

BOOK REVIEW

Maude Barlow, Bruce Campbell (1991). TAKE BACK THE NATION. Toronto: Key Porter Books, Ltd. Hardback \$26.95. Reviewed by David Johnston.

We are just beginning to feel the reality of living in a new economic order, a global borderless “one-world,” where there is a radical shift of power from the nation state to economic interests, particularly those of the large corporation. It is in such a world that the Vatican feels the need to issue an encyclical called the *Centesimus Annus*, urging companies to have a soul. The irony is that where religious, social and political institutions have failed in their quest for a united world, corporations are succeeding - although at a cost and in their terms.

The problem is business and economic principles in both theory and practice work under different laws than the spiritual and the moral. Moreover, economic laws are not necessarily identical to those that serve the well being of the nation state either. Canada, a middle power, with a fragile national identity, living next door to the most powerful country in the world is particularly vulnerable.

Take Back The Nation, speaks to the dilemma facing Canada today. In particular, Barlow and Campbell address three fundamental historical tensions that have surfaced together for the first time. They include pressure for closer economic ties with the United States, regional misunderstanding and power struggles and the long unresolved conflict between French and English Canada. In addition, the authors offer a provocative view on the place of the aboriginal peoples in the country's soul.

The largest portion of the book is spent arguing that the people of Canada need to regain their economic sovereignty, which the government has surrendered to the large corporation. In Barlow and Campbell's view the restructuring of the economy to suit corporate interests goes counter to the country's basic needs and fundamental social philosophy. They provide evidence to suggest that excessive job losses are hurting local communities, social programmes are being seriously diluted and the wealthy are taking a greater portion of the national income. The authors also contend that in signing the Free Trade Agreement with the United States, Canada lost control of its monetary levers of economic policy making.

There are other pernicious effects of the Free Trade Agreement with the United States that is changing the face of Canada towards a more American model. There is increasing pressure to put the country's "cultural industries" on the bargaining table, while the symbolic value of such crown corporations as Via Rail, Air Canada and the post office are being disregarded in an indiscriminate drive to privatisation. Both labour and ecological concerns are also being diluted. Finally, there is federal pressure to privatise educational services and to gear education to fit more closely to the needs of industry.

The Federal Government has strengthened its position in two areas, constitutional affairs and international trade. Otherwise, there has been a decisive shift of responsibilities from the centre to the provinces and regions. This move towards regional decentralisation weakens the country's negotiating position vis à vis the large

corporation. It leads to the distinct possibility of increased competition between regions for companies and jobs and the establishment of non-union “right to work areas” like exists in the United States, or even the development of exploitative low wage zones, like the Mexican *maquilledora*. Such a shift in economic structuring directly contradicts the Canadian way, with its natural orientation towards social justice and equality.

In addition to recommending working international trade relations through GATT and immediate withdrawal from the Free Trade Agreement with the United States, the authors propose a three nations concept for Canada. This position is based on the willingness to accommodate the needs of Quebec and the native peoples. They have even included an eloquent proposal for a constitutional preamble that represents their position. Their argument is essentially based on the French meaning of “nation,” which is defined around linguistic and cultural factors, and of sovereignty, which means the rule of people.

The book is an impassioned plea for the people of Canada to “take back the nation” from the politicians who have betrayed them. It is a call to arms, based on the fact that Canada is a distinct society. I have some reservations with their position - they are, in my opinion, willing to concede too much to Quebec, and the realistic implications of native self-government are not worked out. However, I am personally sympathetic to the general thrust of the arguments presented and highly recommend the book to all concerned Canadians. There is a need for Canada to be in more charge of its destiny and not to so easily surrender to narrow corporate interests. There is a need too, to

accommodate the sincere aspirations of both the native peoples and Quebec and, I might add, the French Canadians outside of Quebec. Unfortunately, the book suffers from a certain idealistic one-sidedness. Its important message deserves a more balanced approach.