

***Propaganda, Technology & Human
Freedom:
Jacques Ellul's Vital Relevance Today***

Presentation to Foresight Synergy Network
by
Randal Marlin

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Friday, May 14, Ottawa 1 p.m. (by Zoom)

Plan of This Lecture/Seminar

- Brief biography
- Ellul's ideas on technique/technology as reflected in a *Futures Research Quarterly* 1985 summary of lectures given in 1980. (Encouraged and assisted by Keith Wilde)
- <https://ellul.org/elluls-lectures-on-planning-and-forecasting/>
- <https://ellulsociety.org>

Two Discussions

Two discussions in what follows:

1. Propaganda as I see it. Starting with Ancient Greece. Similar to Rhetoric. Aristotle: Ethos, Pathos, Logos. Importance of credentials, credibility.
2. Propaganda as Ellul sees it: modern propaganda as qualitatively distinct. Mass media, psychological techniques. Molding of personality. Imbalance.

- Ellul's philosophy of technology/technique: sees faith in technology replacing the sacred. Idea of sociological propaganda.
- I give illustrations of his prescience regarding technology, taken from his lectures.
- His advice to planners

PROPAGANDA

- Ellul's contribution to propaganda theory.
- Definition, theory, illustrations

Jacques Ellul, 1912-94

- Brief summary of his life & mission
- Human technique leading to “efficiency” but not necessarily freedom.
- Techniques of persuasion promote sales of gadgets. Technique is self-augmenting, out of control.

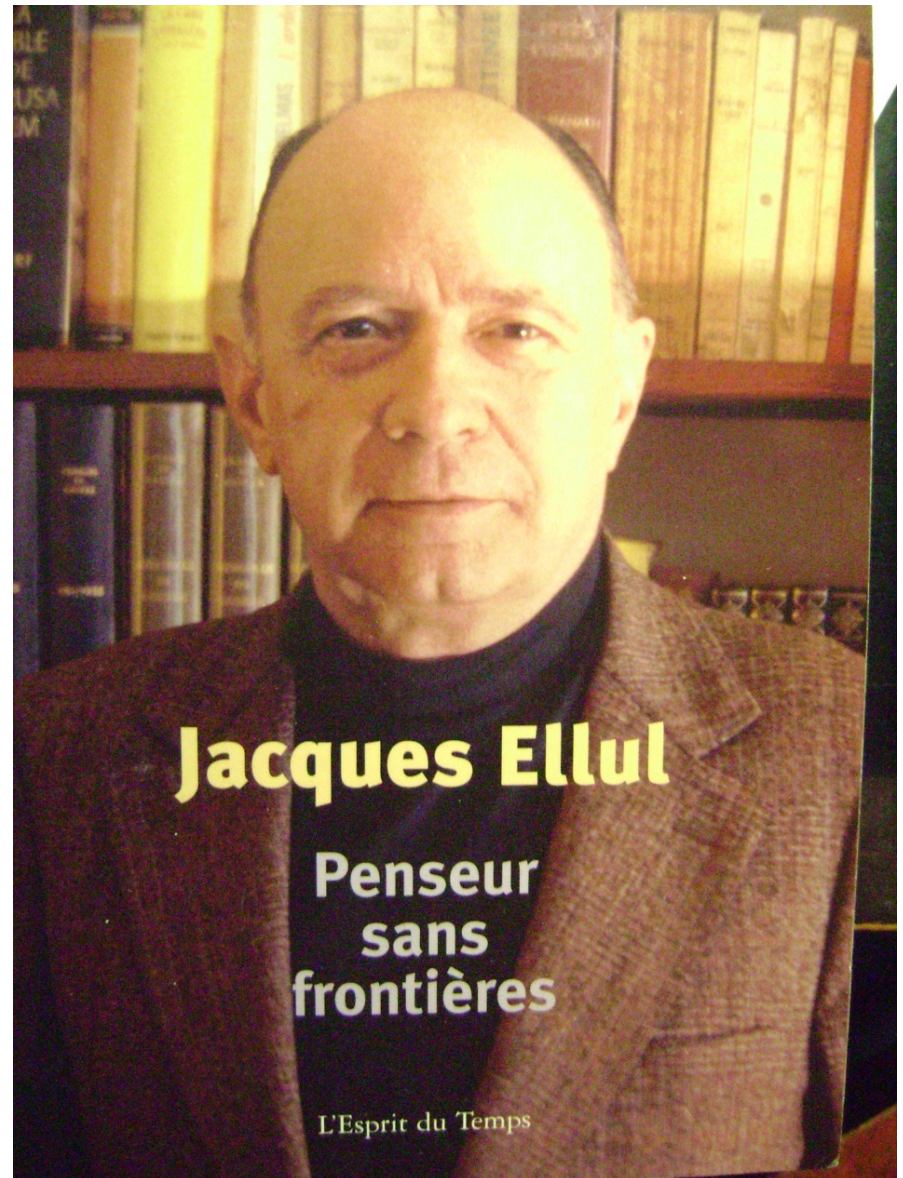


Ellul and Propaganda

He saw propaganda as essentially bound up with the gaining and maintaining of power over others.

Went from Marxism to Protestant Christianity – deeply immersed in history, law, and study of institutions.

Money, technique, as guiding ends, enslave us. A political illusion.



Ellul: Life, Influence, Contribution to Propaganda Studies

- Ellul a prolific writer. History, Sociology, Law, Political Theory, Theology.
- *The Technological Society; The Political Illusion; Propaganda.* Earlier: *History of Institutions.*

Family and Schooling

- Ellul studied at one of the best schools in Bordeaux. His father was well off in business, but when the downturn in the economy came he lost his job, despite his excellent work. That set Ellul to studying Marx and capital. Respect for Marx lasted his whole life, but he had disagreements.

Ellul: Life, Contd.

Disillusioned with Marxists of his time, for placing interests of the party above humanitarian considerations.

Attracted to Christianity, but wary of group conformity and institutional power.

Active in Protestant Reformed Church of France, member of the governing body, but distanced himself from orthodoxy.

1930s and 1940s

In 1930s, studied Marx, Kierkegaard, and theologian Karl Barth. Personalism (Emmanuel Mounier). Close friend of Bernard Charbonneau, ecologist, activist.

He lived through propaganda under Nazis, Worked for Resistance. Recognized as one of the “Righteous Among Nations” by Yad Vashem, Israel’s Holocaust memorial.

Some Major Works

- *History of Institutions*
- Technique, or the Stake of the Century
(*The Technological Society*).
- *Propaganda*
- *The Political Illusion*
- Many books on Theology, Biblical Interpretation, Law and Morality

Main Ideas

The Social Phenomenon of Technique/Technology

A. The Pervasiveness of Technique

B. Technicians in the Policy Process

Technique as Impetus to Study of the Future

A. Technique as Generator of Uncertainty

B. Technique and Hubris

C. Thinking about the Effects of Technique

Advice to Planners

A. Practical Difficulties of Forecasting;
Technique and Its Impacts

B. Caveats for Planners

Technical disorder and four natural limits.

1) Space

2) Time

3) Primary Matter

4) Energy

Also ourselves: Thresholds

C. Categories to Include in Planning and Forecasting

- 1) Ecological factors
- 2) Technology and Food
- 3) Planning Aesthetically
- 4) Specific Warnings re the Information Society

First, What is Propaganda?

- I take the word here primarily in its negative sense even though the neutral sense is well-established. (Propagare = to propagate)
- Usually, if you engage in mass persuasion for a worthy cause, such as raising money for a hospital, you don't call your efforts "propaganda" because of the negative associations of the word.

Characteristics of propaganda

- It aims to persuade a mass audience.
- The communicator wants to advance his or her cause. Truth is secondary.
- Typically, the communicator uses the most efficient means to accomplish the sought objective, even when these don't respect the autonomy of the target audience.
- Repetition, imagery, not evidence and grounding.

Public Relations Technique

James Harff, Director of PR firm [Ruder Finn](#)
Global Public Affairs.

“Our work is not to verify information... Our work is to accelerate the circulation of information favorable to us. We did not confirm the existence of death camps in Bosnia, we just made it known that *Newsday* affirmed it.

We are professionals. We had a job to do and we did it. We are not paid to be moral.

- I tend to view propaganda as communication designed to persuade a mass audience in ways that suppress or bypass their critical judgement and their rational evaluation of the ideas communicated.
- But you need to add the idea of an organized attempt to persuade people.
Example.



Twitter

Only two days ago, President Trump wrote in Farsi on his Twitter feed to tell Iranians how he was “inspired” by their courage. He clearly couldn’t keep up his respectful tone for long. On Monday, he retweeted a badly photoshopped image of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Minority leader Chuck Schumer in traditional Islamic clothing, along with the caption: “The corrupted Dems trying their best to come to the Ayatollah’s rescue.” The two were shown standing in front of an Iranian flag. The original tweet came from an

NC

Definition of Propaganda

- Short and snappy (but inadequate):
Propaganda is communication designed to get people to think and act the way you want them to.
- Propaganda is: *the organized attempt through communication to affect belief or action or inculcate attitudes in a large audience in ways that circumvent or suppress an individual's adequately informed, rational, reflective judgement.*

Jacques Ellul when he deals with the commonly understood idea of propaganda views it as manipulative communication for the purpose of gaining or maintaining power over others.

Background “myths”

- Propaganda needs myths to move people.
- Ellul defines a myth as an **all-encompassing image** linked to desirable objectives that have lost their material, practical character and have become **strongly coloured, overwhelming, displacing from consciousness all that is not related to that image.**

- A myth pushes a person to action because **it includes all that he or she feels is good, just and true.**

Examples of Ellulian myths

- Ellul thought that mythologized science and history were two fundamental myths from which other myths were derived, for people in the modern age.

- Science and history become mythologized when treated uncritically, and serve to validate thereby an outlook, a way of life and political action. Nazism and Communism are obvious examples.

Derivative Myths

Not *always* myths!

- (1) Work (think of *Triumph of the Will*)
- (2) Happiness
- (3) Nation
- (4) Youth
- (5) Hero
- (6) Race
- (7) Progress

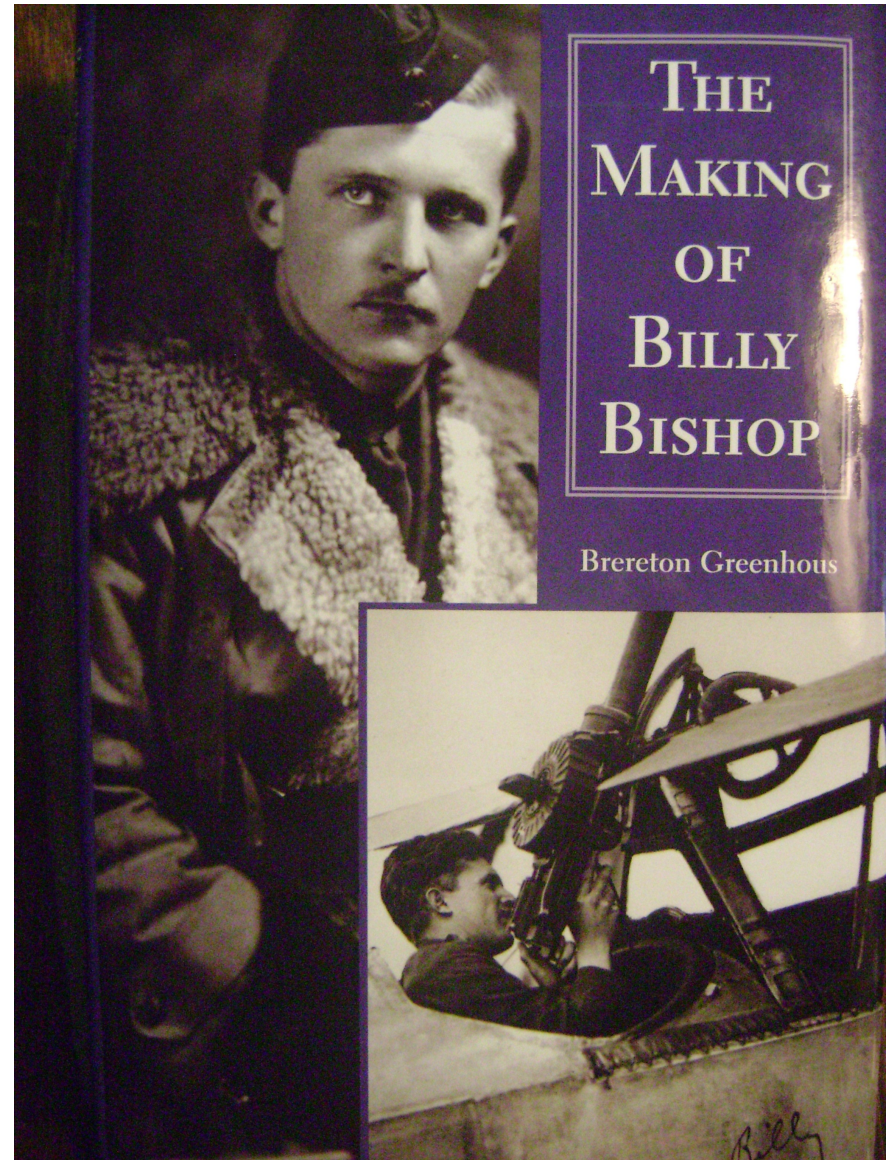
The Hero

Billy Bishop, V.C.

World War I Canadian
ace pilot

Courageous, success-
full

But a lot of exag-
gerations and
falsehoods, as told by
Brereton Greenhous



Pfc. Jessica Lynch

- Manufacturing a hero.
- From the *Washington Post*, April 3, 2003:
“Pfc. Jessica Lynch, rescued Tuesday from an Iraqi hospital, fought fiercely and shot several enemy soldiers after Iraqi forces ambushed the Army’s 507th Ordnance Maintenance Company, firing her weapon until she ran out of ammunition, U.S. officials said yesterday.”

“She was fighting to the death,” the official said. “She did not want to be taken alive.”

- May 9, 2003, *Washington Post*: “Former prisoner of war Jessica Lynch [“the most famous soldier of the Iraq war”] has no recollection of what happened between the moment her Army unit was ambushed in Iraq and when she awoke at the nearby hospital from which she was later rescued, military officials said yesterday.”

- From *Christian Science Monitor*, June 23, 2003: “First we had the big publicity buildup by the military, which conveniently managed to have a video camera on hand for the nighttime rescue of the wounded soldier. Then, a sensationalized account of her capture and rescue that later had to be toned down.”

More Ellulian Myths

(8) Proletariat

(9) Führer (leader)

(10) Communist society

(11) Productivity

(12) Democracy

Are there other candidates? What about beauty? (Naomi Wolf) Think of cosmetics, diet industries.

Propaganda and Timeliness: Words, Truth, Vitality of a Myth

- Ellul: Power of word “collaborator” in 1944.
- Vaclav Havel: The power of the word “socialism” changes over time.

Categories of Propaganda

- Four contrasting pairs:
- Political/Sociological
- Agitation/Integration
- Vertical/Horizontal
- Irrational/Rational (reversing Ellul's ordering here)

Political Propaganda

- Carried out by definite body for definite goals. These goals are political. They are clearly distinguished and quite precise.
- Methods are deliberate and calculated.

Sociological Propaganda

- It is diffuse. It operates imperceptibly. It integrates people, unifying members' behaviour according to pattern.
- Introduces an ethic in benign form, slowly, by penetration, and creates in the end a fully established personality.

- Example: American way of life.
- Un-American = evil. Backdrop for McCarthyism. One form of integration supports U.S. exceptionalism (updating Ellul here).
- The same things, such as interfering with elections in other countries, is viewed differently when viewed through myth-sustaining lenses.

≡ TIME

Boris Yeltsin | **July 15, 1996**

◀ PREVIOUS WEEK'S COVER

FOLLOWING WEEK'S COVER



Agitation Propaganda

- The most visible kind. Usually revolutionary, but can also be used by government to whip up its people into some very high level of sacrifice – war or higher productivity. Of short duration. Hatred of an enemy is fanned. Liberty, bread, fulfillment are promised. This propaganda feeds on itself.

Integration Propaganda

- Seeks conformity, participation in society. Aims at stabilizing the social body, at unifying and reinforcing it. Seeks a total molding of the person in depth. Hard to combine this with agitation propaganda.
- Mao made use of stereotypes, slogans and interpretations that would do for both.

Vertical Propaganda

- From top to bottom – leader to people.
- Leader can be a technician, a political head or religious head, acting from a position of authority.
- Done in secret.

- Using all the technical methods of mass communication.
- Propagandees behave mechanically, passively, as by reflex.

Horizontal Propaganda

- Made within the masses.
- Group leaders, animators, letting individuals condition each other.
- Information, data and reasoning are skewed.

- Small groups of 15-20. Large organization needed.
- Not distinguished from education by participants.



Kommunistisia hyveitä yhteishenkeä lujitettiin agitaation ja propagandan avulla. Kuvassa Kansan-kolhoosin johtaja puhuu työläisille vuonna 1951.

De kommunistiska dygderna och gemenskapsandan förstärktes genom agitations- och propaganda. På bilden 1951 talar kolchoschefen till arbetarna på kolchoset.

Communist virtues and solidarity given a boost through agitation and propaganda. In the picture the director of the Way of the Communist -kolkhoz addresses the workers at a gathering from 1951.

tehdyn päätöksen perusteella. Tuolloin Neuvosto-

kolchoser kunde arbetare från tre eller

Irrational Propaganda

- Uses emotive appeals, myths, etc.
- Other forms of deception, leaps of logic, etc. may fit this category

Rational Propaganda

It may seem as though rational persuasion is the opposite of propaganda. But much that is “rational” and “scientific” is not.

- Citation of facts and figures may not allow for time for proper assessment.
- See *Lies, Damn Lies & Statistics*, Darrell Huff

- Facts may be selective, contrary evidence suppressed.
- Definitions of terms may be unclear, misleading.

Ellul, Propaganda and Truth

- Propaganda can consist of truths. But truth is secondary to effectiveness. Lies that are exposed become ineffective.
- Unbelievable truth must also be sacrificed to believable claims. The case of Rommel.

- What needs special emphasis is the difference between verifiable facts on the one hand and interpretations on the other.
- Lack of time for verification may favour political lying.

Timeliness and interest

- Propaganda needs to hook into interests prominent in people's attention at a given time. What's in the news?
- The case of Wall Street and the crash, 2008, involving credit derivatives. Mantras about market self-discipline, or the "greed is good" philosophy lose power.
- Myths and presuppositions of a given time and place need to be utilized.

Forgetfulness

- Unless people are reminded, they tend to forget the things they were told that made a candidate or policy acceptable.
- The case of the presentation February 5, 2003 by Colin Powell to the UN.
- Or Jean Chrétien's promise (or what was interpreted as such) in 1990 to do away with the GST

Chrétien would scrap GST

Pledges to reform taxes if Liberals win next federal

BY PATRICIA POIRIER
Quebec Bureau

MONTREAL. Liberal Leader Jean Chrétien says he will scrap the goods and services tax if he wins the next federal election.

"The odds of the GST surviving the next election are no better than the odds of the Mulroney government being re-elected," Mr. Chrétien told Liberal supporters in Montreal yesterday.

In his clearest statement on the proposed new tax, which is expected to come into force in the new year, Mr. Chrétien said he would reform Canada's current tax system so that high-income earners pay more and that businesses pay their fair share.

"I am opposed to the GST. I have always been opposed to it, and I will always be opposed to it. It is a tax that is both regressive and discriminatory," he said.

Mr. Chrétien warned that although Liberals no longer hold a majority in the Senate, they will not allow the GST legislation to pass.



For Successful Propaganda

1. Focus on centres (focal points) of interest.
Why?
2. Because: Success is most likely where collective life is most intense, and that happens around centres of interest.
3. Examples of centres of interest: crime, unemployment, traffic accidents, health problems, language and culture, cost of e.g., gasoline, money.

Ellul's contributions to propaganda theory can be summarized:

1. Emphasis on the propagandee.
2. The *need* for propaganda.
3. Other main contributions by Ellul: myth, pre-propaganda. Categories of propaganda. Relation to truth.
4. What sets Ellul apart from most other thinkers is the depth of his thinking on the subjects he deals with. He immerses himself in history as well as going back to Roman and biblical times.

- Like Orwell, and there are quite a few similarities, Ellul's writings on propaganda don't offer much in the way of hope. That seems to me deliberate, to combat the complacency and willingness to think that technology and technique (scientific advances, techniques of governance) will solve our problems.

- But on a wider scale, he brings religion into the picture and sees hope in a world where God is not forgotten.
- To get a sense of optimism you have to read his theological works. As Ellul himself said, his many writings are inter-related, and should be seen as one big book.

- One reader of Ellul's sociological writings was the Unabomber who killed prominent corporation leaders with letter-bombs.

What he did not read, clearly, was Ellul's opposition to violence, about which Ellul devoted a whole book, *On Violence*.

A Recent Example

Let's start with very recent examples of propaganda. They are from the election campaign leading to Donald Trump's defeat, losing to now-President Joseph Biden in November 2020.

1. Choreographed, singing girls.
2. Election poster by Evangelicals for Trump



PUBLIC SAFETY VS **CHAOS & VIOLENCE**

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★★★★★
EVANGELICALS
-FOR TRUMP-
2020

Paid for by Donald J. Trump for President, Inc.



A Trump campaign ad used this image of protesters and police officers in Ukraine from 2014. Courtesy of Mstyslav Chernov

Propaganda and Truth

- Propaganda in a democratic society is more likely to consist of subtle kinds of deception, to escape detection.
- When people recognize that something is propaganda its power is nullified.
- A powerful form of propaganda consists of selection of facts that give a desired impression, omitting other contrary facts.
(G.K.Chesterton)

- Example: *Selection* of facts to report in a way that distorts reality.
- In simple form:
- A child reports to Mom that a sibling hit him, omitting to say that he hit her first.
- Country A is reported as attacking Country B without mentioning that Country B attacked first, or stole land from Country A.



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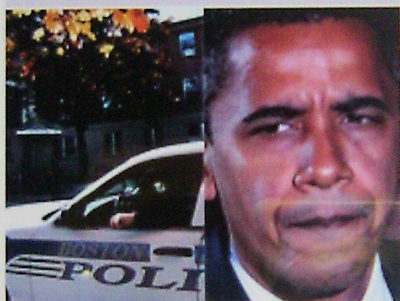
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Palin pranked by Montreal duo

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Next in Did You See That?: Little Monsters Take The Lead...

1/5

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As of Nov 02, 08 as of 2:54 p.m. EST

- Elephant Calf Dies From Virus at Calgary Zoo
- Nfld. 15-Year-Old Charged After Stolen Car Joyride
- Perpetrators Local in B.C. Pipeline Explosions: Police
- Kiprusoff guides Flames to win
- McCain pitches in SNL skit

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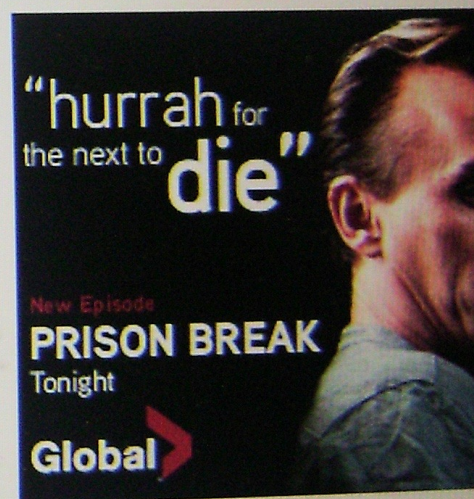


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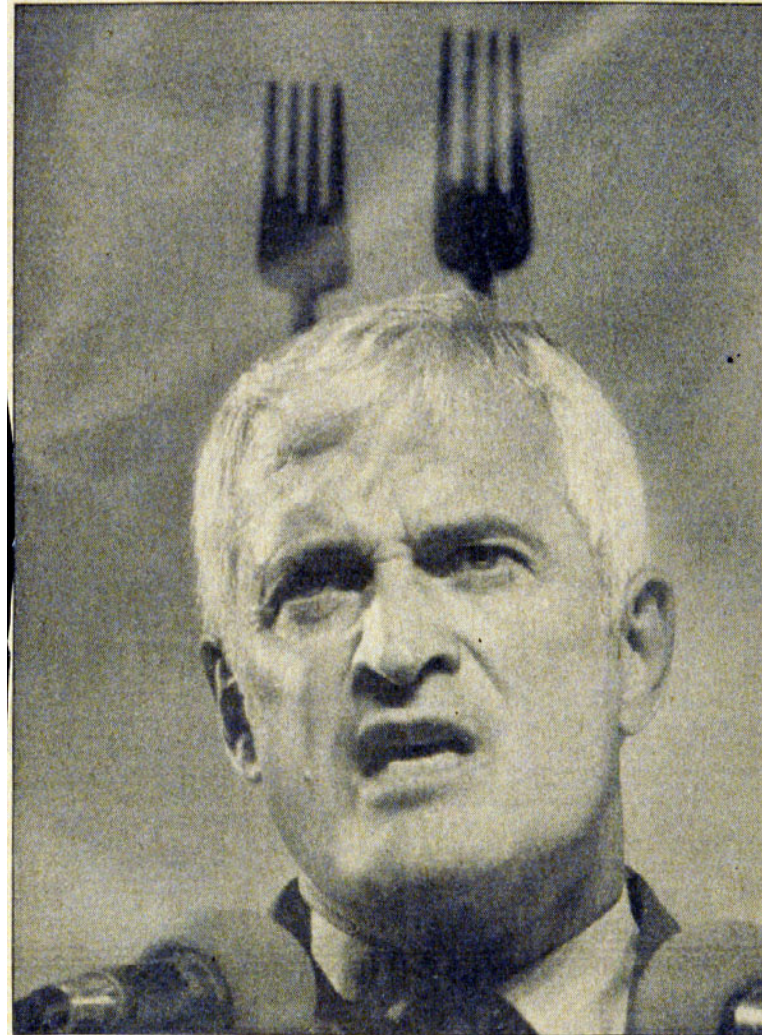
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and Mail

NAL NEWSPAPER

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PURE RYE GRAIN
IMPORTED VODKA

SATURDAY, AUGUST 25, 1984



Globe and Mail, Tibor Kollay

Prime Minister John Turner addresses a group of non-partisan women at Toronto

lunch. The forks are part of a banner bearing words 'Lunches With Leaders.'

PM plans \$60,000 exemption under 'minimum' tax for rich

By LINDA McQUAIG

Under the minimum tax proposed by Liberal Leader John Turn-

poses of calculating the minimum tax. It is not a deduction that rich people can use to further reduce their tax.

\$200,000 would automatically deduct \$60,000. He would then be required to pay at least 20 per cent on the remaining \$140,000, leaving him



JOHN FELSTEAD/Canadian Press

BREAKFAST CAMPAIGN

Federal Liberal leadership candidate Sheila Copps glances at the ceiling before delivering speech to about 100 women in Toronto.

28
BY PATRICIA POIRIER

The Globe and Mail

MONTREAL

Feb 20, 1990

Liberal leadership hopeful Sheila Copps is making important gains in Quebec, much to the chagrin of Paul Martin's supporters.

Quebec Health Minister Marc-Yvan Cote and the provincial Liberals' chief organizer in the eastern part of the province, is expected to announce later today in Quebec City that he is backing the Hamilton East MP.

And, organizers for Ms Copps say well-known grassroots Liberals will join her campaign later this week.

Although she was a virtual unknown in the province when she launched her campaign last month, Ms Copps is now considered a serious contender. She is picking up support from fellow MP Paul Martin's camp. Both she and Mr. Martin support the Meech Lake constitutional accord, while Mr. Chretien opposes it.

Organizers for Ms Copps admit it is more difficult



Sheila Copps

In Montreal yesterday, Ms Copps acknowledged she never expected to be doing so well in Quebec, since her two closest rivals — Mr. Martin and Mr. Chretien — have been

"People are attracted to her charisma, she breathes fresh air, some to politics," explained organizers, Jean-Serge C

Listeners to one of Quebec's popular French language radio shows, hosted by Quebec Liberal minister Cournoyer, had nothing to say for Ms Copps yesterday. He said he had not voted for her in years but, with Ms Copps as a leader, he would reconsider.

The response was in sharp contrast with the reception for Mr. Martin, who was a guest on a similar English language show. Although a number of people said they would support him, more said they would not vote for him to lead the Liberal Party or said they were still undecided.

Mr. Martin would not comment directly on reports that he would be supporting Ms Copps. He would he acknowledge that she is making significant inroads.

Dennis Dawson, who led Mr. Martin's campaign in Quebec,



Potential allies: Copps and Côté arrive at meeting

— CP photo

Copps s in Queb

QUEBEC (CP) — Organizers for Sheila Copps are hoping for a warm welcome she received in Quebec on the weekend. The visit is expected to translate into hard support for her bid for the Liberal leadership.

They are especially eager to snare Marc-Yvan Côté, Quebec health minister and a powerful Liberal organizer.

Côté met with Copps on Sunday and then escorted her into a morning meeting of about 100 people in Charlesbourg.

"Marc-Yvan and I have several things in common," a reliable source told her enthusiastically. "We are both, first of all, political animals."

Côté praised the outspoken MP for Hamilton East.

"Politics requires charisma, not just a machine," he said. "It takes a leader able to translate ideas and carry away public support."

"Mrs. Copps has shown true leadership qualities. She had the courage to support Meech Lake and that seems to me very important."

But Côté said he has not yet made up his mind, adding that he had promised to talk to Jean Martin, another leadership hopeful, later in the day.

Lawrence Cannon, co-chairman of the Copps campaign in Quebec,

Two more examples of propaganda

1. The takedown of Quebec Premier Lucien Bouchard by the Conrad Black press.
2. The buildup to the war in Iraq.
 - (1) August-September 2002. (i) Fear inducing statements by U.S. administration (ii) attack on Prime Minister Jean Chrétien in September.
 - (2) Colin Powell's presentation to U.N. Security Council February 5, 2003.

Credentials and Fakery

- Fakery can consist in making true statements, while suppressing other true statements. A pundit, seer, or stock market advisor can seem belief-worthy if you cite 10 predictions that came true. But not if you add that 90 predictions turned out false. (Recall the importance of fact *selection*)