ON WRITING CONTEMPORARY HISTORY - The text of an address to the Canadian Club of Toronto, delivered on November 4, 1968, by Peter C. Newman, Ottawa Editor, Toronto Daily Star.

The Distemper Of Our Times does not pretend to be history. It is journalism. History is a much loftier affair. History requires perspective, the distance in time that allows a historian to reduce many diverse trends into some kind of unity, relating all the vital movements of an epoch to one another.

Journalism, on the other hand, written while moving along the advancing edge of the present, offers few definitive conclusions. By choice and by necessity the journalist must labour on the other side of the barricades from the politicians. He is -- and must remain -- the objective outsider looking in, taking tentative soundings of events and reporting his results.

It is the difference between a war correspondent who is at the fighting front sending back despatches on the course of a battle, and the historian who records with the dispassion of retrospect what happened, and why.

Still, I firmly believe that the validity of books like THE DISTEMPER OF OUR TIMES lies in the fact that important political events should be recorded from a contemporary viewpoint, as well as being exhumed decades later. As T.H. White, the American author recently remarked, "history written later isn't necessarily better history. It's just different history. Each generation re-writes history in terms of its own pre-occupations and problems."

Journalism does not really compete with history. The historian performs an invaluable function of interpreting the past to his contemporaries; the journalist interprets the present, in the hope of casting some light on the future.

The advantage of the journalist is that unlike the historian, he is not a dispassionate chronicler of events. He is a sharer in the experiences of his times. Not for him the dry, dusty investigations after the fact which separate him from his material. Trapped in the turmoil of the moment, he transmits to posterity the raw emotions he himself has experienced. For example, the 1965 election campaign, which changed Canadian politics very little, will probably be dismissed by historians as an event of no consequence.

But they didn't spend six weeks on John Diefenbaker's campaign train, as I did, jolting into small Prairie towns at twenty-minute intervals. I remember the little Kiwanis Club bands on the station platforms playing RULE BRITANNIA, and the old pioneers exchanging anecdotes with John Diefenbaker, crying as the train pulled out again, crying not so much for a man they had admired, as for themselves, because their way of life was on its way out, and even though they had built this country, they now felt irrelevant and lost. (BIRD story)

Viewing such events, the scholar, all passion spent, in calm command of the historical realities, will paint a quite different picture. The passage of time will give him the perspective he needs for objective analysis. But he will not have tasted the noises, the smells and the tensions of the events themselves. He will also, incidentally, have the advantage of the happy fact that there will be no survivors to challenge his reconstruction of the time hs is describing. This is an advantage I don't have.

The writing of history comes down to a process of selection. Truth is not necessarily the sum of all the ascertainable facts. Once an event has happened, it disappears into the mist of the past. It can never be replayed. The totality of events, particularly the problems of individual motivation, are mysterious when they happen. After they've happened, they're gone; the mystery is permanent and irreducible. And so both the journalist and the historian are faced with a welter of facts from which they must make a relevant selection.

It is the character of the evidence they pick which establishes the framework within which they write. Selection of facts, of course, is just another word for interpretation and interpretation implies a scale of values, a sense that some things matter more than others.

My own method is to collect all the material I can. I used 25% of what I had for this book. I had eight file drawers full and had to rent an office to hold it. I had three main sources for my material. My own observations of events as they happen; tape-recorded, off-the-record interviews with most of the principals involved in any political crisis; and a set of diaries kept for me by some of the major participants in these crises.

Some of my critics claim that I should reveal my sources. But I believe that it is the historian's duty to list sources; it is the journalist's obligation to protect the privacy of those who have befriended him with information. I wrote this book as a journalist.

As a matter of fact I had about a thousand sources. I tried to be so thorough that during one of my trips to Prince Albert, I even had my hair cut by Mr. Diefenbaker's favourite barber. I'd like to say that this intrepid bit of research yielded some pearl of insight into Mr. Diefenbaker's character. But actually, all the barber said was: "Well, John's always treated me right" -- and it wasn't much of a haircut either. Fortunately some of my other sources were more productive.

In the past, academic historians could challenge journalists trying to write contemporary history because the release of documents of a prime minister and other important political figures was needed before his record could be fairly judged. But this was before the revolution in the technology of communications, especially the use of the typewriter and the telephone. In Sir John A. Macdonald's time, historians could depend on hand-written documents which contained a government's record in its entirety. With a quill pen, a prime minister could write only a limited number of letters. But the use of the typewriter has vastly increased the flow of paper out of a PM's office, while the telephone has greatly decreased the importance

of written documentation. There are more documents but there is less in them. If a contemporary statesman has something to communicate, if speed and secrecy are of the essence, he will confide his messages not to a letter but to the telephone. Until wiretapping becomes a skill of the Canadian Historical Association, there can be no permanent record of these transactions. It's interesting that one of the first things Pierre Elliott Trudeau did when he moved into the Prime Minister's office last spring was to install an intercom which connects him with all of his important assistants, individually or simultaneously for hurried on-the-spot conferences. There will be no inter-office memos in his legacy to the national archives.

In compiling their documentations, historians -- both the academic and journalistic varieties -- nose about in chaos, defining their themes, organizing their narrative, setting scenes, dramatizing conflicts, evoking characters and atmosphere. In this process there are limits to their capacity for invention, but there need be none on their capacity for insight.

One of the most serious accusations made against contemporary historians is that they are not objective. If objectivity means fairness and accuracy, then of course, the journalist must be rigorously loyal to his own sense of evidence and he must present an objective picture. But if objectivity means merely impartiality, then I reject it as a proper criterion both for journalism and history.

Truth must be based on an interplay between fact and opinion, and the two are inextricable. Strict neutrality is as undesirable as it is impossible. The reporter is not a transmission machine. When he is sent out, even on the simplest story, he collects, say, fifty facts. Out of these he may select twelve as being important enough to be included in his story. He then picks one to put in his lead. And already he has made two important, not strictly objective judgments. His editor, if he decides to run the story, puts it on page one of his paper, or on page 38 -- again, hardly an objective judgment. Let me stress, I am not talking about accuracy. Naturally, it is essential. The famous American publisher Joseph Pulitzer once said: "Accuracy is to a newspaper what virtue is to a lady."

This may have not been putting it too strongly -- after all, newspapers can always print retractions.

My case for the legitimacy of contemporary history really comes down to the fact of the acceleration of history. The present is becoming the past very much more quickly. What in other, more tranquil times we perceived as "the past" now is chronologically much closer as change becomes the function not of decades but of days. The frightening fact is that the world is changing faster than we can change ourselves. We can not apply the habits of the past to the present. It is no longer possible to impose on a transformed world the theories and assumptions that worked in the past.

No where is this revolution more prevalent than in the intensification and volume of communications. Television, of course, is the medium that has changed the message. By 1970, only two years from now, Canada's population will be 50% higher than it was in 1951, the year before national TV began in this country. A new television generation has been created. But newspapers will never disappear. The adroit use of television by the politicians has made it possible to maintain the nation in a constant state of political mobilization. The whole country has become a huge whispering gallery, with political triumphs and errors flashed from coast to coast as they happen.

The need to know has become more desperate than ever before. And in the kind of participatory democracy promised by Pierre Trudeau, the right to know has become an essential factor -- the rights of the citizen of a democracy to have all the possible information, favourable or not, regarding the character of public problems, the motives and effects of public policy. The journalist-writer of contemporary history thus serves not only the cause of historic truth, but his nation's cause of democratic responsibility.

It is this revolution in communications, which Lester Pearson never fully understood and which caused his stewardship to be so flawed.

Lester Pearson was a statesman conditioned by the long-dead era of quiet diplomacy -- a product of a school of government that truly encompassed an elite -- a group of politicians and bureaucrats who were nominally the leaders of a democracy, but who really held power over a quiescent electorate. In the teens and twenties of this century Canada had an electorate that was still largely uneducated, still plagued by class differences; in the thirties an electorate that was numbed by depression; in the forties, an electorate that was diverted by war; and in the fifties (or most of them) an electorate that was fat and groggy with boom.

But in the sixties, Pearson and his ministers had to keep balancing themselves on top of an electorate in turmoil, caused by an uneasy internal situation, the gradual decomposition of the NATO alliance, and more important, by the fact that western society was undergoing the most rapid and most radical technological changes in the history of man. What Pearson had to deal with -- even if he seldom seemed to realize it -- was a true democracy, an electorate that figured it had a right to know, that wanted an open government, to know not just what is decided, but how it is decided; an electorate that wanted genuinely to participate in government; interested not in unctuous words, but in facts. People -- particularly young people -- increasingly demanded

to know not just the news, but the action. They didn't want excuses, or even reasons. They wanted results.

The communications revolution is not just a matter of new techniques. North America has become a society whose consciousness has been substantially transformed. The electronic revolution has overturned the traditional patterns of thought and behaviour. The young people -- who make up half the electorate -- do not, according to Marshall McCluhan, "look for ways of relating themselves to the world. They demand instead a participation mystique." That's why the attitude of politicians toward the concept of open government is one of the touchstone issues that marks the dividing line between political generations.

The new society is a mass society precisely in the sense that the mass of the population has become incorporated into society. The center of society -- the central institutions, and the central value systems which guide and legitimate these institutions -- have extended its boundaries.

Most of the population now stands in a closer relationship to the power center than has been the case in either pre-modern societies or in the earlier phases of modern society. Previously, a substantial portion of the population, often the majority, were born and forever remained "outsiders". Mass society has aroused and enhanced individuality. This individuality is characterized by an openness to experience, an efflorescence of sensation, a sensitivity to other minds and personalities.

This is why the job of the political journalist has changed. No longer can he merely report the news. He must take a much more activist stance. He must move in, while policies are still being debates. If he does not illuminate the dark corners of the political arena, policies will have become so hardened by the time the politicians deem to make them public that nothing can be done to change them.

The role of the media cannot be over-estimated. The Soviet Government recently sent its tanks rolling into Prague for one purpose and one purpose only: to regain control of the news media. The first objectives of the Soviet invaders were the editorial offices of the newspapers and the underground radio and television stations.

The politicians shy away from open government because they prefer to discuss the issues in the hermatic sanctity of their offices and the Cabinet chamber. In my book, I describe the Pearson Cabinet as resembling "a troupe of shy acrobats performing in a half-illuminated circus tent before the audience is admitted. Here in unassailable privacy they did their tricks for one another, then basked in their own applause. But when their elaborate ploys were tested in parliament before a live audience the acrobatics seldom worked, and many ministers ended up doing a flop-dive into the safety nets."

The conflict between the men who make and the men who report the news is as old as time. The best definition of the correct relationship between journalists and government was published in 1851, by the Times of London:

> "The Press can enter into no close or binding alliances with the statesmen of the day, nor can it surrender its permanent interests to the convenience of the ephemeral power of any Government. The first duty of the Press is to obtain the earliest and most correct intelligence of the events of the time, and instantly, by disclosing them, to make them

the common property of the nation.

The statesman collects his information secretly ... The Press lives by disclosures."

In performing their proper function, newspapers will have to change drastically during the next few years. Seldom any longer is the newspaper the first messenger of spot news or the great picture story. Its new role, surely is in the field of thoughtful explanation. We are no longer in the transmitting but the education business. We shall have to expand considerably both our scope and our coverage. Governments, for example, are not transforming the world. It is the fertility and anarchism of the people. All that most governments are doing, it seems to me, is rushing around trying to keep up with the consequences of what is

happening outside their offices.

Allow me one heresy: I believe that the analysis of news is too serious a matter to be left to newspapermen. We shall have to reach out for experts in every field, publish their thoughts and opinions, their analyses of current developments. The letters to the editor column must become, not a forum for crackpots, but an exciting place for the exchange of ideas and even for criticism of the papers themselves.

Every country is a mystery composed of the lives of many men. But at no time does a nation learn more about itself than during a period of extended crisis, such as Canada has experienced in the past decade.

What we desperately need, it seems to me -- and the newspapers can provide the necessary leadership -- is to develop some kind of coherent philosophy -- or at least outlook -- about Canada's place in the world and a way of looking at the internal and external problems that seem continually threatening to engulf us. Otherwise, I fear that the constant pressure of events will drive us into either a state of indifference, which is a menace to democratic government, or a condition of constant anxiety, which destroys both a tolerant public opinion and private tranquility.

Canadian society -- both French and English -- is in a state of unprecedented turmoil. Power is changing hands as it is reluctantly being ceded by one generation to the next. And impatiently awaiting their turn is a still much younger group, the first generation of Canadians in this century who will have no personal memories of either the great depression or even World War II.

You can sense this generation quietly deserting the established patterns of Canadian politics. The new society that is gradually coming into being will overturn most of the smug assumptions, delicate balances and the closed character of the Canadian political process.

By the time the next federal election rolls around, probably in 1972, 59% of the Canadian population will be under 30. This trend is set and no amount of political rhetoric will make it go away. This should not be a cause for despair. Generational rivalry has always been the main engine of political reform, and this new post-Beatle generation is challenging its elders, questioning the traditional view of every human exchange, from the sex act to the political rally.

In this turmoil, no institution is in greater danger than parliament. The clouds of banalities which frequently blur and muffle the great debates in the House of Commons are no longer good enough.

We share with most western democracies what I consider to be the central political dilemma of the twentieth century, namely how the executive branch of government can be set free from the paralyzing grip of the legislative assembly, without, at the same time, destroying the democratic process.

In Canada's case, this dilemma is made much more critical by the fact that we simultaneously must contend with a deep-running French-English crisis. The two problems are not mutually exclusive. Our parliament is clearly an Anglo-Saxon institution. If we cannot find some way of making it effective, we will subtract -- perhaps decisively -- from the reasons Quebec must discover for staying within Confederation.

In the history of every nation, there are examples of the enormous momentum that can be developed when a whole people feels itself at one with its institutions -- particularly parliament. This was true of Canada during the first and third regimes of Sir John A. MacDonald, the second term of Sir Wilfrid Laurier, the early years of the St. Laurent regime, the brief 1957-58 session of the first Diefenbaker Parliament, and the first few days of the Pearson administration. We must hope that Pierre Trudeau can recapture this mood.

It's far too early to assess Pierre Elliott Trudeau as a prime minister. He's been in office for only six months. Six months after John Diefenbaker was first elected, during the action-filled 1957-58 parliamentary session, it looked as if he would be the best prime minister we've ever had. Six months after Lester Pearson got in following the disaster of the "sixty days of decision", it looked as if he would be the worst prime minister we've ever had. Neither was the case.

But I think in Trudeau's performance to date, we are already seeing a similar phenomenon to his three predecessors. It's a strange thing that so many of us are astonished and disappointed that a man who becomes prime minister isn't instantaneously transformed into a

golden, shimmering figure, jettisoning the attitudes of his lifetime. Louis St. Laurent, for example, spent most of his life as a corporation lawyer, sitting on the boards of many important companies. When he became prime minister he was condemned for acting too much like the chairman of a corporate board. Before he came to Ottawa John Diefenbaker never even had an office to administer and expended all of his considerable energy fighting to defend the underdogs in dusty Prairie courtrooms. When he became prime minister he was condemned for being too much of a lone wolf, for not administering his office well and for being too concerned with individual rights.

Lester Pearson spent thirty years as a diplomat before he became a politician and then he was condemned for being too diplomatic. Now, we have a prime minister who spent most of his life as a professor of constitutional law. And already there are complaints that he's too legalistic and that he tends to lecture the House of Commons.

You cannot fairly condemn men for what they are.

In judging prime ministers, I think you have to take into account that each of them has two very different kinds of reputations. There is the repute with which he is held within his own circle in Ottawa, among his assistants and senior civil servants. Then there is his

popularity in the country at large. Very few men have been able to maintain both these reputations. John Diefenbaker lost the respect of the civil servants, though they tried hard to serve him, by tailoring all his policies toward "the average Canadian", with little regard to their fiscal or administrative feasibility. When his government stopped working, he lost his popular following too, and he was thrown out of office. Lester Pearson, always cared much more for his professional reputation than his public image. As a result, he could never achieve an electoral majority, and eventually resigned. So far, Pierre Elliott Trudeau has been able to balance both reputations: his ability to win a parliamentary majority on June 25 proved his appeal

to the people and he is, at the moment, very popular with Ottawa's bureaucratic mandarins.

His future is impossible to predict, but my strong impression is that Pierre Trudeau will manage to maintain the high repute in which he's held in Ottawa only by drastically changing the system. There are already indications of the direction in which he is moving. His staff of 28 is the strongest retinue of advisors ever retained by a Canadian prime minister. In many ways it resembles a kind of miniature, northern version of Washington's White House staff, with its own intelligence network, called "regional desks." Also, by rationing his ministers during parliamentary question periods, Trudeau is moving toward a situation which would not require the executive

to constantly sit in the representative assembly -- this is, of course, the congressional system.

It wouldn't surprise me if out of the series of constitutional conferences which will take place in Ottawa during the next decade, Canada emerges with a completely new system of government. Pierre Elliott Trudeau may become the first President of Canada.

This is not, I must stress, as yet any consciously thought-out position on his part, nor would it be an intended slight to the monarchy. But no prime minister in Canadian history has been more concerned with the efficiency of the federal government and I think that Monsieur Trudeau sees the only hope of

reform in a fundamental shift to a completely new system. It may be that we will end up with the best features of both the parliamentary and the congressional systems, a step that would be firmly within the Canadian political tradition.

Let me conclude by setting out my theory for the criteria by which successful prime ministers must be judged.

The function of democratic leadership, it seems to me, is to respect the past, convince the present and enlarge the future.

My ideal prime minister would be a man atuned to change, both economic and social. He would have that special brand of courage which Ernest Hemingway once called "grace under pressure". He would be aggressive without being

contentious; decisive without being arrogant and compassionate without being confused. He would respect ideas, but not substitute them for action. He would be a master of prose, but not become intoxicated by his own.

He would be pragmatic, but only up to a point, so that he would always know when to spurn the arithmetics of expediency. He would be articulate and forceful enough to involve the people, including his opponents, in his struggles on behalf of Canadian nationhood.

Such a leader would set out clear goals for this country and its two great societies, on the basis, not of public opinion polls, but from his own strong sense of national necessities. Instead of participating quietly in the lottery of history, he would be capable of

gripping events on the move and have the kind of impact that would reveal the character of the country to itself. The very force of his personality would become a unifying influence for the nation at large. What we need in this country is a man who can help all of us find a way to grow, both as individuals and as a nation.

We must all hope that Pierre Elliott Trudeau -- who will be the subject of my next book -- turns out to be just such a man.

Thank you very much.