

Political correctness and faddish zealotry had no more effective opponent than Rex Murphy

By Conrad Black

When Rex Murphy phoned me a week before he died, he was peppy and confident that he would be good for a few months more and that we might even be able to go to dinner again, though, he said, "I hope you will not be embarrassed by my portable oxygen supply."



Political commentator Rex Murphy gives a rousing and entertaining defence of the oilsands during his keynote address to the annual Bennett Jones Lake Louise Business Forum, Friday, Nov. 29 at the Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise. PHOTO BY TED RHODES/CALGARY HERALD

He was under no illusions that the end would be along soon, and he was completely philosophical. Not a religious man, he felt that he had had pretty much the life he wanted: the ability to read very

profoundly in English literature, to have a very wide range of acquaintances and friends and to have been able to disseminate his views in his own style throughout Canada for many years.

Getting to know him well has been one of the rewards of my 70s and few friendships have been more completely enjoyable and stimulating than these years with Rex. He and Jordan Peterson and I, and on several occasions joined by my wife Barbara, had a number of dinners in which we started by commenting quite soberly on contemporary events but gradually worked up into florid soliloquies on the ramshackle condition of many subjects.

Rex, in particular, had a special and marvelous gift for illustrating his concerns with ultra-literate hyperbole and the impact of his words was accentuated by his intense eyes, mobile features and as he concluded his thought, the slight resemblance of his lower face to a venerable and determined snapping turtle. This effect was replicated and amplified in several public meetings that Rex and I, and on one occasion all three of us had, where we more or less intentionally torqued each other up to overstate our points somewhat, and I generally found myself in the pleasantly unfamiliar position of being a counsel of moderation and of hopefulness.

At heart, Rex was a man of great generosity of spirit, unshakable civility, immense enjoyment and knowledge of the language, written and spoken; he was essentially a libertarian who was offended by superfluous and sanctimonious authority, and by pretension in general.

No one I have ever known was more courteous, more considerate of his friends, more genuinely and unjustifiably modest, and few people I've known were as courageous as Rex was in advancing unfashionable views, not motivated by contrariness or an ambition to shock, but by his considered dissent from the conventional wisdom. In the same measure that he would not clamber aboard a bandwagon of faddish opinion, he became almost Churchillian in his flamboyant and erudite righteousness in the face of what he considered to be unjust. He was particularly outraged by what he regarded as unprofessional journalism.

In one of his last columns, in the National Post two weeks before he died, he [summarized](#) the moral factors in contention in the present war in Gaza. He had little patience, none at all in fact, for those who would claim that Israel had no right to exist as a Jewish state and that its presence as one was an “occupation,” and that there was any requirement for proportionality in response to the invasion and massacre by Hamas of October 7. His perspective was informed by an extensive knowledge of the travails of the Jewish people, residents of what is now Israel for at least 5,000 years.

Like the generation that preceded his, he saw Israel as a state of sanctuary for the Jewish people, half of whose worldwide population was exterminated in the death camps of the Third Reich. October 7 was not a skirmish in a long-running dispute about borders; it and the antics of subsequent anti-Israeli demonstrators and rioters he saw as another manifestation of the absolute wickedness of genocidal antisemitism. Israel is at war because of the barbarous and evil violation of the ceasefire and the goal of righteous war is victory and not proportionality. Of all the reams of opinion expressed on that subject none was more powerful and more persuasive than the words of Rex Murphy.

He had his differences with some of his employers, but they were differences of principle and of perspective. Rex’s thoroughness, his integrity, his great talent as a communicator and his charming personality – a learned Newfoundland leprechaun – were never in question. And he refused to be gagged or over-edited in his opposition to what he saw as the profound vacuity and error of much of current public policy. Political correctness and the militancy of faddish zealotry had no more effective and redoubtable opponent.

Long before I knew Rex, I noted with gratitude that he was one of my first champions in the media who saw clearly the weakness of the pseudo-legal charges I faced, (the late and

much-missed Christie Blatchford and Mark Steyn were among the handful of others). In the profound sadness of the news of his passing, I was especially grateful to have gotten to know him well and thank him suitably for his support in a lonely and difficult time.

Rex would vigorously dispute it, but he was a great man, as well as a dear friend. He was a brilliant writer and a singular and irresistible personality to all who knew him. His death is a terrible loss to Canadian journalism and a profound sorrow to his many friends. It was an honour, as well as an inexpressible pleasure, to have known him.

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