

Our Media Should Help Sustain a Knowledgeable and Informed Electorate

By Conrad Black

I was graciously invited to have a conversation with the Western Association of Broadcasters president, David Craig, at the WAB's annual meeting at the magnificent Banff Springs Hotel on June 6. David was very articulate and put to me a number of questions whose answers he thought could possibly be of interest to the members, and it was a very cordial exchange.



Banff Springs Hotel in a file photo. (Awana JF/Shutterstock)

I had the opportunity to reflect on my concerns that standards of education had declined and that this had probably been the

principal factor in making the public in Canada and throughout the Western world less demanding of integrity and thoroughness from the media, and that this unfortunate sequence of events had caused a sharp reduction in confidence in media. I said that as a free press is vital to a democracy, that reduction in confidence, although not undeserved, was potentially dangerous.

I expressed my long-held view, based on having employed a very large number of journalists over many years in a number of countries, that many of them did not really wish to be reporters, but rather to be investigators and people of influence in promoting or debunking causes or elevating or demoting individuals, and that it was up to editors to maintain the integrity of news outlets by insisting upon the distinction between reporting and comment.

As the conversation progressed, very smoothly and sometimes with light-hearted asides, I expressed my support for a public broadcaster and disagreement on this issue with Pierre Poilievre, the leader of the federal opposition, as I think the CBC should be given an increased rather than a reduced budget, but more competent management with a higher determination for fair and balanced news coverage.

We wandered into the controversy over the [hundreds of unmarked graves](#) supposedly of native children who had died, possibly from negligence or mistreatment, and had been surreptitiously and anonymously buried at Kamloops, B.C., and near other residential schools. I referred to "[Grave Error](#)," the excellent book by Tom Flanagan and C.P. Champion to which I contributed a foreword, that has made it indisputably clear that [there is no present evidence](#) that the underground anomalies that were claimed to be unmarked graves of indigenous children were, in fact, graves at all.

It has been well established that every single child in the Indian Residential School system was accounted for. As happened generally in society in the latter 19th century, there were many deaths, especially from tuberculosis, even in

the most prosperous families, but all indigenous children were either returned to their families or a full and validated explanation was given for their demise.

I pointed out that [\\$27 million had been voted](#) by Parliament to find out exactly what went on at Kamloops and other communities, and whether the so-called mass graves were graves at all and, if they were, who was buried in them. The source of this immense story that caused the prime minister to lower the Canadian flag to half-mast on all federal buildings everywhere in the world for six months, depended on sketchy evidence from underground radar that, as the person who operated the radar reported, could have been anomalous root structures or any number of other things and were not necessarily graves.

In a [story](#) in the broadcasters' official publication about my comments at the WAB meeting, I was accurately quoted as stating: "We went through this terribly humiliating national experience of lowering our flags for six months and declaring that we murdered these children and then tried to hide their bodies. Well, this didn't happen. None of it happened." The article added the last part was said "over the cry of 'Yes it did'" from an indigenous broadcaster.

"Black's commentary went unchallenged by Craig," the article continued, and informed the readers that "WAB's Board of Directors has issued a formal apology to attendees, saying that Black's opinions are not reflective of those of the board or its members."

The article then quoted from the board's statement: "We recognize the comments he made today were disrespectful and incredibly hurtful. ... The intention of bringing Conrad to the WAB conference was to have him openly discuss his business and media successes and failures. We'd like to address our shortcomings of not properly moderating the conversation. We sincerely apologize for the events that occurred today."

Earlier in the article, the author falsely asserted that I had uttered an "outright denial of the death of Indigenous children at residential schools." I did nothing of the kind. I

have often written and stated that many children died at the residential schools but that there is very scanty evidence representing that they died because of negligence or malice. I've declared hundreds of times that I am an advocate of drastic reforms in programs for indigenous peoples, that they do have legitimate grievances and with that we have to do a much better job of addressing them. I've also often stated that there is no evidence that any children died who were buried in unmarked graves at Kamloops or elsewhere and whose deaths were withheld from their families.

I was unaware that anyone verbally contradicted me, and I did not notice that there was, according to the article, an apparent walk-out from our session by a broadcaster or anyone from the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission. It may have occurred, but it was rather unobtrusive.

We need to ensure we don't become complicit in the general practice of submissive misinformation and synchronized grovelling to any faddish and aggrieved agitation. The facts are that the Indian Residential Schools were set up and operated with [motives that were not discreditable](#), and they did rescue approximately 150,000 indigenous children, with the agreement of their families, from a state of poverty and illiteracy which they would not otherwise have escaped.

In the schools' administration, there were undoubtedly many nasty and inexcusable incidents, but the allegation of the secret burial in unmarked graves of hundreds of deceased children has not been substantiated in the slightest degree: [no bodies have been unearthed](#), nor any evidence that these graves actually exist. It has been established that no deaths were unaccounted for.

David Craig whispered to me at the end of my remarks that there were some negative text messages, and I said that I would happily wait beside the podium and discuss individually with anyone present any further concerns or questions they might have. One very intelligent and courteous gentleman wanted to discuss a few matters that had nothing to do with

indigenous issues, and there was not a word from anyone else.

The media of a G7 democracy need to be discerning and courageous in order to keep Canadians sufficiently informed and maintain an alert and knowledgeable electorate.

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