

When Peggy Wente attacks (not much happens)

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by Conrad Black



For many years I have occasionally been approached in public places by an extremely courteous and even engaging woman, bedecked in the stylistic flair and panache of a bag lady, whom I eventually identify, after finessing it for a couple of minutes, as Peggy Wente. She has periodically done her best to revile me in her writings in The Globe and Mail. After faithful readers sent me her piece in last Saturday's Globe and Mail, formerly a writer's newspaper but not one I can

normally face, I finally, in a Damascene bolt, figured it out: Peggy wants me to reply to her, to take offence at her peevish nonsense and seem hurt. She is welcome to wallow and paddle unvexed in her animus, which I do not reciprocate. But I will slake her parched ambition to get my attention publicly, and soothe her restless nights, this one time, as a public service.

The editors of The Globe and Mail have periodically publicly asserted that they would “work with her” to address her problem of plagiarizing. I suggest that they expand their therapeutic tutorials to include an enhanced acquaintance with the facts. The president of the United States made it explicit in giving me a full pardon that the White House counsel and his legal staff carefully researched my case and the analysis provided by Alan Dershowitz and other distinguished counsel who represented me, and concluded that it was, in the president’s words, “a bad rap (and) an unjust verdict.” Otherwise, I would not have sought a pardon, and he would not have given one. Anyone who wants the facts can get them in my book “A Matter of Principle.” The pardon “expunges” (in the president’s phrasing) the two fatuous remaining convictions of the 17 the American fascist prosecutors started out with and, now, officially, I am innocent. That was not what Peggy wrote; but it is the truth. The case against me was bunk; I have won and it is closed.

Has Peggy eaten her hat, as she promised to do if Donald Trump was elected?

Nor was I previously unable to travel to the U.S., as she also wrote. I would have had to apply, which I was assured would be agreed to, but declined to do so given the shameful judicial treatment I was accorded there. I have no plans to return any time soon, and will continue to confine myself to the other 197 countries in the world, but will return eventually. I was not writing my comments on American politics “for one reader,”

as she wrote. Many weeks I have more than 10 million readers of my American columns, and my comments on this president have not been uncritical. Has Peggy eaten her hat, as she promised to do if Donald Trump was elected? She might find that the digestion of straw or felt makes her less bilious, mendacious and delusional.

And no, my social life has not been reduced in quality nor my standard of living seriously altered by my travails. Peggy knows nothing of the socioeconomic echelons she envisions, nor anything about making money. My false friends deserted, but have been replaced, and most people I regarded as friends proved to be so. She has no idea how quickly money can be made by people who have an aptitude to do it, and I have enjoyed my return to finance, my original career. (The much-published picture of my wife and me at a costume party at Kensington Palace was not, as Peggy wrote, of Barbara as Marie Antoinette and me as Cardinal Richelieu; she was dressed as a bar-maid, not a Habsburg-Bourbon queen, and I was a run-of-the-mill cardinal, without Richelieu's goatee and his insignia of secular office as duke, prime minister, foreign and interior minister, and grand admiral. No doubt Peggy knows about some things, but French history is not one of them.)

That is all the public (or private) recognition she will get from me, and I want to move to the substantive point she made that I am "too old to make a comeback." It has already happened in my case, but I wish to take up my latest cause: fighting ageism, as I successfully fought the monochromatic left in Canadian newspapers, Euro-integration in Britain, separatism in Quebec, and corporate governance terrorism in the United States. It's time for a new good cause. At 74, I am only five years older than Peggy Wente. I feel as I did 30 years ago, and I want to inspire readers who may think of themselves as elderly, and Peggy herself, heavy-laden as she apparently is by the imminence of the Scriptural Age (70), with some helpful facts.

We have to revise our thinking about being elderly: it starts later and implies much less early diminution of effectiveness than was thought

Goethe wrote most of Faust at 80; Verdi wrote his Requiem at 85; Sophocles, in the 5th-century B.C., wrote Oedipus at 90, and the Doge Enrico Dandolo conquered Constantinople at the age of 97, although he was blind and had been excommunicated (a real problem for a Venetian in the 13th century). He died the next year and was the only person ever buried in the Hagia Sophia.

Among those famous people who did great things at the end of their 70s and into their 80s were Chateaubriand, Kant, Michelangelo, Monet, Titian, Tolstoy and Voltaire. Adenauer, Churchill, Clemenceau, de Gaulle, Gladstone, Palmerston and Cardinal André-Hercule de Fleury (who began a very successful term as principal minister of France of 16 years at the age of 73, in 1726) are among many statesmen who served effectively in great offices well beyond my present age. Canada's Lord Strathcona served very effectively as Canadian High Commissioner in London, and in several important private-sector positions, right up to his death at 93.

Last weekend I happened to speak at length by telephone with Norman Podhoretz, the founding editor of Commentary magazine for 35 years, and with Irving Kristol, the leader of the American neo-conservatives. He is 89. I spoke also with Henry Kissinger, who will be 96 next week. Both were in perfect fettle and sounded as they did 30 or 40 years ago (and illustrate how little my life is confined to the parvenus of Palm Beach to whom Peggy attached me, and whom I am grateful to have escaped). The top Democratic contenders for the U.S. presidential nomination, Joe Biden and Bernie Sanders, would be 78 and 79 when they start their possible four-year terms in 2021. The incumbent (who will most probably win), will be 74, and 78 when his second term ends. Up to Richard Nixon, the

United States had only two presidents who lived to be 90 (John Adams and Herbert Hoover). Then four consecutive presidents have: Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush.

Because we are concerned as a civilization that technological advances are, for the first time, creating unemployment rather than employment, we have cut our retirement ages to 65, or less, which is absurd and has created a terrible strain on our pension schemes. When president Franklin Delano Roosevelt set up Social Security in the U.S. in 1935, the average life expectancy for an American male was 67, and the pension kicked in at 65. We have to revise our thinking about being elderly: it starts later and implies much less early diminution of effectiveness than was thought.

Peggy Wente must raise her sights; go on slagging me off if you wish – I won't reply to it or probably even read it again, but do not imagine that you are at the pale of eternal rest or prolonged decrepitude. Unless your fatuities of last Saturday were a very esoteric death-rattle, you can continue to inflict yourself on readers for at least another decade. You are neither in the diapers of youth nor (I assume) of senescent incontinence. Fight on. I will, and as Richelieu famously said to Louis XIII, shortly before they died, "I precede you to light your way."

Note: *I will be in England for the next five weeks, plumbing the depths of my socioeconomic status and enjoying Their Lordships' House, and wish all readers a pleasant launch into summer – back in July.*

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