# Mr. Stanfield's failure

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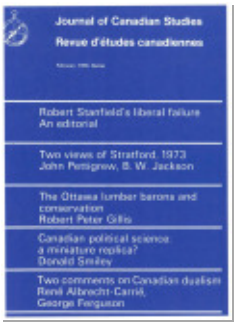


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# *Mr. Stanfield's failure*

To many, it may seem premature to speak of Mr. Stanfield's failure. After all, it was not much more than a year ago that his party came within a few seats of forming a government; and just this past autumn the Conservatives were able, for the first time in years, to pull even with the Liberals in the Gallup poll. Although the most recent poll, published in the first week of February, shows the Liberals well ahead once again, there is no reason to believe that their lead is invulnerable. These are solid achievements for a politician. Why then speak of failure?

The kind of failure of which Mr. Stanfield may ultimately be culpable is not one of short-term manoeuvre and strategy, though it may come to that: it is rather the kind which turns upon a politician's higher responsibility to the times in which he lives and the values he is charged to represent. It is a failure of vision.

Mr. Stanfield seems not to be aware that we are living at the dawn of a conservative age. He plods doggedly forward like a political basset hound, ferreting out subjects for enquiries or commissions, but seldom lifting his nose from the ground to sniff the prevailing winds of human affairs. He behaves like a respectable, even admirable, political leader of twenty years ago, when modernity wore a glad face instead of the ugly one she wears today. Now that her true character is becoming plain, even to fundamentally liberal minds, it will not do for a Conservative

leader who wishes to occupy the ground which is rightfully his, or to achieve political success of the kind that matters, to behave as if nothing had changed.

There are at least three areas of concern in contemporary public affairs which ought to have served Mr. Stanfield as indications of the profound shift of sensibility which we are experiencing. The first is the urban crisis. That a growing proportion of the electorate are no longer prepared to permit the wholesale destruction of the urban fabric, nor to tolerate the anti-social aridity with which greed and heedless technical innovation would replace it, signals an important change in attitudes to the public interest and the private will. Mr. Stanfield's second clue should have been the crisis of the environment. Our increasing awareness that the demands of modern life undermine the very natural conditions which make life possible is a second and more insistent warning that the limits to the gratification of appetite and will may be narrower than is recognized in the metaphysics of modernity. The third clue is, of course, the energy crisis which has recently broken upon us and which has served to underline the lesson of the environmental crisis that our reckless squandering of the resources of this earth is both intolerable and, what is more, unnecessary. Nothing could have been more beneficial to us than those few days at the height of the oil embargo when persons throughout the western world began to take stock of the shamefully, arrogantly wasteful manner in which we have organized our lives and to imagine simpler, healthier, and possibly nobler ways of living, the kind at which Pierre Dansereau has hinted in his phrase "joyous austerity." Now that the crisis has abated, much of this insight will fade with it for a time, but the lesson was too plain to be altogether forgotten. The way we think has changed, as will the way we act: we have no other choice.

All three of these crises have in common the implications that man's wilfulness is to be curbed, that there are bounds beyond which he may not go without destroying the conditions of decent life, that there are some things, in short, which must not be done. But as soon as thought begins to take this course, the liberal virtues of self- assertion, upon which is built the whole structure of modern life and thought, are called into question. In fact, modernity itself is called into question. And where modernity is in question, conservatives, if they know what they are about, should take the lead.

From the start, the thrust and motive of the conservative spirit, long before it bore that name, was a certain resistance to modernity, an intuition that the minds which were shaping the modern world ("these skeptical innovators" as Dr. Johnson called the men whose spirit Blake distilled into the mythical figure of "Urizen") and the forces to which they were allied (which both Bolingbroke and Coleridge identified is the "moneyed interest") were at odds with the highest impulses of the human spirit and therefore posed a threat not only to the good life but to life itself. That is why, for some three hundred years, conservatism has fought a rear-guard action of resistance against the triumphant forces of modernity. More often than not, however, it has misunderstood the meaning of its own intuitions and has interpreted that meaning in terms of the very values to which it stood opposed — or, rather, which it sought to subordinate to other, higher values. We have had to build a wasteland around us before we could fully understand what men like Blake and Coleridge, with only the power of Imagination, could see from the beginning. A spiritual wasteland was not enough. We have had to go the full length of creating an intolerable, unworkable physical wasteland before we would face up to the real consequences of the presuppositions of modernity.

As long as the inner tendency of modernity had not been faced, all discussion of human affairs was to be conducted within

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the framework of liberal assumptions. For the past hundred years, even conservatives have had to talk in terms of freedom and progress. But now that the moment of illumination has come upon us, the ground of political and philosophical debate has undergone one of those sudden reversals of focus familiar to gestalt psychology. Now, and for the foreseeable future, public discussion will increasingly take as its starting point not the liberal virtues of self-assertion but rather their dialectical opposites: the virtues of conservation and of reverence. Even Liberals are going to have to articulate their thoughts in these un-liberal terms — and, as a matter of fact, they have already begun to do so. Canada has not known a more consistent or more thorough-going philosophical liberal than Pierre Trudeau, yet even he has begun to recognize the inescapable implications of recent events and to invite his audiences "to turn away from our traditional North American concern with the technologies of 'conquering' nature to the joys of living in respectful harmony with nature."

It is almost certain that these phrases are little more than rhetoric and that Mr. Trudeau does not fully grasp the ultimate consequences of his new orientation. However, he is astute enough to recognize the future when it is thrust upon him. So it is almost equally certain that, despite the fiasco of his blind-date with the Club of Rome (which, had he less of his liberal faith in technocratic expertise, he ought to have foreseen), he will persist in the new direction to which he has committed himself.

The politics of the last quarter of the twentieth century, as Pierre Trudeau surely realizes, will be defined not so much by a choice between traditional notions of left and right as by a choice between, say, the values of Lewis Mumford and those of Buckminster Fuller. If these are to be the circumstances of political life, what does Mr. Stanfield propose to do about it? Does he even recognize what is going on? Is he satisfied to allow liberals like Pierre Trudeau to occupy what is, if he only knew it, his own political ground? Is he prepared to permit the Liberals to usher in what has to be, for our own survival, a conservative age? There are not many perceptive conservatives who would be content to do so. They know that the conservative virtues of prudence and restraint, which liberals will derive from our present crises, are merely the negative side of conservatism and completely miss its positive message. These virtues are the outward symptoms of an attitude which any age or culture but our own would have recognized as the fear of God; and the fear of God, however useful an antidote it may be to reckless self-assertion, is nothing more than the ground or starting point of an altogether different and higher form of experience toward which it points. Wisdom resides, as Pascal said, "entre la crainte qui en est le principe, et l'amour qui en est la fin." If liberalism can be distinguished by its attitude to the otherness of the phenomenal world which confronts the ego, conservatism is distinguished by its posture toward the otherness of the spirit.

Mr. Stanfield possesses many personal qualities, qualities of patience, dedication, modesty, and wit, which make him one of the most attractive men in Canadian public life. Moreover, he may know more about Canadian politics than all his critics put together. One occasionally feels that, although he is certainly not galloping into power, he may well be tip-toeing there. A thoughtful Canadian, however, must ask himself whether, in the light of Mr. Stanfield's apparent obliviousness to the deeper issues of our time, the country would benefit from his accession to office. One can have nothing but sympathy and respect for his current campaign on the issue of inflation, but of what use is this concern without some rather more fundamental thinking about economic growth itself? And what about his extreme reluctance to advocate measures designed to reduce foreign control of the

economy? This issue cannot be divorced from concern about the destruction of the natural and urban environments. The link between foreign investment and the rape of our natural resources is obvious enough, but the connection with the urban crisis is just as real. It has been estimated that foreign investors control forty percent of Canada's recently built office and commercial space, that the proportion of foreign ownership is increasing, and that, as a result, foreign investors have a determining influence upon the pace and direction of urban development in Canada. Mr. Stanfield's inability to come to grips with the issue of foreign investment and ownership makes it highly unlikely, therefore, that he would be able to offer leadership toward the conservation of our cities and of our resources, a goal which should be a top priority of any future conservative government, whether it calls itself Liberal, Conservative, N.D.P., or anything else..

The attraction of Mr. Stanfield's personal qualities makes it doubly sad that he seems incapable of raising himself to something approaching a statesmanlike vision of the tendency of contemporary life, or of offering conservative leadership at a time when it is so urgently needed. But it is not the first time that men of high talents and of appealing character have failed to offer the leadership which history demanded of them. At this moment, it seems likely that history will record a judgement on Robert Stanfield very similar to the judgement which Newman recorded on Robert Peel: "How sad that he who might have had the affections of many, should have thought, in a day like this, that a Statesman's praise lay in preserving the mean, not in aiming at the high; that to be safe was his first merit, and to kindle enthusiasm his most disgraceful blunder! How pitiable that such a man should not have understood that a body without a soul has no life, and a political party without an idea, no unity!"

R.R.H.

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# *Notes*

John Pettigrew and B. W. Jackson, who comment annually on Stratford for the *Journal*, are Associate Director and Director, respectively, of the Stratford summer seminars. Professor Pettigrew is with Trent University and Professor Jackson with McMaster University.

Robert Peter Gillis is on the staff of the Public Archives of Canada in Ottawa.

Donald Smiley is the Editor of *Canadian Public Administration* and Professor of Political Science at Erindale College in the University of Toronto.

A. E. Safarian is the Dean of Graduate Studies in the University of Toronto. His paper was originally delivered as a talk to the Harvard Club of Toronto in February, 1973.

René Albrecht-Carrié is now retired after a distinguished career as Professor of History at Columbia University. George Ferguson is the similarly distinguished former Editor of the *Montreal Star*.