

Editorial ? What value election endorsements?

This newspaper is not in the habit of endorsing political parties at election time.

And if ever there was a justification for such a policy, it surely was found in what happened in the recent federal election, when the Liberals swept into power despite the fact that nearly every daily newspaper in the country told its readers they should re-elect the Harper Conservatives.

And in Toronto, the Liberals swept every Commons seat despite the fact three of the four dailies endorsed the Tories, the sole exception being the usually pro-Liberal Toronto Star. (We say 'usually' because in fact the Star endorsed the NDP in the previous election.)

What we didn't know until after the election was that not all the Conservative endorsements necessarily reflected the opinions of the editorial boards. In fact, it now appears that, in a move reminiscent of the William Randolph Hearst era, the editorial boards of all the major dailies published by Postmedia were told in advance by Carl Godfrey, the chain's chief executive officer, that they must endorse the Tories.

For veteran readers of the Ottawa Citizen and the Winnipeg Free Press, this must have been more than a little disconcerting, both publications having tended to be pro-Liberal when they were part of the Southam chain and had strongly pro-Conservative competitors in the Ottawa Journal and Winnipeg Tribune.

Godfrey's action provoked John Honderich, former editor and publisher of the Toronto Star and now board chairman of the parent Torstar Corp., to write an opinion piece Monday decrying it as having a 'negative impact . . . on the newspaper industry in general.' Under the Godfrey edict, each of 16 major Postmedia papers was allowed to have its own endorsement editorial, so long as it wound up endorsing the Conservatives.

'Since God made babies, I think (such editorials) were always made that way,' Godfrey said later in defending his action. 'If anyone thinks otherwise, I think they were dreaming in Technicolor.'

Disagreeing, Honderich suggested examination of the policies of other newspaper chains would 'tell an entirely different bedtime story of the so-called 'proprietor's prerogative'.

'No one can dispute the tradition of an individual publisher or owner calling the election shots for their local paper. Godfrey did that regularly when he was publisher of the Toronto Sun. But to dictate the choice across an entire chain ? and nation. That is an entirely different tale.'

We wonder. We don't know, but suspect that all the Sun Media papers owned by Quebecor were in the Harper stable, whether or not they got orders from head office.

And we strongly suspect that the Thomson family, owners of The Globe and Mail, had something to do with that newspaper's bizarre endorsement of the Conservatives ? an editorial that actually suggested re-election of the Tories would lead to removal of Stephen Harper as party leader.

If nothing else, the Globe editorial's ludicrous stance could be seen as indicating that the writers wanted readers to ignore the advice, which they undoubtedly did.

Interestingly, a more recent Globe editorial recommending actions the new government should take looked as if it had been taken from the Grits' election platform.

In the end we're left wondering what value, if any, is to be found in such endorsements. Has there ever been a public opinion poll aimed at finding how many (if any) voters changed their minds as a result of reading such editorials?

Our strong suspicion is that in an era when daily newspapers' circulations are falling, voter inclinations are affected much more by television newscasts that show what's really happening out there. And for those who still read the dailies, they will tend to be swayed far more by news reports and thoughtful columns than by 11th-hour editorial-page endorsements.

If nothing else, the current controversy convinces us we've been right in staying strictly 'on the fence.'