

Books & Authors

# Asper empire raises questions about concentration of media ownership

By **SHELDON KIRSHNER**  
Staff Reporter

**I**srael Harold (Izzy) Asper, the founder of the CanWest Global Communications Corporation, was a Canadian media titan until his untimely death in 2003.

From his headquarters in Winnipeg, Asper – a former tax lawyer and leader of Manitoba’s Liberal party – presided over an empire of television stations and daily newspapers, including the *National Post*.

When he acquired the Southam chain from Conrad Black, the now disgraced and imprisoned newspaper magnate, Asper transformed himself into the owner of Canada’s largest news media company.

A person of such calibre is worthy of a top-notch biography, and one will doubtless be written sooner than later. But for now, readers will have to be content with Marc Edge’s *Asper Nation: Canada’s Most Dangerous Media Company* (New Star Books).

Edge, a reporter and editor who has worked for the *Vancouver Province* and the *Calgary Herald* and currently teaches communications at Sam Houston University in Texas, has produced “a critical corporate media history” rather than a conventional biography.

Based almost entirely on secondary sources, with little original research, as he himself points out in a disclaimer in the preface, *Asper Nation* is a polemic, and should be read in that spirit.

Writing as a “disillusioned former journalist” fed up with the concentration of media ownership in this country, Edge observes, “This book is less an indictment of Izzy Asper and his heirs than of a system that allowed them to gain control over so much of Canada’s news media and use it to promote an ide-

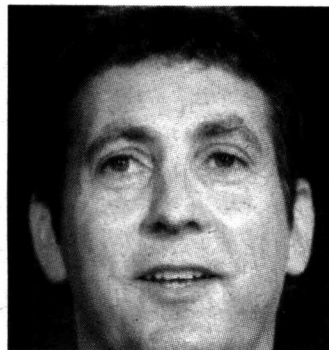
ological agenda.”

And what might this agenda be?

Asper, who promoted a laissez-faire economy and advocated the elimination of the welfare state, believed that market forces rather than government intervention should determine economic policy. And as a dyed-in-the-wool Zionist, he was ardently pro-Israel.

It’s unclear where Edge stands on these issues, but what is crystal clear is that he objects to a situation whereby an individual, be it an Asper or a Black, can “dominate the debate on these or any other issues of importance.”

It is not a trivial observation. When the publisher of the Asper-owned *Montreal Gazette*, Michael Goldbloom, resigned in the summer of 2001, he told the *New York Times*: “There is no question in my mind that the Aspers feel they own the newspapers and the newspapers should



Leonard Asper



Israel Harold (Izzy) Asper

reflect their views.”

Asper, a secular Jew, went to great lengths to assure that his newspapers would be fair to Israel. But sometimes, he went too far, Edge claims.

Quoting a story in the *Globe and Mail*, he says that senior editors at the *Gazette* were told to run a strongly worded pro-Israel editorial in the wake of a suicide bombing in Jerusalem that killed 15 civilians. The editorial urged the Canadian government to support Israel “without the usual hand-wringing criticism about ‘excessive force’ if Israel chose to respond to the terrorist attack.”

Citing another example of the Aspers’ tendency to impose

their opinions on their domain, Edge mentions the Doug Cuthand affair.

In a controversial piece, Cuthand, a native columnist for the *Regina Leader-Post* and the *Saskatoon StarPhoenix*, compared the plight of Canada’s first nations with that of the Palestinians. “I see them as the Indians of the Middle East,” Cuthand wrote. Dissatisfied with the analogy, the Aspers spiked his column.

According to Edge, the Aspers’ intolerance of dissenting views cuts across the board.

Peter Worthington, the former editor of the *Toronto Sun* and a CanWest columnist, also ran afoul of the Aspers when he wrote, “The Aspers just don’t seem to get it. Rather than having all Southam papers straitjacketed into one unanimous, identical view on national affairs, wouldn’t it be more effective if the papers could espouse a similar view differently?”

Edge, in this vein, cites further examples of how the Aspers have attempted to shape coverage.

This critique notwithstanding, he is not personally antagonistic to Asper, describing

him as “a fountain of energy” who could be “ruthless in business and relentless in court, yet charming socially and generous to a fault in his devotion to philanthropy.”

Without delving into Asper’s life too deeply, Edge offers tantalizing biographical tidbits that a future biographer will certainly flesh out.

Born in 1932 in Minnedosa, Man., a town of 2,000 200 kilometres west of Winnipeg, he was the son of a Ukrainian Jewish violinist, Leon Ausereper, who fled Odessa in the early 1920s. To earn a livelihood, he turned to business, becoming the proprietor of a movie house chain.

At the University of Manitoba, Asper was a star debater and a columnist on the student newspaper. In 1957, having graduated with a master’s degree in law, he began writing a column on taxes for the *Winnipeg Free Press*.

Delving into his short-lived stint as a Liberal politician on the provincial scene, Edge says he staked out fiscal positions well to the right of most Liberals and even many Conservatives.

In the only election he ever contested, in 1973, Asper fared poorly. Though he won a seat in the legislature, he resigned two years later and declared himself a “free agent.”

Edge claims that the connections he made while leader helped him wield influence in the national Liberal party and to forge close relations with such figures as Jean Chretien and Paul Martin.

Edge spends far more time on his career as a successful businessman. As he observes, business enabled Asper to combine his legal and tax expertise with his knowledge of government.

He and a partner, Paul Morton, established an independent TV station in Winnipeg in the mid-1970s and then acquired a Toronto property, Global Television Network.

They expanded westward before moving eastward to Ontario and the Maritimes and abroad to New Zealand, Australia and Chile.

A Revisionist Zionist who admired Vladimir Jabotinsky and whose views coincided with the Likud party, Asper claimed that Israel was treated unfairly by the media, particularly by the Canadian Broadcast Corporation.

He called for the formation of “honest reporting response groups,” and made sure that his newspapers did not reflect an anti-Israel bias.

Edge notes that his children, David, Leonard and Gail, all trained lawyers, support his causes and are pro-Israel. When it comes to Israel, Leonard Asper, his successor as CanWest’s chief executive officer, is a chip off the old block.

In only one respect have the Aspers veered away from the old man’s mantra.

Instead of backing the Liberals, they openly supported the rejuvenated Conservatives under the leadership of Stephen Harper.

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