

● INSIDE POLITICS

The Perils Of Political Puffing

IN THE QUIET of Canadian literature, the practise of "puffing" has been debated for decades.

Puffing is the over-kindly treatment of a Canadian author. Puffers argue that it is justified because Canadian letters as an endeavor is young and immature; therefore, it is unfair to apply big league standards of literary criticism to Canadian writers. Give them a chance; encourage them; their development will lead on to a vigorous literature, in time. Meanwhile, we can always read Hemingway and Faulkner and Joyce.

Should we cut out the puffing? Do we need more acidulous bite in appraisal and judgement in all fields?

THE QUESTIONS came to me Wednesday afternoon, when, with pathos, the last of Walter Gordon's Budget legislation crept out of the Commons.

There was a wistful gratitude in the Minister's voice as he thanked a bored and sparse House for its help. He was humble and earnest and so different from the crisp, assured lion of the business and political world who read aggressively through that bristling Budget address on June 13th. Humpty Dumpty had his great fall.

It seems to me that Walter Gordon was the most gross example of the perils and unfairness of political puffing — an even stronger characteristic of politics in Canada than it is of either literature or drama.

Last year it was Wallace McCutcheon, before that George Hees, before that John Diefenbaker. Lester Pearson has been puffed for a generation. Now the winds are starting to balloon Mitchell Sharp and Guy Favreau and John Deutch. The need for larger than life heroes in politics seems insatiable.

A few days ago an American reporter who has been following Canadian affairs for years told me that the worst thing he had found in Canadian politics was the over-buildup of our politicians. The key example was Lester Pearson.

HE WAS OUR FIRST diplomat to move on the world level. Our bursting national pride led our journalists and politicians to elevate him to the status of demi-god without any real analysis of his abilities. He was good as a foreign secretary; therefore he was a great man.

In the U.S., he argued, the pace is so tough, the scrutiny so severe, that a man like Pearson would have been toughened and smartened—or wiped out. Canadians hate to look

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By **DOUGLAS FISHER, MP**

closely at their heroes; then, when they are forced to by disasters, they wing away. They drop the deflated man. They search for, and find, somebody else to puff.

Walter Gordon is not only a decent man, he is a very honest one. During his recent travail, just a little subterfuge, some small rearrangement of facts, would have moved him off the hook. Some people say he lacked deftness and political adroitness. He does, but having them might make him really odious.

The point is that his honesty was crippled by other lacks. He is not a great economist, either theoretical or pragmatic. He is not a great businessman administrator, sure of his details, adept at assigning duties, co-relating data, and managing experts.

We thought he was, as a nation, because he had been built up, he had let himself be built up, by his party and its newspaper supporters (particularly the Grit Toronto daily) until he was the symbol of the all-wise. God help him, he had even written a book. No one examined it seriously, probed its arguments and facts, or pressed its author. It was like taking a pamphleteer and making him a Shakespeare.

GORDON BECAME an inflated myth; this decent, well-intentioned, chartered accountant who had inherited a business and carried it on, sheltered and respected. Now that the myth is burst, he is such an embarrassment that many in his own party would like to sweep him under a rug.

I doubt that he will be retained long, what with all the puffing Sharp and Favreau are getting. Each looks good, each is clear, restrained, concise, and informed on his responsibilities. But neither has had the crisis situation, the pressure, or the test of time.

Earlier I mentioned John Deutch.

He is a former civil servant, an economist, who is No. 2 man at Queen's University. The story is that he is to head the new Economic Council.

Deutch is a brilliant administrator, an eminently sensible man. He may do a fine job. If he takes it he will become the focus of most economic discussion in our country. Already the inflation is under way, to make him a superman economist.

Unfortunately, he is not this and cannot hope to be this. But we'll huff and we'll puff until he resembles a bloated blend of the late C. D. Howe, E. P. Taylor and Walter Gordon. About five years later, after many disappointments, some critics will get around to reading his pre-puff, economic articles and discover what a cautious, conservative, almost trite economist he is.

IT'S NOT SO MUCH that we need balloon-prickers, as I believe Walter Gordon would agree; what we need is less unrestrained vim at inflating the balloon.

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