particular attention to the "organic intellectual". According to Gramsci (1971: 3,5-6,12) hegemony is exercised by the dominant group in civil society, creating what he termed "spontaneous consent", while the state exerts direct domination over those who do not consent either actively or passively. So while consent is in some sense consensual, it does rest

upon the organized violence and coercive capacities of the state. The role of the organic intellectual in this hegemony is to act as a "deputy" or "organizer" of the dominant group, creating conditions favourable to the expansion of that particular class. Unlike the "traditional" intellectuals of literature or science, the organic intellectuals direct the ideas and aspirations of the class to which they belong, thereby creating the "thinking and organizing element of a particular fundamental social class". Hegemony thus occurs when the interests of the leading class become harmonized with other classes and incorporated into an ideology that becomes expressed in universal terms. By portraying the interests of the ruling class in universalist terms there is some incorporation of the aspirations of the "sub-groups", while the interests of the hegemonic class are not themselves undermined.

Gramsci's analysis not only helps us explain the formation of national hegemony, but it can be taken further to explain an order within the world economy. The hegemony that exists on a national level under the aegis of ruling class interests can be articulated across national boundaries to form transnational alliances. The actions of policy makers and industry leaders do not exist in a vacuum, but rather, they operate within a global policy-making and consensus-forming milieu. According to Cox (1993: 49-66), a transnational consensus can occur through the transmission of guidelines to policy-making channels of governments and large corporations through forums such as the Trilateral Commission, Bilderberg, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, and the G7 Summits. These gatherings shape the

discourse within which policies are defined and it is through their interaction with national organizations and elites that ideas become filtered from the global to the national. It is not merely a singular line of transmission that occurs in the process, as it is more like a network or a web of interactions that link policy-making from country to country.

While various members of Canada's elite serve in national organizations and forums, one may question how a consensus is formed and how this consensus then affects a state's goals or policies. As agents of transmission in the medium of globalization, leaders of Canada's elite constitute an important link to members of their own class at home, as well as to a global network of elites. It is through this elite interaction and resulting consensus formation that the state adjusts its national strategy to the exigencies of the global economy, thereby acting as a "transmission belt" of ideas, and ultimately, of policy directives. Our first task, however, is to identify some members of Canada's "circle of power" and to determine how the links of the circle are formed.

What is it that distinguishes the ruling class in Canada, and what characteristics do its members share? While crude indicators of wealth may provide instant and discrete categorizations we must examine the social and ideological factors involved in this cohesion. It is more than economic circumstance that forges ties between individuals of a particular socio-economic class, but rather, a shared vision of the world that very often comes from having similar backgrounds and experiences. Shared experiences alone do not guarantee that members of a

particular class will have identical beliefs or aspirations, but they do make individuals more readily accept a set of values or understandings of the world. One institution that is perhaps the most crucial in developing and instilling these shared understandings is the education system, and more specifically, private school. Not only is private school essential in disseminating a set of ideas and beliefs among a particular elite milieu, but it also provides an environment in which the elite can reproduce itself. Moulding generations of young men and women according to the tenets of the Establishment ensures a certain degree of continuity and the persistence of upper class values and beliefs. According to Clement (1975: 244), by excluding "outsiders" with administrative policies or fees, private schools can "create in the young of the upper class a consciousness of a kind, transmitting traditions over several generations". Attending "dad's", and to a lesser extent "mom's", old school is also a "form of inheritance" that helps preserve the continuity of the elite.

North American studies that investigate the degree to which private schools form the early breeding ground for "old boy's networks" have often focused on American prep schools or ivy league universities, with scant attention to the schools of Canada's upper echelon and their own "old boys". While purporting to offer a superior education many schools within Canada's private education system, and within other former British colonies, may also be distinguished by their connection to English schools – models upon which they were founded. An example of this was the creation of Upper Canada College in Toronto (UCC), one of the dominant private institutions in English

Canada. According to Fitzgerald (1994: xvii) UCC, established in the days of the Family Compact, was created to produce "an educated, governing elite to counteract the subversive democratic and republican influences of the United States". Through the indoctrination of its graduates with "character-building" attributes, private school serves as an important arena of recruitment as well as for the development of acquaintances and future contacts – the "old boy's network". A cursory glance at a list of UCC alumni reads like a "who's who" of Canada's elite, with names from politics, the private sector and the arts.² Indeed, many of its graduates formed partnerships that lasted long after their school days ended. Douglas Bassett and Frederick Eaton, both alumni of UCC, roomed together at the University of New Brunswick. The Eatons own controlling interest of Baton Broadcasting, of which Bassett is CEO (Fleming, 1991: 289). According to John Fraser, connections formed at private school, much like the Eaton-Bassett alliance, are somehow more influential than those forged elsewhere. He asserts that the UCC experience gave him:

The best things private schools have to offer, which is confidence. It gives you contacts and it gives you confidence, and I don't say that state schools can't do that either, but there is such a natural unconscious aura that you're at the top of the heap.³

According to many graduates of private schools there is nothing conspiratorial about these connections. An informal network of friendships and contacts seems altogether natural to a group of individuals who share the

same vision, value system and belief that they are they "top of the heap".

While the studies cited point to the number of elite in private schools, their emphasis has been on male graduates with very little mention of women, private education and their place among Canada's elite. In the recollections of numerous UCC "old boys" collected by Fitzgerald (1994: 165), they very often remembered their female counterparts at Bishop Strachan and Havergal only in relation to some "furtive explorations" at school dances.⁴ The institution of patriarchy played an enormous role in the formation and preservation of these elite institutions where women largely served as servants or as objects of pleasure. Even though private girls' schools do exist they have generally had to survive with fewer dollars and a lower standard of facilities. According to Maxwell and Maxwell (1995: 339-340), the elite have historically been less willing to finance private female education in Canada, due in part perhaps, to the expected and generally accepted role of women within the elite: as supportive spouses; as volunteers in philanthropic endeavours, or as proprietors and coordinators of the social events of the elite.⁵

While the connections formed in private school represent an important breeding ground for future ties, private clubs form another important link in the inner circle. It is at various "Bohemian Groves" that figures from all facets of politics, industry and the media come together to form useful and even lucrative associations.⁶ According to Clement (1977: 242-244), three-fifths of Canada's economic elite belong to one or more of the following

seven clubs: the National, York, and Toronto Clubs of Toronto; the Mount Royal and the St. James Clubs of Montreal, the Vancouver Club of Vancouver and the Rideau Club of Ottawa. Twelve per cent of the Canadian elite also has US club memberships – one of the most prestigious being the Links Club of New York. Initiation fees are in the range of \$10,000 with yearly fees of about \$1000 – 2000. In addition to the prohibitive costs, the clubs keep their circles closed to outsiders with restrictive membership policies. To ensure that potential newcomers will "fit in", they must be sponsored by long-standing members and be voted in by each existing member (Fleming, 1991: 243-244). The number of votes needed for acceptance varies from club to club. At the Toronto Club, for instance, one negative vote means a rejection of the aspiring member. This "blackball" system keeps out the "undesirables" and most club applications are also worded to allow "even the sponsors of candidates to downgrade their choices". Members are subtly reminded that their first duty is to the maintenance of club integrity (Newman, 1977: 455).

The clubs are also restrictive in the sense that most are open to men only and there is still anti-Semitism and anti-ethnic sentiment internalized on the part of some of the older club members. While official policy may not discriminate, except in the case of women, the "blackball" system makes it difficult to prove that membership refusals originate from any existing bias. While Newman (1977: 456,461) asserts that the "club game" has become "outdated and slightly ridiculous", likening its members to "dinosaurs," private clubs provide more than the comfort of

leather chairs and fine Port. They are an integral component of a system of elite interaction that involves a series of contact environments, often first initiated at private school. The bond formed at private school and then nurtured in social settings like the private club or the golf course allows members of the elite to make alliances with other like-minded individuals, thereby providing a forum for the dissemination of ideas. Despite Newman's prediction that private clubs would be rendered irrelevant as younger members of the Establishment balk at the conservative and moldering lairs of their fathers, the allure of private clubs appears to be growing. According to a recent article in the *Globe and Mail* (May 6, 2000), young people in their 20s and early 30s, with robust disposable incomes, have returned to the clubs in droves. The young scions apparently view club memberships as "an investment in the future" – an insurance policy of sorts for their anticipated acceptance into the gilded society of the *haut monde*.

The tendency of "like-minded" individuals to seek each others' companionship and counsel has implications beyond the schoolyard or the private club, however, resulting in a small circle of elite interaction that leaves little room for interlopers. A study of economic power in Canada provides some empirical evidence that a large proportion of the country's wealth is held in surprisingly few hands. One way that this increased concentration has manifested itself is through the prevalence of Enterprise groups. These are sets of firms that are unified through the ownership of large blocs of shares, as well as through the sharing of top personnel in directorships. In addition to

myriad directorship intermingling, there is evidence of a much more narrow and direct form of capital concentration in the form of family control. According to Carroll (1989: 96-97) there appears to be a re-personalization of capital through the power exerted by family wealth in Canada. A 1998 *Financial Post* Survey ranked the top 500 Canadian companies in terms of revenues, assets and net income. Of the top 50 companies, 16 were subsidiaries of a foreign corporation, while another 16 were family owned or part of a conglomerate that had majority family ownership. An interesting aspect of this survey is that some families appear more than once in various permutations. Seagram, Noranda and the EderBrascan Corp., for instance, appear in the top 50, but they are all holding companies of the Bronfman family. Thomson Corporation, the Bay and the Woodbridge Corporation also appear on the list, but they too are part of one conglomerate – the Thomson publishing empire of Kenneth Thomson.⁷ Canadian families dynasties wholly or partly own 16 of the top 50 corporations, but the number of families that owns these assets is much smaller.

While elite interaction, the inculcation of particular values and the dissemination of ideas can occur in an institutional fashion, with private education and industry directorships, or at the social level, in the manner of private clubs, it can also occur at a much broader national level through organizations or think tanks. One of the most influential organizations in Canada is the Business Council on National Issues (BCNI), which was formed in 1976 by corporate leaders to combat what they perceived to be too much government intervention. According to

Langille (1987: 45, 50), the BCNI is a forum for multinational capital under the leadership of finance capital as the hegemonic fraction. This fraction includes chartered banks and companies involved in resources and primary manufacturing. The BCNI thus represents an updated version of the historic "staples" fraction that signified the alliance between finance and resource capital in Canada. Members include 150 CEOs from some of the largest multinational companies in Canada. Together these companies have assets of \$1.5 trillion, earn revenues of \$400 billion and employ about 1.3 million workers. In a listing of the country's top CEOs, 18 out of 25 are members of the BCNI's policy council. Members include the CEOs of GM Canada, the Royal Bank, CIBC, Northern Telecom, Imperial Oil, Alcan, Imasco, Noranda and Canadian Pacific (Clark, 1997: 34, 249). According to Langille (1987: 70-73), the BCNI has proven to be more effective than its US counterparts in realizing its policy goals because power is much more concentrated in Canada, both in business and in the state. The organization is able to collect large sums of money and it can easily disseminate its ideas and policy recommendations to a few key people who have the power to affect policy. In addition, the group has been very successful in advocating its position to the public through the media.

While organizations such as the BCNI lobby the national government to enact policy changes, members of Canada's elite also interact with other elites through various international forums and organizations. There are a number of important organizations that serve as

"transmission" belts for the circulation of ideas and for elite consensus. One of the largest is the Trilateral Commission, founded in 1973 by David Rockefeller. Several Canadian members of the commission include: Allan E. Gottlieb, former Ambassador to the United States; Paul Desmarais of Power Corp.;⁸ Senator Trevor Eyton and media mogul Conrad Black. In addition to his Trilateral affiliations, Black is a permanent member of the Bilderberg Group. The press baron played host to the Group in 1996 at the King Ranch in Toronto, amidst tight security – necessary, according to Black to "allow leading citizens to speak their minds openly and freely" (Siklos, 1996: 408). Some of the notables reported to have supped at the ultra-exclusive table were: Prime Minister Chrétien; wealthy industrialists and philanthropists David Rockefeller and George Soros; and former US Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger.⁹

While various members of Canada's elite serve in national and international policy-making forums or think tanks, one may question how a consensus is formed and how this consensus then affects a state's goals or policies. An example of the power of the global transmission belt became apparent in the 1980s. Canada's elite played a crucial role as the growth of monetarism prevailed over the consensus previously formed around "corporate liberalism" and Fordism.¹⁰ In Canada this monetarist perspective was advocated by the central bank, under the leadership of John Crow, following the lead of the US Federal Reserve and the central banks of other OECD countries.¹¹ The transmission of global neo-liberalism also became prevalent as various factions called for deficit

reduction, greater privatization and reduced government spending. Organizations such as the BCNI and the C.D. Howe Institute were actively pressuring the government to reduce its deficits and lower its spending to provide a more stable environment for transnational investment and ensure "investor security".¹² In addition, many of the country's main media sources were united in their nightly pronouncements on the issue – endlessly giving dire predictions about what a loss of "investor confidence" would mean for the Canadian economy and for the living standards of its citizens. In an interesting twist, Canadian investors from Bay Street had been "hounding" Moody's senior Canada analyst to "downgrade Ottawa's credit rating as a means of applying pressure for more aggressive action on the deficit". According to the Moody's analyst, Canada is the only country where "nationals... want the country downgraded even more – on a regular basis" (Clarke, 1997: 119).

Despite the amount of scholarship on many aspects of Canada's political, social and economic landscape in the post-war era, we have surprisingly little information on the Canadian elite. The information we do have falls under several crude categories of ownership, assets and directorships. While we can generally distinguish the "very rich from the merely rich", we know very little about them as a group, or indeed as a class (Newman, 1977: 3). This is even more pronounced in terms of the family wealth in Canada, which seems firmly ensconced in only a few hands. In fact, according to the data provided, the concentration and centralization of capital, family-owned and otherwise, are increasing, particularly with a series of

company takeovers and mergers in the 1990s. This is not an isolated phenomenon, however, but can be viewed as part of a global trend as states push for increased privatization and deregulation. Further research is needed on the increasing concentration of capital in Canada and the creation of new coalitions of power – both economic and political – particularly as the effects of globalization continue to transform the economy. New political forces and actors emerging from the West may cause a re-alignment of party politics, especially in central Canada. As the spectacle of the Reform Party's transmutation continues, the Alliance is finding support in some seemingly unlikely segments of the elite – historically, staunch supporters of the Conservative Party.¹³ The political landscape is not the only recipient of change. The affluent denizens of the Vancouver and Petroleum Clubs have historically relied upon resource wealth to fuel their coffers, but new sources of capital are beginning to emerge. Vancouver's high-tech industry, for instance, is growing ten times as fast as the province's economy, and "New Titans" are finding profit and influence in "cyberspace and cybermoney" (Newman, 1997: 530). This re-alignment of politics and a movement away from traditional sources of wealth will undoubtedly cause a shift in the traditional coalitions of power and create new "circles of elites". A neo-Gramscian approach becomes even more relevant as we try to identify these "New Titans" and their hegemonic role both nationally and globally.

While investigating the role of Canada's elite in the economy, it is important to determine how elite interaction

functions and how ideas become disseminated. On a social basis the private club serves as an environment of elite interaction where contacts are forged and ideas discussed. Another more important forum of elite reproduction and interaction, however, is the private school. Not only is private education crucial in the inculcation of the values and mores of the elite, but it also serves as a breeding ground for future "inner circle" connections. While there have been a few studies of Canadian boys' schools, it would be useful to examine the girls' school, or ones that have become co-ed to determine how, or if the process of elite interaction differs. Are women of the elite part of the consensus formation, or are they "institutionally invisible" (Maxwell and Maxwell, 1994: 141), simply acting as social conveners for the Establishment?

In determining the role of Canada's elite nationally and globally it is important to understand the notion of hegemony and how it operates transnationally. To determine how common concepts, ideological frameworks and the range of possibilities are established we need to know how Canada's elite functions in the global "transmission belt". In order to do so it would be useful to examine some key figures of the "organic intellectuals" in more detail. One such figure is Conrad Black, who has ties to both the Trilateral Commission and the Bilderberg Group. He is also of some interest because of his virtual monopoly of print news in Canada and his holdings in Britain, both of which provide him with a considerable platform from which to disseminate ideas. Another interesting individual is Paul Desmarais – not only for his

vast holdings in Canada, but also for his numerous political alliances.¹⁴

While this examination has focused on a discrete group of individuals designated as an "elite" by their economic status, Canada's elite encompasses a much wider range of individuals than those that can be identified simply with assets and balance sheets. A much broader definition of the elite, including the political, cultural and media elite would have to be employed for a much more comprehensive examination. Another concern of course is the definition of the Canadian elite. While perhaps "Canadian" in nationality, it is important to consider to what degree this global elite is not grounded to any nation in particular, but rather, to the perpetuation of global capitalism. The question remains as to whether there is anything distinctly Canadian about this elite or whether the exigencies of the global economy have changed them from an "ersatz British" or American elite to part of a larger, more faceless global elite.

Endnotes

¹ Presumably the object of the acronym FOOF – Fine Old Ontario Families.

² A few well-known UCC graduates include: Ted Rogers (Rogers AT&T Communications), Hal Jackman (Former Lieutenant-Governor of Ontario), Michael Wilson (Former Progressive Conservative Minister of Finance), John Eaton (Eaton's), Douglas Bassett (Baton Broadcasting, CTV Network), Conrad Black (Hollinger Inc.), and David Thomson (Thomson Communication).

³ Cited in Fleming, 1991: 314. It is interesting to note that Fraser flunked out of UCC the same year that Conrad Black was

expelled for stealing exams. Fraser was hired as editor of Saturday Night Magazine in 1987, after the magazine was purchased by Black. See Siklos, 1996: 173-177.

⁴ According to one Ridley College alumnus, Havergal was known to the boys as "Have-a-Girl". (Ridley, established as a private boys school in St. Catharines in 1889, eventually went co-ed in the mid 1970s. The school's motto? Terrar Dum Prosim – May I be consumed in service). Private correspondence.

⁵ The doyenne of Toronto's "Glitter Girls" is Anna Maria de Souza, founder of Canada's most prominent charity event – the Brazilian Ball - and one-time companion of Conrad Black.

⁶ See William G. Domhoff, *The Bohemian Grove and Other Retreats*. Members and guests of the exclusive San Francisco Bohemian Grove include entertainers, captains of industry and former U.S. presidents.

⁷ Of the world's 100 largest economies, 51 are corporations – 3 are Canadian: Thomson, Seagram and Nortel. In a 1999 Canadian Business issue on Canada's "Rich 100", Thomson was rated the richest person in Canada, with a net worth of \$20.97 billion.

⁸ Paul Desmarais' son, André is Prime Minister Chrétien's son-in-law. The senior Desmarais is also close to Finance Minister Paul Martin, who ran Canada Steamship Lines (CSL) at Power Corp. Martin eventually purchased CSL from Mr. Desmarais – the \$195 million price tag made more manageable by a bank note signed by Desmarais himself.

⁹ The group takes its name from a resort hotel in Holland where the first meeting was held in 1954. The site of the 1996 conference, dubbed the "Bohemian Grove of Canada", was the CIBC Leadership Centre in King City, Ontario. The 1999 conference was held in Portugal, and the participants included: Lord-in-Waiting Conrad Black (his British peerage denied), former Canadian Defense Chief of Staff, John de Chastelain; Scotiabank CEO, Peter Godsoe; former head of TVO Peter Herndorf; and former Minister of Trade Roy McLaren. US President Bill Clinton

is expected to attend the Conference this year in Bern, Switzerland.

¹⁰ See Kees van der Pijl, *The Making of the Atlantic Ruling Class*, for an explanation of the postwar consensus on Keynesian and Fordist policies in the West under the rubric of US hegemony. Corporate Liberalism entailed the subordination of bank capital to state supported finance capital – the pursuit of which fostered transatlantic class cohesion.

¹¹ According to Linda McQuaig (1995: 230), after an IMF meeting and discussions with German central bankers, Paul Volcker, Chair of the US Federal Reserve, "emboldened by German anti-inflationists", tried monetarism in the US.

¹² The C.D. Howe Institute was a key player in the fight against inflation and lowering the debt. Its membership represents wealthy individuals, investment and brokerage houses etc., whose main concern is the way inflation erodes the value of financial holdings.

¹³ According to the *Globe and Mail* (May 13, 2000), the "New" Reform Alliance is receiving some support from Establishment stalwarts such as Henry Jackman and Fredrik Eaton.

¹⁴ Brian Mulroney was responsible for appointing both Black and Desmarais to the Queen's Privy Council – a post usually reserved for cabinet ministers and Governor Generals. Among Mr. Mulroney's numerous directorships following political retirement is one at Power Corp.

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