

TORONTO

TELY

Autopsy on a newspaper

OTTAWA — Some readers have asked me why I have not written about the closing of The Telegram.

A few have taken my silence as self-imposed because of embarrassment as a strong trade unionist at what the intransigence of the guild has wrought — that is the snuffing out of the paper. These critics acclaim Dennis Braithwaite, Lubor Zink and Peter Worthington for their forthrightness about union responsibility.

Others have written or told me that I lack the guts to take John Bassett apart for his grab at a multi-million pot without regard for the security of over a thousand employees.

Several correspondents seem to think there is an "inside" plot which pre-determined the closure and that I must know about it.

I have heard explanations galore. Many bitter employees think of Mr. Bassett as a callous villain, in league with that hypocritical advocate of anti-combines legislation over at the Star. Almost as many stories, fiercely believed, put the blame on stupid and-or erratic labor leaders, particularly in the Toronto guild.

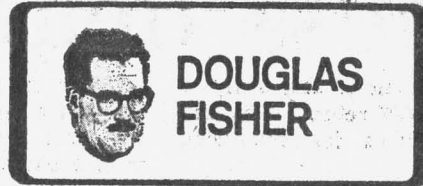
Some employees, most of them veterans on the editorial side, cite an easy-going executive leadership below the publisher. Too many provided automatic affirmatives for the publisher. Too sycophantic.

Occasionally some stoical believer in economic determinism has outlined the inevitability of the closing. Note the long-run trend to press monopoly all over the western world. The bigger swallows the smaller, all to the inexorable imperative that the highest possible profit must flow from the capital invested.

The prime reason for my reticence until now is simple. I am not a Telegram employee. I have not drawn most of my income from the paper. I have been on the periphery of its operations, working in Ottawa. I did not come up through the paper (or any other paper) as a reporter. Thus I have not shared fully in the deep comradeship and the sense of belonging of the true Tely loyalist. Disappointment at what the closing means to me is dwarfed by the shock and the insecurity which fell on hundreds to whom the Tely means a living, a calling and the future.

A second reason for my hesitance to sound off lies in the relationship I have had as a political columnist with the publisher.

I began to write for The Telegram in 1962 when I was an NDP member of Parliament. I was certain then, certain now with hindsight, that John Bassett was the only publisher of a large daily in Canada who would have given me a platform. There was never a formal contract, just an under-



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standing made in conversation that I could write what I wished. The only editing would be for syntax or in apprehension of libel. The publisher could kill a column if it outraged him. If he did I would still be paid for it. Only one was killed — in 1962. It became routine that I had absolute freedom of expression from the paper, whatever my own timidity.

While the temptations were great to explode last month over the purchase for \$10 million by the Toronto Star of the Tely subscription list, the fair treatment I had always had from the publisher deserved more than my distant outrage.

Last week I got the story as Mr. Bassett tells it. It wasn't very satisfying in that it revealed nothing new.

I asked the publisher if he appreciated that until he goes to the grave there will be a keen public feeling of antagonism to him in Toronto simply because so many careers had been arrested or diverted by his decision whereas he had ascended to an even

higher level of wealth. He knew that. He didn't relish widespread public dislike but, as he phrased it: "Believe me — my conscience is clear. There was nothing more I could do. No other reasonable alternative."

I suggested to him that I had sensed some time ago that he had lost interest in the newspaper side of publishing, that other enthusiasms had overlaid the zest he used to put in the task. He said that I was wrong, that there had never been and wouldn't be anything he wanted to do so much as to put out a good, influential daily. He was damned proud of the Tely's quality. It was not a shortfall in quality that had brought the paper to grief. The competitive picture had worsened despite many innovative improvements — Everything had telescoped into a crisis with the downturn in the economy and in advertising, and with union demands and union insensitivity to the paper's financial position.

I argued with Mr. Bassett that he had not really tested the willingness of his employees to compromise. I believed that the union leadership was sure until Sept. 18th that it had time to make compromises, that the membership would have responded gallantly, not grudgingly, to the reality if it had really understood that termination stood smack ahead.

"What more could I have done? They saw the books. You know trade unions. Don't the leaders speak for the membership? They had the warning advice of their own auditors."

On the union side of any autopsy, it seems clear to me that the leaders were unconvinced that time was running out for The Telegram. This failure of understanding has had terrible consequences for hundreds of families. One wishes Mr. Bassett had tried again and again to bring the crisis home to the employees.

It makes a nice, traditional cut-off to say that posterity shall judge who was right or wrong, culpable or irresponsible, in the demise of The Telegram. Save us from such a platitude. In time, the sorrow for the employees' plight will subside as they make their way elsewhere. The agony of a supremely confident man over his own failure is left with Mr. Bassett.

The more grievous, lasting loss is the community's. Toronto has one less countervailing forum. A really huge responsibility for the public good falls more on one man, Beland Honderich of the Toronto Star.

Can Mr. Honderich measure up to this responsibility? I want to wind up my Tely work by tackling that question.