

PAAC E-News

Public Affairs: Your Online Newsletter

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[President's message](#)

A good idea whose time has come



by Elaine Flis
PAAC President

At the beginning of August, the federal Conservatives imposed new rules on their own party, under which Conservative candidates who lost in the last two elections will need special dispensation from the Conservative National Council to run a third time. Presumably, they wouldn't always get it. It sounds highly political, and it is - as the Harper Conservatives prepare to try to win a majority in the next election, it makes sense to offload their two-time losers. Still, they may be onto a good idea.

What's this? A Liberal agreeing with something Conservative? Well, why not? Even a blind dog finds a bone now and then, and so it seems can a conservative political group. As reported in the Globe and Mail, Don Plett, the president of the Conservative National Council, said it's more of a guideline than a rule: "We are very, very clearly not suggesting that, if a person has run twice, that they won't be allowed to run again. We may want to discuss the possibility of maybe that person running in a different riding." At other times, a good candidate would get clearance to run a third time - a likely example here would be John Capobianco, who in his second try at Etobicoke-Lakeshore in 2006 came in second only because Liberal superstar parachute candidate Michael Ignatieff was the unexpected opponent.

The Conservatives will probably want John to take another try, but most of the other 35 Conservatives in a similar position are likely to be asked to put the good of their party ahead of their ambitions. And that's the good idea I think is to be found here.

The public feels very cynical about politicians, and I think that reflects the fact that many elected officials, and those who strive to be elected, seem to have lost sight of their rightful place in the scheme of things. You get elected to serve the people. If they keep saying no and you keep running, that's trying to persuade the people to serve you.

I could take it further. Perhaps there's a role for term limits in Canadian politics. The idea has served the United States well in its highest office, and will soon do so again: President George Bush cannot seek a third term, even if the war takes a turn the American public can better accept. Had such a law been in effect here, Canada would have avoided what some felt was stagnation under a Chrétien government that continued beyond its prime.

The Harper Conservatives seem to have tapped into a good principle when they decided that people who run for nominations in the party twice or lose in general elections twice, have had a good run but it's time to set personal ambitions aside and make room for new people.

If new talent is good for a party, it's good for a country. Cynicism and self interest should have no place in politics.

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PAAC Award winner Coffey calls it a career

It was a bittersweet announcement that came to us at the top of the month, when we heard that Charlie Coffey, Executive Vice President, Government Affairs and Business Development at RBC Financial, called it a career. He retired, putting the cap on a distinguished 44 year career at RBC - a career in which he became a pioneer in all aspects of public affairs that translate to making a major institution into a good corporate citizen. For his efforts, Coffey won all sorts of accolades and recognition, including induction as an Officer of the Order of Canada.

Charles Coffey was also winner of the PAAC Award of Distinction in 2002, only the second such award given by our organization. It's presented annually to someone who shows skill, innovation and integrity in the field of public affairs. Charlie Coffey was a natural choice. His RBC initiatives included a National Children's Agenda and much work with First Nations in support of their goals of economic development and self-sufficiency, issues which Coffey pushed hard at all levels, with enthusiasm and commitment. When he spoke to PAAC the day he accepted the award he summed up his own attitude, as he often did, using the famous Nike ad slogan, Just Do It. "I must've packed that slogan in my suitcase," he told us, recalling his trip up the public affairs ladder. "I found myself using the phrase in meetings, in memos - even to my children."

Throughout his career, when Charlie Coffey saw something that needed doing, he just did it. His willingness to go to bat for Aboriginal people, a commitment that came to him after a transfer to Winnipeg during his banking career, was legendary. "After spending 20 years on Bay Street, I found myself on Main Street - Portage and Main in 1989. I was greatly disturbed by what I saw and heard there, and later on in remote communities. I made up my mind then to speak up and speak out on issues impacting Aboriginal people, issues keeping them from taking

their rightful place in Canadian society."

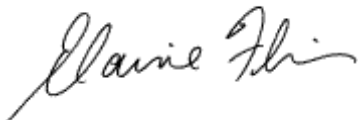
In his career with RBC, Coffey became a driving force in making the bank a good corporate citizen by doing good works for Aboriginals and other needful groups, and in so doing managed to prove that good works are good for business, too. One of the groups he championed was women, particularly women entrepreneurs seeking to make it in small business. He championed the cause of children, supporting early childhood development and family support programs at all political levels. In a career spanning more years than some of us in PAAC have lived, he accomplished much and set a fine example. He leaves a very large set of shoes to fill.

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And now, it is my pleasure to welcome the newest members to the Public Affairs Association of Canada:

- Karen Bodirsky, Rothmans, Benson and Hedges, Inc.
- Mary Meldrum, Freedom 55 Financial
- Lisa Schmidt Winsor, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health
- Gordon Cameron, Ontario Community Newspapers Association
- Marlene Yakabuski, BOT Construction Ltd.
- Chris Conway, REALpac

Please feel free to contact me with your input and suggestions, at eflis@enterprisecanada.com



[Event report](#)

Newsman critiques blogosphere: Written rebuke reaps rage

The guest speaker at our August 23 luncheon was journalist Adam Radwanski, who has been a columnist for *The Hill Times* and *The Ottawa Citizen*, was founder and editor of the late online Punditmag.com and currently makes his mark as columnist and editorial writer for *The National Post*. His presentation, *Blog Jam: How the New Media is Quickly Getting Old*, was based on what happened when Radwanski, a blogger himself, wrote a blunt criticism of the so-called 'blogosphere' in a July 31 *National Post* column.



Adam Radwanski, political affairs columnist for the National Post, was our guest speaker August 23.

Radwanski wasn't talking about *all* blogs of course. There are something like 12 million of these things originating in the U.S. alone, but most of them are personal vanity blogs about people's favourite hobbies, babies, vacations, rock bands, movie stars, handicrafts, sexual fetishes, recipes and cats. No, he was criticizing the thousands of blogs dedicated to political advocacy, only a relatively few of which are infused with anything resembling informed opinion.

His column, titled *Divided They Blog*, began, "Last week, a contributor to a popular Canadian weblog posted a blistering attack on Islam. Under the heading, 'Islam Must Be Stopped,' someone called 'Right Girl' weighed in on 'the devil that they call Allah,' labeled Islam 'a death cult' and called for the entire religion to be banned in Canada." Radwanski used that extreme example as the starting point for a scathing newspaper critique of blogs - meaning, of course, those popular 'web logs' which anyone with a computer and an attitude can post for public consumption - and how they've led to a degradation of public discourse. His presentation to PAAC was a reprise of that critique and a discussion of the whirlwind of reaction it reaped.

"What struck me was the response to Right Girl," he said. "If you went down the street saying this sort of thing, people would laugh it off or distance themselves from it or respond strongly against it." Yet, protected from consequence by the anonymity of the Internet, most of those responding felt free to support Right Girl's diatribe. Radwanski's written analysis of the reasons why earned him criticism similar in tone to that original anti-Islamic screed. "I could have written about going off and joining the Taliban and I would have gotten fewer responses," he said. One writer called Radwanski an elite no-talent nepotistic commentariat mafia-member....well, you get the idea.

An evolving trend

Responses like that represent an evolving trend. When the Internet first became widely available, many people put up web sites, often highly designed, complex ones. Later came the web logs - simple, easily updated web

pages on which everybody could be a writer without the inconvenience of learning the discipline.

Radwanski said that at one time he thought of the typical blogger as a rank amateur sitting in his underwear in his parents' basement, cranking out his online activism; a rebel without a clue. Yet these days good writers are also out there, and he was careful not to condemn all bloggers. "The blogosphere couldn't be more democratic," he said, "because everyone can participate." Some blogs are indeed useful, and many are even well written, but he said even the well written ones usually don't engage in debate but only preach to the faithful. "Most people read blogs where their views are being reinforced," he said. "What I see online is that, whatever your views, what it attracts is more of the same views."

The situation has degenerated, especially in U.S., to two sides - the political left and right - screaming at each other, hurling abuse and calling anyone who disagrees an elitist no-talent nepotistic running-dog lackey of whichever side the writer despises. On the left, we hear a constant chorus of criticality bemoaning the evils of George W. Bush, while from the right comes a rising rant of rebukes against Liberal media bias, Democrats controlling America and Hilary Clinton as the devil undisguised. "What is most troubling is that instead of looking for views that challenge their own, readers go to where they find views that reinforce their own." That leads not to political discourse but to polarization. "People who go online with more moderate views become more hard-line when exposed to this."



Listen to the other person - Above, Adam Radwanski (centre) along with PAAC Event Chair Ian Bacque (right) and guest Diane Slopek-Weber, Director of Corporate Communications with Tim Horton's (background), listen while someone poses a question at the luncheon session. Below: Marie-Pierre Guerin, Manager of GR at Telus (left) enjoys a chuckle with Radwanski (right) and Ian Bacque (centre) after the lunch.



Radwanski believes that newspapers, by contrast, feel a need to impose some form of balance on themselves regardless of their political bias - partly because real journalists are trained to do that, and partly because newspapers thrive on ad revenue and cannot afford to chase it away by alienating people. "In newspapers there is quality control," he said.

Meanwhile, the style of those political and faux journalistic blogs conditions people to seek out only like-minded views and to feel no responsibility to read other views and think about what they read. The result: Civilized political discourse is choked off, and thoughtful dialogue gives way to angry invective.

Radwanski sees this in the input he receives as a left-leaning columnist on an otherwise right-leaning paper. "I'm not surprised when I receive a letter about something I wrote," he said, "but I am surprised by the level of vitriol from people conditioned to not expect different views." Indeed, readers are conditioned not only by blogs but by an increasingly polarized array of right or left-wing books, right or left-wing commentators, and right or left-wing talk radio.

Free spirits

Of course, those free-spirited blogs do some good when they hold the traditional media to account, as bloggers did successfully when they exposed the false document behind Dan Rather's career-busting pre-election report on President Bush's war record, and as other critical blogs did more recently when they pointed out media manipulation in the Hezbollah-Israeli war, complete with some photos likely staged, and others tweaked with PhotoShop to be more dramatic. "When they hold the traditional media to a higher standard I'm all for it," Radwanski said, but he added, "What bothers me about all this - the books, the columns, and all those blogs - is that it's not going to change a single opinion."

The possibility of changing people's opinions, he seemed to be saying, is what makes calm, informed political discourse a good thing - that wonderful prospect that people can change their thinking when they learn something new. The erosion of that prospect is a loss.

Radwanski's stressed that his main examples of the belligerent blogosphere come from the United States. The Canadian situation is not so bad, he said, but we could get there. That's why Radwanski, in the classic Canadian way, argued for moderation rather than polarization. "We in political writing have a responsibility to uphold

the idea of strong political discourse."

-D.S.

[For blogophiles only](#)

Come blog with me

Adam Radwanski handed out printed copies of his July 31 article, *Divided They Blog*, at the August 23 luncheon, but if you weren't there [click here](#) to get to it online. You'll have to register as a Post subscriber.

If you would like to read another thoughtful article on the whole phenomenon of blogging and citizen journalism, Nicholas Lemann, writing in *The New Yorker*, offers a scholarly look at it.

For an interesting look at the use of cell phones as blogging tools, bringing ordinary people into the role of war reporting, read this item by Marsha Walton on CNN.

If you're interested in a detailed look at how bloggers exposed some apparent media manipulation in the recent Mideast war outbreak, [click here](#) for the startling and disturbing details of what may have been done for the sake of public relations in war.

Want a blog that will appeal to you if you're right-wing? Click over to David Frum's page. Want something that leans leftward? Click over to Warren Kinsella.

And of course, you shouldn't read about Adam Radwanski without checking it at his own blog site, Radwanski's Ramblings.

-D.S.

[The Book Man](#)

A near-perfect primer on modern techno-culture

The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century

By Thomas L. Friedman



Book review by Stewart Kiff

The World is Flat was first published in 2005 and since then has gone on to become an international bestseller and something of a non-fiction publishing phenomenon. It became such a powerhouse that author Thomas L. Friedman took the unusual step of publishing a revised version called "Release 2.0" with some 100 pages revised and updated. That's the one to buy.

This nearly 600 page tome is selling so well that in the 69 weeks since the release of the original it has held steadfast on the *Globe and Mail* bestseller list. It can also be found at Wal-Mart, which is truly indicative of mass market penetration. When an erudite and clever book like this makes the leap to that sort of mass market success here in Canada, there is clearly something special about it.

Thomas L. Friedman is no stranger to non-fiction success, but until this book he was primarily known for his foreign affairs column in the New York Times. His two previous books, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (1999) and *Longitudes and Attitudes: Exploring the World After September 11* (2002) proved Friedman has a gift for synthesizing the complex events of today's world into a straightforward and coherent narrative. His prose is light, his asides are entertaining, and his arguments compelling. He has a unique ability to draw the reader in, both with the warmth of his intelligence and his everyday observations written so succinctly.

The World is Flat is worth reading not only for the power of the author's craft but also because it has become so popular that it is on the verge of becoming, at least among those who read non-fiction, a common touchstone for our culture. Friedman's narrative about the 21st century has already had sufficient impact on how we regard modern history so that when you read it, his arguments, though original, will already have the air of the familiar.

I think the primary reason so many people have read this book is because Friedman succeeded at the Herculean task of compiling an understandable narrative about how the Internet and other recent technological advances have affected our world. His underlying thesis is that technological advance has in effect flattened the world. It has rendered distance irrelevant for those who are plugged into to the Internet and the technological advantages it provides. Unfortunately this book gives scant attention to people who are outside this admittedly small circle, which would have hindered the overall positive tone that Friedman strives for throughout this work.

We all know intuitively that after the arrival of the Internet, email and such powerful tools as Google, wireless phones, and digitization that we need a new paradigm for viewing the everyday world. What Friedman does in this book is give us a new world view by which to understand the changes that technology brought in the 21st century, and a useful analytical framework for dealing with these changes and working them into our everyday lives.

For those of you who read the original version of this book, Release 2.0 has a fair bit of new content on the concept and practice of uploading and the innovations that have burst upon the scene most recently, through blogging, podcasting and open source software. He also gives advice about how to survive and prosper in this

new world.

The latter part of the book undertakes the challenging task of outlining policies and means for society to remain at the forefront of technological advance. This part of the book, in particular, will resonate with anybody who has listened to recent Ontario or Canadian government policy pronouncements in favour of developing a knowledge economy and a culture of innovation. It seems as if Friedman has inspired Canadian public policy speech writers.

The World Is Flat is a rewarding and valuable read, and well worth investing the time it takes to read it.

Strongly Recommended.

NOTE: *The Hill Times*, in its Monday August 28, 2006 issue, reprinted an important excerpt from an upcoming book on the 2006 Federal Election in an article called *The Media and the Campaign* by Christopher Waddell and Christopher Dornan. This is the first substantive research-based review of the 2006 election that I have seen. It is well worth reading for some unusual insights on this last crucial election campaign; not the least of which was that the *National Post* gave the NDP the most balanced election coverage of all the major dailies.

-S.K.

PAAC member Stewart Kiff is the President of Solstice Public Affairs. He welcomes your feedback and suggestions, and can be reached at stewart@solsticecanada.ca.

[The Web Editor](#)

News activism and the death of subtlety

by David Silburt
PAAC Web Editor

America's most astute political observer had an interesting comment recently when the new 'democratic' government of Afghanistan declared that its media should henceforth cover news in a way that reflects well on that government. Jay Leno said, "See, in Afghanistan they don't have FOX News."

Touché. What Adam Radwanski said about the blogosphere is not unique to it, and may not even have originated there. There is nothing bloggish about FOX. It's a mainstream news organization, yet its coverage has been so widely associated with championing the right that people joke about it, including Leno, who is just as happy to take a poke at the political left as the right. The flip side of media bias is equally obvious. Shortly after Radwanski's presentation, this department took a renewed look at the daily paper arriving with a pompous *thump* at the front door every morning and realized it was saying pretty much the same things all the time: Liberals good, Conservatives bad; George Bush bad, Democrats better, give peace a chance, and here's your daily roundup of who is noble and who isn't. Solution: Cancel that paper and order up the Post instead, because if they lean right but have room for Radwanski, maybe they offer a better hope for balance. As a one-time Toronto newspaperman named Hemingway might have said about it, isn't it pretty to think so.

Blogs are indeed polarized, but the very fact that newspapers are prepared to bill themselves as Liberal or Conservative may indicate something more is happening to public discourse than what Radwanski pointed out about the blogosphere. Speaking as a newsman, he said newspapers have quality control. Yet a critical reader might also conclude that traditional journalistic outlets have for years been gradually setting aside their old role of reporting the truth as disinterested observers. Instead they have promoted themselves from observers to umpires, making their rulings on world events, seeking to change people's opinions from wrong to proper, which can mean moving public opinion to the left or right, depending on the publication. What's different about newspapers is that their writers do this with subtlety, and bloggers usually don't. That's because bloggers are new on the scene; newspaper people are old hands at it.

A left-wing paper might allow a right-wing guest columnist on their op-ed page, carefully chosen for his tendency to sound like a bigot. Then they let the readers have at him on the letters page. Or, a right-wing paper might allow a left-wing guest writer to contribute an article, the guest writer chosen for his or her tendency to write in left-wing clichés guaranteed to sound silly to their target readers, thus promoting the paper's agenda rather than expanding the discussion. It's subtle. Rather than call George W. Bush a witless trigger-happy cowboy, a newspaper with a left-leaning editorial board might just arrange for the phrase "blazing six-guns" to appear close to the Bush reference, or position a goofy editorial cartoon nearby. An event reported as an heroic military victory against the Taliban in one publication will be reported with a focus on our war casualties in its left-wing competitor, and the word Vietnam just happens to be mentioned nearby in the copy. Subtlety is the key in mainstream journalism, and most bloggers are too amateurish to use it.

Newsmen have long understood that a subtle slant is better than an angry rant when the goal is to manage public thought, but the polarizing effect of bloggers is eroding that axiom. When people come right out and say things that would be spiked for political incorrectness in the mainstream media, they offend readers who don't share the bias - and cause them to look more carefully for similar bias, even when it's covert. That makes bloggers guilty of something far more offensive to the mainstream than trying to polarize opinions with an overt, ham-fisted style that newspapers quite properly avoid. It makes them guilty of weakening an entire established industry of opinion sales and service. Because Radwanski is right. Extremist blogs don't change people's opinions. They cause people harden their opinions and look carefully for bias. And find it.

Newspapers that respond to this trend by trying even harder to sell their own opinions risk becoming too obvious about it. Some have. Newspapers that step back from this trend by encouraging people to think rather than telling them what to think, have a chance to remain relevant. If covert activism doesn't work when people detect it, then perhaps honesty may yet come back into style.

Wouldn't it be pretty to think so?

Have your say

We welcome member input, whether it's a letter to the editor, a story suggestion or a proposal for a guest column. Feel free to email your input or suggestions to us. All submissions for publication on this site are subject to approval by the Editorial Board.

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Writer/Editor: David Silburt

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