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A PRESS COUNCIL SET UP IN ONTARIO

Unit, Canada's First, Aims at
Public Role in Newspapers

By JAY WALZ

Special to The New York Times

OTTAWA, Aug. 19—A group of leading Ontario publishers has just set up a press council to promote the confidence of readers in the newspapers of the province.

The Ontario Press Council is the first such body established in response to a recommendation made a year ago by the Canadian Senate Committee on Mass media. The committee called for a national press council to give readers an open, independent forum to air their complaints and to protect the freedom of the press.

The new council—founded by eight of Ontario's larger daily papers, representing about half the daily newspaper readership in Ontario—is conceded to be only a first step toward a national council. But a group of publishers in Quebec has announced plans to set up a similar organization.

A visit to the headquarters of the Ontario Press Council, which was opened this week in an office building here, have already begun to come in.

Ready for Anything

"We're ready for any complaints—from the public or the press," said the council chairman, Davidson Dunton, who recently resigned as president of Ottawa's Carleton University.

Fraser MacDougall, a journalist who has accepted appointment as the council's executive secretary, showed a growing pile of correspondence. "Complaints," he said. Some had to do with the handling of specific published articles. Others were more general criticism of news coverage.

The council—patterned after the British Press Council, which was formed in 1953—is committed to serving both as watchdog and ombudsman. But it will also seek to improve the image of newspapers as guardians of freedom of the press.

"Public confidence in the press remains at a pretty high level," Mr. MacDougall said. "But in the increasingly complex society that newspapers set out to portray, there is bound to be more and more questioning. In the old days, any reader could walk into the editor's office and tell him what was wrong with his paper, but that direct communication is no longer possible."

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Organization of Council

The council is to have 21 members. The papers will have 10 "professional" representatives drawn from publishers, managing editors, editors, reporters and the advertising staff. Ten more "public" members are now being selected by the 10 newspaper representatives, and by Mr. Dunton, who is the 21st member.

The Senate committee, whose inquiry led to the formation of the Ontario council, found the press in Canada in a generally lethargic state. The committee, headed by Senator Keith Davey, a Toronto Liberal, attributed the condition, in part, to a concentration of ownership and power "now growing to alarming proportions."

More than half of Canada's 107 dailies, the committee found, are owned by three groups—the Free Press, Southam and Thomson, a chain of 28 Canadian newspapers owned by Lord Thomson of Fleet, publisher of The Times of London.

The Davey committee recommended a voluntary press council, through which newspapers might give the public a greater voice in the handling of the news.

'An Independent Forum'

Beland Honderich, publisher of The Toronto Star, an independently owned newspaper whose weekday circulation of 545,000 makes it Canada's largest and wealthiest daily, agreed with the Senate committee. A press council, he has argued, would "both safeguard the freedom of the press and also provide the public with an independent forum to deal with complaints against newspapers."

Mr. Honderich took charge of organizing the Ontario Press Council, whose eight members, in addition to the Star, are the Kitchener-Waterloo Record, the London Free Press and five newspapers of the Southam group: the Ottawa Citizen, Hamilton Spectator, Brantford Expositor, Windsor Star and Owen Sound Sun-Times.

The council, in an outline of objectives, pledges itself to "preserve freedom of the press," and to "encourage the highest ethical, professional and commercial standards of journalism." It will consider complaints not only from the public, but from "members of the press about the conduct of individuals or organizations toward the press." No complaint will be considered until "the complainant has given the newspaper an opportunity to satisfy the complaint."

Since the council is not obliged to hear complaints involving nonmembers, its jurisdiction is far from complete. And until a nationwide council is created, there is no chance to consider the implications of the trend towards concentration of control and monopoly that the Davey committee found to be advancing so ominously in Canada.