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# COMMENT

## Schools ever more boy-unfriendly

IAN HUNTER

A few years ago the Law Faculty at which I then taught held a "retreat" (in retrospect, this was just the right description) at a hotel in downtown London, Ont.; the purpose of the gathering was to bridge the chasm between a dwindling group of (mostly male) professors who thought our purpose was to teach students the essentials of law in order that they might become competent practitioners, and the younger ideologues (mostly women) who thought the law school's mission was to reshape society in accordance with feminist theory.

A male colleague — thoroughly decent and an excellent classroom teacher — ventured to suggest that he treated all his students equally; as an example, he mentioned that he always recognized the first hand raised in response to any question. He got no further. One of our feminists indignantly cut him off, demanding if he didn't know that "studies have shown" that females are less likely to answer a professor's question and, if they do, they raise their hands more slowly? Therefore, to acknowledge the first hand raised was, ipso facto, discrimination. My abashed colleague acknowledged he was unaware of such studies, which provoked a chorus of demands for sensitivity workshops, etc.

I recalled this incident when I read Christina Hoff Sommers recent book: *The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism is Harming Our Young Men*. Sommers' previous book (*Who Stole Feminism?*) did not endear her to the ladies of the fevered brow, but their scorn and hostility has apparently not deterred her.

Here she demonstrates how the institutional change wrought by two decades of feminist pressure on elementary and secondary schools has destroyed educational opportunities for boys. Sommers' focus is the United States, but it would be surprising if her conclusions are any less valid in Canada.

Boys lag girls (by about a year and a half) in reading and writing. Boys do less homework than girls and are more likely to drop out of school. Boys are less involved in extracurricular activities. Boys are more involved in drugs, alcohol and crime. Boys are more likely than girls to be diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder; a staggering 95% of children prescribed Ritalin (for hyperactivity) are male. Boys are five times as likely to commit suicide.

So complete has been the institutional triumph of feminism that little is being done to address these realities. After two decades of feminist "studies," educational bureaucrats, principals and teachers choose the path of least resistance. The result is our

schools have become girl-friendly, but inhospitable for many boys. William Pollack, a Harvard clinical psychiatrist, has called schools "the most boy-unfriendly places on Earth."

Two years ago, elementary schools in Atlanta, Ga., eliminated recess because otherwise boys would rough-house. One school went further and got rid of the school playground altogether. The ideal (which Hoff Sommers calls "feminizing boys") is to have boys socialize and play like girls. Only when Barbie is the toy of choice, irrespective of gender, will ideologues be content.

Hasbro, a U.S. toy firm, decided recently that the moment was right to market a unisex playhouse and assembled representative little boys and girls to try it out. "It soon emerged that boys and girls did not interact with the structure in the same way," Hoff Sommers writes. "The girls dressed the dolls, kissed them and played house; the boys catapulted the toy baby carriage from the roof."

For that declining proportion of boys who make it through our feminized elementary and secondary schools and wind up at a university (where the undergraduate composition, today, is 55% female), they will find themselves at institutions that would have been unrecognizable to their fathers.

Institutions where the budget for the equity office may exceed the budget for the library to purchase books. Where administrators turn

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a blind eye to academic offences such as cheating, but come down hard on any student who might give a sexist chant at a football game. Where faculty are no longer chosen for their knowledge of the subject and ability to teach it, but because administrators seek to fill a certain profile based on race, sex or sexual orientation.

When I heard my feminist colleague tell about how girls raise their hands more slowly in class, I confess I laughed at her. But, in the twinkling of an eye, it seems, she triumphed; overnight universities became places I found difficult to recognize.

There is no silver lining in the feminist triumph in the universities, any more than in their triumph in the public schools; if there is a leaden lining it is that boys who make it to university, following 12 years of such feminized public schools, will experience little culture shock.

Ian Hunter is professor emeritus in the Faculty of Law at the University of Western Ontario.

## Another question for the Ethics Counsellor

It's worth noting how other jurisdictions handle interest conflicts

ANDREW STARK

At the center of the conflict-of-interest controversy surrounding the Prime Minister is the following provision from the federal Conflict of Interest Code: "Public office holders shall not have private interests ... that would be affected particularly or significantly by government actions in which they participate." It's entirely possible, of course, for an official to have taken an action that affects his private interests, and yet be a person of sufficient integrity that he simply shuttered out his personal stake and made his decisions strictly on the merits. The problem is that to know this for sure, we would have to open up his mind and rummage through it, something we cannot do. So we have a conflict-of-interest rule that says "don't even go there." Don't even raise this question and force us to entertain it; as citizens we've got too many other things on our agenda. We trust you not to go there, and if you do, you've violated that trust. If you want to continue to hold interest X, then stay away from any official actions that would affect it. If you want to participate in actions that affect X, then cease to have any interest in its financial performance. That's all we ask.

Did the Prime Minister participate in a government action that affected his personal interest? No one disputes he participated in a government action; he contacted the Business Development Bank and urged it to approve a loan to the Grand-Mère hotel in his riding. What's at dispute is whether, in doing so, the Prime Minister affected a private interest he might have had in the golf club next door.

For two reasons, the Prime Minister — supported by the Ethics Counsellor, Howard Wilson — answers this question in the negative. First, he says, he sold his interest in the golf club in 1993. Second, even if he continued to hold an interest in the golf club, it was the adjacent hotel he assisted, and the two are separate legal and financial entities.

Last week, debate focused on the first claim, with the Opposition noting that even if the Prime Minister sold his golf-club shares to businessman Jonas Prince in 1993, he wasn't paid for them until 1999. Since the Prime Minister knew he wouldn't be paid until a buyer was found for Mr. Prince's shares — and since a buyer would be easier to find to the extent that the golf club was viable — the Prime Minister continued to have an interest in the financial well-being of the golf club throughout the 1990s even if he was no longer an owner.

This week, attention is moving to the second claim: What were the links between the hotel and the golf course? The Prime Minister, supported by Mr. Wilson, claims there were no links. "There is no financial or legal relationship between the golf course and the neighbouring" hotel, the Prime Minister has said; they are "two entirely separate en-

titles," Mr. Wilson insists. The Opposition, for its part, points to package deals the hotel offered jointly with the golf course, or to statements made by the hotel's owner, Yvon Duhaime, that suggest ongoing links between the two.

Here, as in other aspects of the case, it's worth considering how other jurisdictions handle a similar question. Consider the federal level in the United States. Its central conflict of interest law is identical to our own; it says that an official may not "participat[e] ... in any particular matter ... if the particular matter will have a direct and predictable effect" on a personal "financial interest." Interestingly, in the United States this is a criminal law, whereas in Canada it is not.

The U.S. Office of Government Ethics, the American equivalent of Mr. Wilson's office here — with the important exception that it operates independently of the president and Cabinet — issues examples of situations to which this law applies, embedding these examples in regulation so they have the force of law. The first example is this: "An Assistant Secretary of the Department of the Interior owns recreational property that borders on land which is being considered for annexation to a national park." Question: May he or she "participat[e] in any way in the Department's deliberations or decisions regarding annexation?" Answer: Absolutely not; the assistant secretary's doing so would violate the law — a law identical to our own conflict of interest rule — as the U.S. Office of Government Ethics interprets it. No need to even concern ourselves with the murky business of legal or financial links between the proposed park and the official's land; the example doesn't

### ALL WE NEED TO KNOW IS THAT THE TWO PROPERTIES ARE ADJACENT

even raise such questions. All we need to know is that the two properties are adjacent. To affect the value of the one is to affect the value of the other. This seems obvious. To the U.S. Office of Government Ethics, anyway.

But not to our Ethics Counsellor. So a question for him: Why are Canadians not given the benefit of a robust, substantive interpretation of our conflict-of-interest law — an interpretation of the sort our neighbours south of the border enjoy? As our chief ethics official, you must have researched how a law identical to ours is interpreted in other jurisdictions, and particularly in the United States. Why did you reject their interpretation? Why are they wrong and you right? What was your reasoning?

I don't mean these as rhetorical questions. Perhaps Mr. Wilson has answers to them. Surely, though, we are entitled to know what they are.

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Andrew Stark, a former policy advisor in Brian Mulroney's PMO, teaches management at the University of Toronto and is the author of *Conflict of Interest in American Public Life* (Harvard University Press, 2000).

## Canadians feeling superior? I don't get it

ANTONY ANDERSON

According to legend, when he was secretary of state for external affairs, Lester Pearson was asked about a meeting with Dwight Eisenhower, U.S. president and avid golfer. Pearson was astonished by the American leader's lack of knowledge about a certain bilateral issue. Characteristically turning his irritation into humour, Pearson quipped, "You'd at least think his caddy would have mentioned it to him." Or so the story goes. And it is an old story reincarnated in every generation of Canadians.

Keeping up this national pastime of mocking our southern neighbours, the CBC broadcast an April Fool's edition of comedian Rick Mercer's pilgrimage around the United States making fun of how little Americans know about their northern neighbour. The talented, engaging Mercer got people on the street and even the Governor of Arkansas to congratulate us on preserving our national igloo.

He got biology students at Harvard to express indignation about the seal hunt in Calgary and Saskatchewan. He asked them about King Lucien Bouchard's royal visit. He got them to give opinions about sending the army into the region of Gilles Duceppe.

Americans expressed their delight at our finally getting a 24-hour system of time, FM radio, Grade 9, a volunteer fire station and giving Irish Canadians the vote. They weren't so keen on us mining around Mount Rushmore. Over and over again, with relish and pleasure, Mercer replayed our great national in-joke that Americans know nothing about us.

No question, it's hard not to howl at their near-total ignorance. But I think we should be paying attention to the laughter because it has a hollow ring.

First off, Mercer is doing the comedic equivalent of shooting fish in a barrel. This is effortless mockery. And it is smug mockery.

We're not just laughing at the absolute self-absorption of a super-power's populace. We're making fools of them to pump up our own sense of national esteem. One does feel smarter, superior and a tad righteously indignant at the end of the hour. But I suspect that beneath this surface bluster is the whinge of a wallflower desperate to be noticed and recognized. That undertone permeates the entire program. "Please notice us. Why don't you know anything about us? We're your neighbours for God's sake. Please notice us." And so Mercer keeps going back in

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### 24-HOUR SYSTEM OF TIME

order to remind all of us that "oh yeah eh, they think our national dish is beavers' balls."

Years ago, Margaret Atwood wrote that our border is actually the longest one-way mirror in the world. Mercer's program is just further sad proof that we're all still pressed up against the mirror hoping to get in.

Question No. 1 for all those who looked and laughed — Why do you care so much about what Americans know about us? Why would you spend an hour of your life getting your ego stroked and pumped by the failings of others? And why do you need so many reminders of the obvious? Superpowers have always thought they were the centre of the universe. They only pay attention to small inoffensive nations if we do something that affects their wealth or their military. The Americans are no different from the British or the Romans or the Chinese.

I couldn't care less about how little Americans know about us. I'm troubled by how little Canadians know about Canada.

The Dominion Institute is a non-profit organization which, from time to time, releases poll results that boggle the imagination. According to the institute's executive director, Rudyard Griffiths, "Only slightly more than a third of young Canadians could name the century within which Confederation occurred. Almost a third of all people surveyed thought D-Day marked the bombing of Pearl Harbour. And only 8% of those polled knew that the Queen is our head of State." With pathetic numbers like that, Canadians shouldn't take refuge in shooting at easy stationary targets.

Most Canadians think Lester Pearson is just an airport. And yet, we constantly take comfort and delight in mocking Americans for how little they know. But the joke is on us.

And we aren't even close to getting it.

*National Post*  
Antony Anderson is a Toronto film-maker.

## BUSH ON BUSH

# So the word 'is' are correct

How do you rib a man for his failings and foibles if he spends much of his time ribbing himself? That is a question U.S. President George W. Bush and his aides have clearly asked and just as clearly answered, and what they have decided is that there is no armour or inoculation as effective as self-effacement. His speech at the annual Radio and Television Correspondents Association dinner in Washington last week steered the event's tradition of comical presidential commentary in a mischievously masochistic direction. In fact, Bush took out a copy of George W. Bushism, a collection of so-called accidental Wit and Wisdom of the 43rd President, and reveled in his own ruminations. And, true to form, he bungled his delivery (or was it some sort of ironic intention?) as he joked that he had, just hours earlier at a news conference, coined the word "misunderstand," when what he really said was "misunderestimate." This is what else he said.

FRANK BRUNI

Thank you all very much. Well, Lew [Ketchum, the event's chairman], thank you very much. Laura and I are thrilled to be here. I appreciate the members of the press. I think you serve a very

useful purpose, especially tonight.

As you know, we're studying safe levels for arsenic in drinking water. (laughter) To base our decision on sound science, the scientists told us we needed to test the water glasses of about 3,000 people. (laughter) Thank you for participating. (laughter)

It's good to see so many members of the Congress here. My fellow Texan, Tom DeLay, here at the head table. (Applause.) Lew asked me a little earlier if Tom ever smiled. I said, "I don't know, I've only known him nine years." (laughter)

Senator Lieberman is here. (Applause.) We all know Joe is an Orthodox Jew, so he does no work from sundown Friday until sundown Saturday. This has so impressed me, I myself am thinking of converting. (laughter) So I don't have nothing to do from sundown Saturday to sundown Friday. (laughter)

Most of you probably didn't know that I have a new book out. Some guy put together a collection of my wit and wisdom — or, as he calls it, my accidental wit and wisdom. (laughter) But I'm kind of proud that my words are already in book form. So like other authors, I thought I'd read from it tonight. (laughter) It's like the thoughts of Chairman Mao, only with laughs, and not in Chinese. (laughter)

Here's one from the book — and I actually said this. (laughter) "I know the human being and fish can coexist peacefully." (laughter) Now, that makes you stop and think. (laughter and applause) Anyone can give you a coherent sentence, but

something like this takes you into an entirely new dimension. (laughter)

Here's another: "I understand small business growth; I was one." (laughter) You know, I love great literature. (laughter)

I actually said this in New Hampshire: "I appreciate preservation. It's what you do when you run for president, you've got to preserve." (laughter) I don't have the slightest idea what I was saying there. (laughter and applause)

Or how about this one: "More and more of our imports come from overseas." (laughter)

Now, most people would say, in speaking of the economy, we ought to make the pie bigger. I, however, am on record saying, "We ought to make the pie higher." (laughter) It is a very complicated economic point I was making there. (laughter) But believe me, what this country needs is taller pie. (laughter and applause)

And how about this for foreign policy vision: "When I was coming up, it was a dangerous world and we knew exactly who the they were. It was us versus them. And it was clear who the them was." (laughter) "Today, we're not so sure who the they are, but we know they're there." (laughter and applause)

John Ashcroft, by the way, attributes the way I talk to my religious fervour. In fact, the first time we met, he thought I was talking in tongue. (laughter)

Then there is my most famous statement: "Rarely is the question asked, is our children learning." (laughter) Let us ana-